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## A CASE STUDY OF STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF A PRINCIPAL'S BEHAVIORS THAT INFLUENCE SCHOOL CLIMATE, CLASSROOM PRACTICES, AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN A TITLE I SCHOOL

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A CASE STUDY OF STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF A PRINCIPAL'S BEHAVIORS  
THAT INFLUENCE SCHOOL CLIMATE, CLASSROOM PRACTICES, AND STUDENT  
ACHIEVEMENT IN A TITLE I SCHOOL

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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## **Abstract**

### **A CASE STUDY OF STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF A PRINCIPAL'S BEHAVIORS THAT INFLUENCE SCHOOL CLIMATE, CLASSROOM PRACTICES, AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN A TITLE I SCHOOL**

By Kristy Ferguson Budny, M.Ed.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Commonwealth University

March 21, 2019

Dissertation Chair: Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, Ph.D, Associate Professor, Educational Leadership

Public schools have increasingly transformed throughout the years, and the growth in suburban areas has brought many diversified schools that sometimes mirror schools in an urban setting (Kneebone and Berube, 2013). Building principals, particularly those in charge of Title I schools, face numerous challenges each day within their buildings (Kahlenberg, 2001). Not only have the demands of high-stakes testing increased over the years, other external factors also present challenges within the school setting. While the school stakeholders play an integral role in how the school is shaped, the building principal's behaviors ultimately serve as the overarching guide in shaping how the school is run (Stone-Johnson, 2013). Existing research is abundant in identifying leadership variables that can potentially influence student achievement, from leadership behaviors (Daresh & Lynch, 2010) to school culture (Deal & Peterson, 2009); from teachers' feelings of self-efficacy (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012) to teacher effectiveness (Meyers & Pianta, 2008); from teacher-student relationships (Hamre & Pianta, 2006) to student



attitudes (Hopson & Lee, 2011). However, there is a dearth of research that examines the possible relationships between several interacting components; especially, in terms of stakeholders' perceptions. This case study aims to begin filling this gap. What is also unique about this study, aside from the setting in a specific Title I suburban school, is its use of appreciative inquiry that aims to tease out the most positive attributions, rather than focusing on the negative.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Schools across the nation have grown in diversity over the years, and with the focus on academic achievement, building principals must be creative and innovative in ways that they structure their schools to foster learning environments. Studies have shown there are various leadership styles that principals portray, each of which have a direct impact on school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement (Daresh & Lynch, 2010; Deal & Peterson, 2009). Instead of focusing on what is not working in a particular school, this case study aims to take a positive approach using the appreciative inquiry data collection method in a particular suburban, Title I school.

The current state of public education in America is defined by strict standards in which school principals and teachers must effectively and efficiently ensure that all students are making adequate progress in academics. DuFour and Marzano (2011) strongly offer that schools of today have a greater demand to "...raise academic standards to levels that were unimaginable to previous generations of educators..." (p.6), and while this is a common theme amongst educators (both teachers and principals), there are ways in which this can be done effectively.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) defines Title I schools as those identified as having a large number or percentage of students from low-income families, which in turn, qualifies the schools to receive financial assistance to ensure academic achievement. School divisions channel the Title I funding received to the public schools with the highest number of students who come from low-income families. Schools that enroll at least forty

percent of students from low-income families are able to use funding for a school-wide Title I program that benefits all students (Virginia Department of Education, 2017).

In regard to student achievement, “Title I students remain among the most challenging populations for achieving significant gains in academic performance and standardized test scores,” (Shaha, Glasset, Copas, & Ellsworth, 2015, p. 227). Kahlenberg (2001) asserts that, “Being born into a poor family places student at risk, but to be assigned then to a school with a high concentration of poverty poses a second, independent disadvantage...,” (p. 25). Kahlenberg further states that high-poverty schools are stigmatized as having less motivated students, negative peer influences, low parental involvement, limited resources, and less qualified teachers. While there is a stigma that Title I schools are primarily found in abundance within city limits or in the far outskirts of an area less densely populated, the growth of Title I schools within suburban areas is becoming prevalent.

**Growth of Title I schools in suburban areas.** At the most basic level, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) uses an urban-centric system to classify schools into four locales by their size, population density, and location in relation to a city: city, suburban, town, and rural. This classification system does not mirror that of the vast amount of educational research that classifies schools into three major categories: urban, suburban, and rural (Kneebone & Berube, 2013). For purposes of this study, the researcher will follow the social framework that delineates urban as city, suburban as outside of the city, and rural as country.

The United States has seen an unprecedented growth of suburban areas over the recent decades. Urban areas framed with building towers, public transportation, and large populations in small, centralized locations have given way to suburban areas that have a similar feel but cover a larger mass of area. Socioeconomic transformation continues throughout the suburbs,

bringing re-segregation to the forefront as statistics show that there is a “remarkably high level of segregation for Latino and black students in the suburban rings around our large cities, and white populations are moving to the outer-most rings much faster than the population is growing,” (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012, p. 2). The portrayal of suburban neighborhoods post World War II clad with white picket fences, predominantly middle to upper-class families, and cookie cutter houses, is now represented by a fast-growing atmosphere comprised of racially diverse individuals, some with limited income. Kneebone and Berube (2013) contend that suburban areas are now home to the largest and fastest growing poor population in the country and are no longer limited to urban and rural areas exclusively. As suburban areas continue to grow, what once was considered characteristics of urban schools (1) high poverty, (2) higher numbers of students with special needs, (3) higher teacher turnover rates, (4) higher discipline problems, (5) low student achievement, (6) low staff morale, (7) low parental involvement (Reed and Swaminathan, 2014), are now similarly seen in a host of suburban schools.

Those characteristics, coupled with issues brought to light in suburban areas that include (1) increases in racial and socioeconomic diversity of school-aged children, (2) areas of racial and economic inhabitants that mirror urban cities, (3) a teaching staff that may lack suitable training to work with such populations, (4) limited organizational resources to address the new challenges, (5) political infrastructures unequipped to handle increased diversity, (6) weakening or teeming infrastructures (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012), play a role in the increase of schools in these areas that qualify to receive Title I funding to help ensure student achievement.

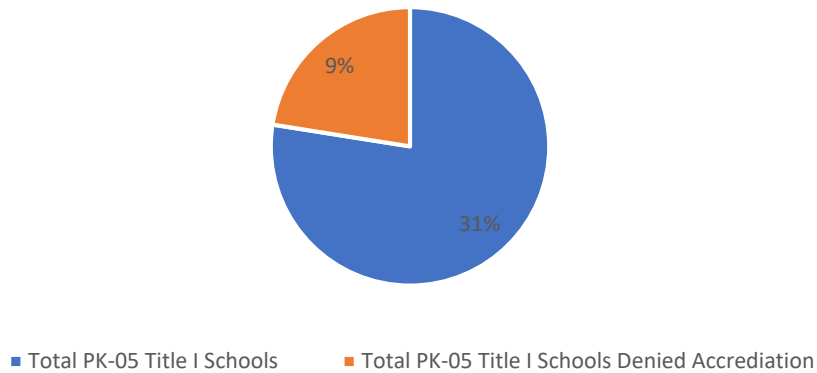
However, that list is not exhaustive in defining what makes a school eligible for a Title I status, as other extraneous factors such as job market decline and reduction of income(s) per household

resulting in students at or below the poverty line drive the status of a school being named as Title I (Kahlenberg, 2001).

Based on data from the NCES, during the 2009-2010 school year, there were more than 56,000 public schools in the United States that used Title I funding to provide academic support and learning opportunities for more than 21 million low-income students. During the fiscal year 2015, Virginia students saw over 1 billion dollars in Title I funding. The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) (2016) states that of the 1.8 million children living in Virginia, approximately 34% of these children are classified as low-income, and there were 558 schools that were classified as a school-wide Title I program.

**Student achievement in Title I schools.** All public elementary schools in the state of Virginia, regardless of Title I status, are required to meet benchmark standards in order to receive accreditation status, which can be acquired either from a three-year average by subject area or the most recent year's test data by subject area. The Virginia Board of Education maintains its Standards of Accreditation (SOA) for schools meeting the expectations of student achievement, as shown in Figure 1.1 which showcases the breakdown of Title I elementary schools' accreditation status during the 2017-2018 school year, specifically highlighting those schools that were denied accreditation (Virginia Department of Education, 2017).

## Virginia Title I (Grades PK-05) Schools' Accreditation Status (2017-2018)



*Figure 1.1.* Virginia Title I (Grades PK-05) Schools' Accreditation Status (2017-2018). This figure shows that 9% of the Title I (Grades PK-05) elementary schools were denied accreditation based on the 2016-2017 test data, even with the additional financial monies put in place to ensure student success. In comparison, there were only 3% of non-Title I school wide elementary schools that were denied accreditation. Schools can meet the accreditation benchmark either on a yearly basis, or based on a three-year average; specifically, for Reading, the benchmark is 75%.

It is often inferred that Title I schools face challenges in reaching and maintaining high student achievement at a greater level than non-Title I schools, due in part to outside influences of the home and family. School principals are tasked with undertaking the charge of these schools and ensuring that, at minimum, basic achievement standards are being met. With an increase in scrutinizing over test scores by federal, state and local agencies, mandates, and research-based methods, schools have lost the ability to focus on what originally was the driving force in shaping its cultures. Deal and Peterson (2009) offer the following:

Standardization, test scores, and research-based methods have replaced local discretion, faith, creativity, and teacher ingenuity. The unintended result is the unraveling of

symbolic fibers that once gave a hallowed enterprise passion, purpose and meaning.

What were once joyful places of promise and hope have too often become mechanized factories bent on producing only a small fraction of what a well-educated person needs and what the community wants (pg. 4).

**Leadership of the school.** There is ample research that surrounds what principals *do*, but there is a deficiency about *how* these principals enact changes (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). The role of the building principal is one of the most important when examining a school, particularly a school that is classified as Title I. There are many dynamics that play a role in how a school functions and performs and each of those are directly influenced by the building principal. School climate, classroom practices, and student achievement are directly related to the behaviors of the school principal; however, there are also external factors that may influence these pieces. Stone-Johnson (2013) cites numerous research and hypothesizes that school principals are under enormous pressure to make improvements in academic achievements of students, and that a successful educational principal believes that teachers, students, and other stakeholders all play a role in shaping a school's performance, specifically focusing on establishing goals and expectations, along with promoting and participating in teacher learning and development.

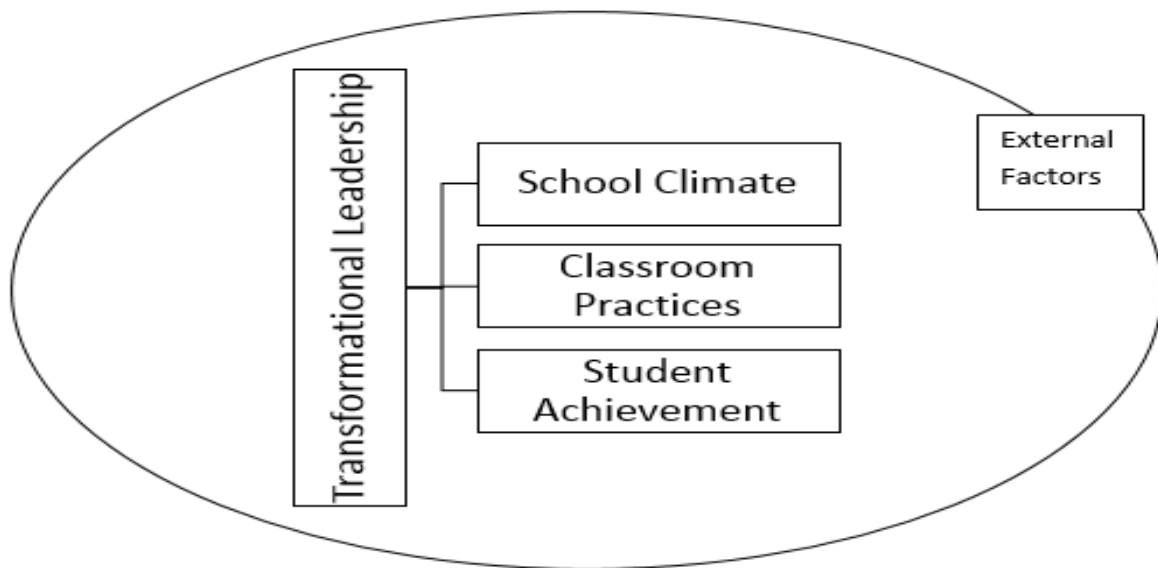
This qualitative case study will focus on the intersecting dynamics of school leadership behaviors, school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement as examined through an appreciative inquiry lens in a suburban Title I school.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The federal and state governments have placed so much pressure on student achievement, primarily in the form of test scores, rather than on relationships and the foundational elements

found within a school building. Researchers have begun to compile scores of best practices of principals and how their behaviors shape a school. Of the copious amounts of literature examining principals and student achievement, the overarching theme throughout was that of relationships and the role that they play within school buildings.

The purpose of this study is to examine the principal’s behaviors, as perceived by the principal and associate principal, teachers, and elementary division director that may be contributing to student achievement in a Title I school. The researcher’s theory is that characteristics of transformational leadership have an influence on school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement. The researcher recognizes there are external factors that play a role in impacting transformational leadership, school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement, as noted in Figure 1.2.



*Figure 1.2.* Model of the Study. This figure illustrates the potential impacts that transformational leadership has on school climate, classroom practice, and student achievement, as well as indicating that there are also external factors that may influence these components. Other outside factors that can impact the principal’s behavior, school climate, classroom



practices, and student achievement include student discipline, absenteeism, family obligations, and years' experience by both the principal and teachers.

### **Significance**

The demands of high-stakes testing in a Title I elementary school in a suburban setting and the accountability process of attaining state accreditation have posed difficult challenges for schools overall as well as the school chosen for this in-depth analysis. Existing research is abundant in identifying leadership variables that can potentially influence student achievement, from leadership behaviors (Daresh & Lynch, 2010) to school culture (Deal & Peterson, 2009); from teachers' feelings of self-efficacy (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012) to teacher effectiveness (Meyers & Pianta, 2008); from teacher-student relationships (Hamre & Pianta, 2006) to student attitudes (Hopson & Lee, 2011). However, there is a dearth of research that examines the possible relationships between a number of interacting components; especially, in terms of stakeholders' perceptions. This case study aims to begin filling this gap. What is also unique about this study, aside from the setting in a specific Title I suburban school, is its use of appreciative inquiry that aims to tease out the most positive attributions, rather than focusing on the negative. While it is not possible to prove a direct correlation between variables, using appreciative inquiry to examine stakeholders' perceptions in a Title I school that is maintaining accreditation despite perceived and material odds, has potential to add to the literature on best practices for student achievement in high-needs schools. Data can be used to inform leadership preparation programs as well as in-service professional development of current school principals.

**Appreciative inquiry.** Mertens and Wilson (2012) propose that appreciative inquiry is a data collection strategy that focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses of an organization. Specifically, what is desired as the outcome is examined, and a dialogue about what is needed to

facilitate the desired change takes place among stakeholders. This is based on a constructivist perspective that focuses on participants' perceptions and meaning making concerning the positive attributions that may be contributing to steady progress. Appreciative inquiry will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three.

### **Research Questions**

The following research question and sub questions guides the design and implementation of this study:

1. What are stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's behaviors that have impacted school climate?
2. What are stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's behaviors that have impacted classroom practices?
3. What are stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's behaviors that have impacted student achievement?

### **Limitations**

This study was a single case study of a Title I elementary school in a suburban setting. It is not generalizable to every school, as the make-up of teachers, students, and school principal are not identical throughout the division and other schools. The faculty of JES is primarily comprised of white female teachers, with the school principal being an African American female. First, under the current leadership of the building principal, there are a limited number of teachers that have been at the school for the duration of the principal's tenure. For purposes of this study, teachers with varying levels of experience were asked to participate in interviews to gauge attitudes towards the current administration. This could pose as a limitation if the teachers did not feel they could give honest answers regarding their administration. This study could

possibly yield different results if looked at from other angles, such as through race and/or gender specific roles within the school. Also, it would benefit the educational community to duplicate this research at a school that is not meeting accreditation standards to analyze what differences (if any) in leadership behaviors are identified.

Second, the researcher of this study is a fourteen-year teaching veteran and currently has a supervisory role in her own job within the same division; thus, was able to perceive information gathered through an administrative lens as well as through a teacher's lens. This could be both a strength and weakness in the research design and findings. Thus, the researcher took specific steps to neutralize potential biases. In addition, this study was not meant to prove a cause/effect relationship, nor did it aim to generalize to all principals. Rather, the intention was to add to existing literature and provide a provisional framework that might be replicated and/or adapted elsewhere.

## **Brief Overview of Literature**

### **Principal Behaviors**

Transformational leadership, which focuses on emotions and values, aims to foster capacity development and personal commitment to an organization's goals (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009). The framework of transformational leadership, as described by Pepper and Thomas (2001), exhibits three overall goals in helping to shape school climate: (1) helping staff to maintain a collaborative culture; (2) promoting teacher development; and (3) helping the school community to solve problems together. The school principal works to develop school norms, beliefs, values, and assumptions that are student centered and support growth by teachers. By promoting teacher buy-in and fidelity to programs and necessary change, school principals foster a collaborative climate in which teachers feel empowered to change in a positive way.

Thoonen, Slegers, Oort, Peetsma, and Geijsel (2011) continue to build on the research of Leithwood and Jantzi and propose that school principals initiate and identify a vision through which teachers buy-in to the excitement and build an emotional attachment; therefore, increasing a collective organization which, in turn, enhances teachers' personal professional development. Through a shared vision and teachers' internal motivation to improve their personal practice, a willingness to internalize and achieve can lend itself to enhanced classroom practices.

In short, contemporary school leaders are anticipated to perform at higher standards than before, with the expectations that they are held accountable for teaching and learning, there should be a persistent reach for improvement while acting as a positive change agent, and are expected to promote a healthy, positive school climate (Brower & Balch, 2005).

### **Principal Behaviors and School Climate**

Research has shown that the term "school climate" has been used interchangeably with the term "school culture;" however, Van Houtte (2007) suggests that the two terms are in fact, not interchangeable, describing climate as an organization's shared perceptions, while culture is described as the shared assumptions, meanings, and beliefs of an organization. Van Houtte further alludes to the following:

Climate entails the total environmental quality of the organization, and is, as such, broader than culture. Moreover, climate, being a multidimensional construct, encompasses culture...Climate should be reserved to describe organizations in their entirety, including – besides the shared beliefs – the relations between individuals and groups in the organization, the physical surroundings, and the characteristics of individuals and groups participating in the organization. (pg.84)

School climate is determined by the quality of relationships between individuals within a school, the teaching and learning that exists within the school, and the collaboration between teachers and administrators (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli & Piker, 2009). Zullig, Huebner, and Patton (2011) posit that educational policy has been determined primarily by measures of reading and mathematics achievement, as mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB); however, there is mounting evidence that suggests that school climate may affect behavior and learning more than accountability policy and the implementation of high-stakes testing. Furthermore, when organizational processes and social relationships are addressed, a positive behavioral change is more likely to happen. Thus, school climate has potential to influence all members of the school community (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012).

The role of the school principal in shaping school climate is paramount as suggested by Spence, Stewart, and Grewal (2012), “Improving the climate of learning for all students is unattainable without the attributes of an inclusive leader” (p.54). This is controlled by using a variety of frameworks and reflection tools, and then leading stakeholders in creating a clear vision and action plan that promotes an environment that is conducive to learning and achievement.

### **Principal Behaviors and Classroom Practices**

Principals who act as instructional leaders, rather than managerial administrators, set clear goals, allocate resources to instruction, manage the curriculum, monitor lesson plans, and evaluate teachers (Jenkins, 2009). Building a capacity of teachers that meet regularly to discuss their instruction, analyze data and solve problems facilitates student achievement. School principals tend to have a cohesive belief of improving instruction and student learning and building a united capacity of stakeholders throughout the school (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

## **Principal Behaviors and Student Achievement**

School leadership falls second behind teaching as a school-related dynamic that affects student learning and achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2010). Stone-Johnson (2014) theorizes that while student achievement is an important goal of a school principal, promoting the students' best interests in fairness, justice, equity, and democratic learning is also an integral portion to be a successful principal.

Leadership of a building has an indirect path of influence on student achievement via the school, teachers, and classrooms, and can be attributed to school-wide policies and cultures, adherence to the curriculum, the working conditions of the teachers, class size, and a diligent data monitoring system. Dhuey and Smith (2014) also offer that outside factors can influence leadership methods, which can affect student achievement. A division policy on how to lead and implement improvement of the school, education, experience, and the family background of students can play a role on how a school principal can influence student achievement.

Professional capacity, parent-community school ties, and a student-centered learning climate are all indirect variables through which school principals have an influence over in promoting student achievement (Bruggencate, Luyten, Scheerens, & Slegers, 2012). Given the challenges to meet accreditation criteria, specifically by urban schools and suburban schools with urban characteristics, building principals often seek innovative ideas to promote student achievement; furthermore, it is imperative that school principals keep in mind the characteristics of their school, students, staff, and, communities (Reed & Swaminathan, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter gives a glimpse into the significance of the school principal and the influence on school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement. While these key

concepts are important in any school, they are particularly important in a Title I school, where a portion of the students may be at a disadvantage due to extraneous factors outside of the school setting. There are many underlying variables that one must take into account when rebuilding a school, and it is important to understand that it does not happen overnight; however, it can be done successfully over time. Using appreciative inquiry as a framework in which to analyze these concepts will provide a distinctive lens that has had a limited use in educational research thus far. Chapters two and three will lay the foundation for this study and will provide the reader with the research framework and theoretical background that will be used to carry out this study.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Purpose and Parameters**

This chapter gives an overview of the literature that informs this study. The methods used to conduct this review included literature searches utilizing Google scholar, as well as Virginia Commonwealth University electronic databases such as ERIC via EBSCO, Education Research Complete, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences, and Teacher Reference Center. Search terms that were used included, but are not limited to: principal Title I, principal student achievement, classroom practices, transformational leadership, and school leadership. This literature review explores the intersecting dynamics of school leadership behaviors, school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement. Investigating prior research on these topics will aid in the understanding of how these components collectively work together to enhance student achievement in a non-accredited Title I school within a suburban community.

#### **Introduction**

Over the decades, the principal's role has shifted from managerial to primarily instructional leader, being held accountable for student achievement. David and Cuban (2010) speculate that instructional leaders of today must focus on a variety of aspects that play a crucial role in student achievement. Such aspects include spending time in the classrooms and monitoring instruction and providing feedback, providing meaningful professional development, analyzing data, and integrating curriculum coaches. Research shows that these concepts are not mutually exclusive of each other, but rather a complex network of ideas that influence each other.



“In the post-No Child Left Behind world, where schools now dissect, disaggregate, and use data to improve instruction for all groups of students, high-quality teaching has emerged as the overwhelming answer. But quality teaching demands effective principal leadership, especially in schools with the greatest needs...” (Cook, 2015, p.1).

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) contribute a central explanation about principals and their contribution to a school’s success. In short, they summarized decades of research and found that there were several factors directly related to schooling and leadership within a building as can be seen in Figure 2.1.

Clear mission and goals	Overall climate of the school and classrooms	Attitudes of teachers
Classroom practices	Organization of the curriculum and instruction	Students' opportunity to learn

*Figure 2.1.* Importance of a Principal. This figure represents the summary of decades of research on the importance of school principals, as reported by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005).

Based on this information, the researcher was able to consolidate these ideas into three main effects of transformational leadership (as previously displayed in Figure 1.3) on school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement.

Title I schools exhibit a host of characteristics that may give hindrance for student achievement; however, a quality principal that lends himself or herself to foster the drive for instruction can help to minimize these effects. This is evident by the repeated theme of

relationships throughout the literature review. McEwan (2003) places importance on the relationships that principals build, with students, teachers, and parents, and these “relationships drive school improvement” (p.54). In the end, the quality of instruction within the classroom is a deciding factor on student learning and achievement; nevertheless, the principal may have a direct effect on this by way of working with the classroom teachers or an indirect effect by improving professional capacity and school climate (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

The researcher hopes to navigate this chapter by discussing the over-arching theme of leadership behaviors, specifically looking at relational trust and transformational leadership, and the roles that those behaviors play on school climate and classroom practices, resulting in the effects on student achievement.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership has evolved over the years through various researchers. Looking back at the early works of Bernard Bass and his pioneer research on transformational leadership, Anderson (2017) conceptualized the characteristics that promote such behaviors: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation.

Bogler (2001) states that in regard to principals’ leadership styles, there are two types of leadership that one may identify with: transformational and transactional. Transformational leadership refers to a type of leadership in which principals work collaboratively with staff to create a vision to guide them through change. During this time, the principal seeks to motivate and build morale and job performance of teachers. Principals become role models that lend themselves to teachers taking ownership within the change and their work. Transactional

leadership uses rewards and castigation to obtain cooperation from followers, often resulting in the principal working to maintain the status quo.

Coupled with leadership styles are principals' decision-making strategies, in which Bogler (2001) identified four styles: (a) autocratic, (b) consultation, (c) joint, and (d) delegation. Autocratic refers to the principal making all decisions without consultation from any other stakeholders. Consultation decision-making states that the principal will consult with other stakeholders but will make the final decision by themselves. A joint decision-making strategy is one in which the principal collaborates with stakeholders and together a final decision is made, having been influenced by each member of the group. Delegation decision-making refers to the principal gives a member the authority to decide. This practice can be termed as distributed leadership, which Spillane (2005) suggests that "leadership is a system of practice comprised of a collection of interacting components: leaders, followers, and situation. These interacting components must be understood together because the system is more than the sum of the component parts or practices" (pg. 150).

Given the research cited by Bogler (2001), there are several key factors associated with leadership styles and decision-making. Most notably, positive job satisfaction is related to participatory decision-making and transformational leadership.

Overall, teachers report greater satisfaction in their work when they perceive their principal as someone who shares information with others, delegates authority, and keeps open channels of communication with the teachers. A low level of teachers' involvement in decision-making is related to a low level of satisfaction of work (pg. 666).

Principals that convey a transformational style, whereas personal attention is given to the needs and interests of teachers, raising motivation, and extra effort is put forth in order to meet the

needs of teachers, encourages teachers to review the job as more rewarding. The same can be said for principals that give teachers a part in the decision-making process, making teachers feel more involved.

Principals, teachers, staff, and other stakeholders all have unique traits that influence how each acts, resulting in a negative or positive effect on a school. Porter, Wrench, and Hoskinson (2007) cite research by Eysenck (1956) and Eysenck and Eysenck (1976) about the effects of supervisors' temperaments on subordinates. Extroversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism are considered supertraits that all range on a continuum with varying degrees in which human behavior can be studied. Numerous studies have been conducted examining temperaments on organizational communication; however, there are limited studies on how supervisor temperaments affect subordinates. Smith and McCanger (2004) as cited in Porter et al. (2007) used the Big Five personality type indicator as an alternative to Eysenck's super traits. In their study, subordinates had to express their supervisor's personality type and react to different organizational indicators. As would be expected, results indicated that supervisors with high levels of agreeableness, emotional stability, and extroversion had a positive effect on subordinate satisfaction with a supervisor, while supervisors who were perceived as cold, manipulative, and anti-social had a negative effect on subordinates' satisfaction with their supervisor.

**Relational trust.** An important aspect of leadership is that of building and maintaining trust. Constructing a shared vision, modeling trustworthy behavior, coaching, managing, and mediating are five components that instructional leaders must tackle as a means to building trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Because of the demands and pressures of high stakes testing and accountability, schools, notably those not meeting achievement benchmarks or those that are marginally close to achievement benchmarks are feeling the brunt of reform as educators are

exhausting ways to improve academic achievement. Tschannen-Moran (2014) portrays how important building and maintaining trust is within a school:

Schools must garner trust and legitimacy at a time when these commodities are in short supply in society at large. Trustworthy school principals must learn to create conditions in which trust can flourish within their school as well as between their school and their community. School leaders...earn the trust of the members of their school community are in a better position to accomplish the complex task of educating a diverse group of students in a changing world. Principals and teachers who trust each other can better work together in the service of solving the challenging problems of schooling (pg. 14).

Cranston (2011) conducted a study on relational trust within school buildings as a means of determining conditions for successful professional learning communities within a school. He interviewed 12 principals, which were majority female and from a mix of urban, suburban, and rural schools. In his findings, there were five themes that emerged that support the concept of social relationships that support professional learning communities: (a) trust develops as teachers are in a relationship, (b) relational trust requires establishing group norms around risk-taking and change orientation in order to foster a safe, comfortable climate for professional growth, (c) relational trust supports effective collaboration, (d) the principal is central in establishing a climate of trust, and (e) faculty requisite trust of the principal is paramount. Based off of these themes and findings, Cranston determined that "...to see the kind of change necessary for students to improve learning outcomes school-wide, principals need to do more than listen to the facts and circumstances discussed by faculty" (pg. 69). By building a trusting relationship with school personnel, a principal is likely to gain more momentum from faculty in making a change within the school.

Within a school, there are intertwined relationships that exist with varying levels of complexity. Relationships between teachers and students, teachers with other teachers, teachers with parents, and teachers with principals are organized around the roles that each stakeholder has. The framework that describes the social exchanges that occur is based on relational trust.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) render that in order for these relationships to maintain and grow, there must be unity in the expectations and obligations of the stakeholders, meaning that all are working with the same expectations and goals in mind. Bryk and Schneider go on to say that, “schools work well as organizations when synchrony is achieved within all of the major role sets that comprise a school community” (pg. 21). When stakeholders perceive that others are not acting in ways that are consistent with expectations, relational trust weakens.

Specifically, in the context of urban school reform, relational trust should facilitate teachers’ efforts both to innovate in their classroom in order to develop more effective instruction and to reach out to parents in order to deepen their support around students’ engagement in learning (pg. 116).

Principals’ actions play an integral role in building and maintaining relational trust. By acknowledging the liabilities of others, actively listening to their concerns, and avoiding subjective actions, effective principals pair these behaviors with identifying a school vision and behavior that strives to advance the vision. Showing fidelity between words and actions upholds the personal integrity of the stakeholders; thus, forming the relational trust to move forward with improvement. In a school that is plagued with difficulties, the principal may have to initiate change by hiring strong candidates and giving feedback to teachers who are not meeting the school’s vision (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

Building on his previous research, Bryk (2010) continues to expound on what a building principal does to promote organizational climate within a school by influencing instructional program activities, such as allocating resources and staff to implement such programs. Likewise, the school principal must work to build relationships across the school community involving all stakeholders to help in the change effort. Stone-Johnson (2014) examine characteristics of school principals, asserting that quality leaders of a school look to determine what is in the best interest of the students. Oftentimes, this means that a principal has to look outside of what is available within the school building. Furthermore, principals have stakeholders at multiple levels (building, district, community) that he or she must develop relationships with in order to ascertain resources for school improvement.

### **Principal Behaviors that Influence School Climate**

It is the opinion of the researcher that schools today are most notably measured by state test scores and concrete data that stakeholders examine to determine how a school is performing. While test scores determine a school's accreditation status, they do not measure the overall climate of a school, which can play an integral role in student achievement. School climate, as described by Thapa, et. al), "reflects students', school personnel's, and parents' experiences of school life socially, emotionally, civically, and ethically as well as academically" (pg. 369). Daresh and Lynch (2010) examine how within the walls of a school, one can view the surroundings as cold and not nurturing, doors are closed, teachers raise their voices in angry tones, visitors are not greeted; however, on paper, students are performing at or above the required state and federal levels, and in turn, considered a "good" school. For principals that want to build learning communities within the school, there must be a culture within the school that is favorable to the stakeholders forming a community.

**The changing climate.** The climate of a school is not static, but rather constantly evolving to account for characteristics of current members, current problems and external demands, and the history of the organization (Gorton & Alston, 2012). Further insight by these researchers indicate that change is also driven by the basis that even if the status quo is not bad, there is usually room for some improvement, and even though change may not lead to improvement, one would not know for sure unless attempting some change. Only after a principal has managed to gain a thorough understanding of the school's culture can change begin to take shape.

Schein (2004) presents ten characteristics that principals should engage in to promote a positive learning experience in cultural change: (a) setting an example by active problem solving and involving members to generate solutions, (b) learning about external and internal factors then reflecting, analyzing, and conforming to new ways, (c) having faith in people and believing that all people can and will learn if given the opportunity and resources, (d) understanding that the environment is manageable, (e) solutions may come from a variety of sources such as scientific inquiry, experience, and trial and error, (f) being able to look ahead to assess various strategies to implement and deciding in the present what is and/or not working, (g) value communication between all stakeholders, (h) cross-cultural communication to bring about diversity, (i) think systemically, and (j) understand culture and be willing to work with the culture. Knowing and understanding these change agents can help to alleviate excess stress that may come with taking on such a daunting task that is changing a school's climate. Working in partnership with teachers, directors, and parent representatives, the principal is able to give all participants and stakeholders a voice in the process.



Without a positive organizational climate in place alongside the culture, it is likely that there will be limited improvement that benefits students and teachers, and that little change will take place (Gorton & Alston, 2012). Principals must intermittently assess building practices and evaluate proposed changes as a starting point for implementing change. Once the initial consideration for climate change has been assessed, the role of the principal becomes an integral part in planning and implementing change within the school building, which inevitably may face resistance and take time.

**Impact of climate.** There have been decades of research citing the importance of school climate in a K-12 setting, specifically the impact on students' mental and physical health and the correlation between a positive school climate and student academic achievement. (Thapa et al., 2013).

Similarly, leadership qualities of principals, teacher-colleague relationships, parent-teacher relationships, student-teacher relationships, both interpersonally and instructionally, and school buildings and facilities all influence school climate (Williams, 2009). Williams goes on to say that “a good school climate should have the following characteristics: openness to innovation, trust and caring among professionals, respect, cohesiveness, high morale, opportunities for professional development, and supportive leadership” (pg. 28). To assist in student success, it is imperative for all stakeholders involved to work together to establish and maintain a climate that is conducive to learning

In a study conducted by Thapa et al. (2013), five components of school climate were reviewed: (a) safety (rules, norms, physical, emotional), (b) relationships (respect, school connectedness, social support, leadership, students' race), (c) teaching and learning (social, emotional, ethical, service learning, support for academic learning), (d) institutional environment

(physical surroundings, resources, supplies), and (e) school improvement process (reform programs). In their findings, the authors assert that a positive school climate is associated with youth development, risk prevention, health promotion, student learning, academic achievement, and teacher retention. As pointed out in the literature, there are very few studies that examine school change over time, and propose that for low-performing schools, emphasis should be placed on including the entire school community in the planning process; therefore, enhancing the relational trust is an integral component in school climate.

Dimmock (2012) theorizes that having good leadership and capacity building are requirements if a school is to move beyond the demands that are placed on them; thus, making them more effective and efficient. Building on a school's collegiality and collaboration efforts are fundamental to shaping a school's culture. Culture and context, which both influence principals' decisions, stem from society as well as within the building in which principals work. Specific behaviors that school principals exhibit are greatly influenced by contexts and cultures in which they work and affect how items are prioritized within rebuilding a school. "A tough school in a low SES environment with a reputation for bad behavior may force the principal to emphasize student discipline as a main plank of the school's moral purpose" (pg. 193).

Deal and Peterson (2009), pioneers in principal leadership, have done extensive research in behaviors that affect school culture; thus, noting the importance of school culture and climate touching upon every facet of a school, and being prevalent in everyday situations and responding to change. Effective principals interpret what is going on their building and in the culture around them, asking three questions: (a) What is the culture of school now? (b) What can the stakeholders do to strengthen pieces of the school culture that people perceive as ideal? (c) When a need for change arises, what can be done to change the culture? Effective principals must

possess eight different roles in order to shape school culture: (a) historian, seeking to understand the social past of the school; (b) anthropological sleuth, examines the current culture and beliefs; (c) visionary, collaborates with others to identify the ideal school; (d) icon, exhibits values through dress, behavior, attention, actions, and routines; (e) potter, shaped by school's symbols; (f) poet, uses expressive language to reinforce values; (g) actor, improvises in everyday situations within the school; and (h) healer, oversees times of transition and eases the wounds of loss. While the principal is at the forefront of shaping and building culture within a school, responsibility ultimately falls within all stakeholders' responsibilities.

In a study conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research about elementary schools that made large gains of student achievement versus those that didn't, a major theme emerged regarding students' outside obstacles as a hindrance on student achievement (Bryk 2011). Schools with high concentrations of students that were living with extraordinary circumstances (homelessness, neglect, domestic violence, and foster care) showed a stagnation of test scores, even though these students were learning at the same rate as their counter peers. This was attributed to teachers not only focusing on academics, but also with helping these students to overcome their outside obstacles. As suggested by Hopson and Lee (2011), students that come from a low socioeconomic background are at a higher risk for low academic achievement if surrounded by a negative school climate.

### **Principal Behaviors that Influence Teacher Practices**

Traditionally, classroom instruction was based on teacher-direction, where the teacher played the primary role of the active instructor and the students remained passive. Worksheets, rote memorization, and lectures by teachers were the primary teaching tools. Quinn (2002) indicates that conversation in the classroom and meaning-making through language will have a

bigger impact on student achievement; thus, engaging students in active learning, or learning by doing, is a shift in traditional pedagogy of teachers and principals. This change in mindset of principals and teachers is vital for success; therefore, the principal must be well versed in research that supports this way of thinking in order to motivate and encourage teachers to follow this same practice.

Rice (2010), cites research findings from the National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in *Education Research (CALDER)* in which effective principals were determined to retain effective teachers and reiterates that recruiting, staffing, and retaining effective teachers is crucial in bolstering classroom practices that positively affect student achievement.

Stronge, Richard, and Catano (2008) render a suggestion on how a building principal can effect teachers' classroom practices through five areas: (a) keeping teachers abreast of current research and practices, (b) utilizing teachers' energy and capacities, (c) promoting the concept of a learning community, (d) challenging teachers to examine their own practices, and (e) collaborating with teachers to evaluate curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Through shared leadership and support for teachers, principals can influence how teachers structure their classrooms and implement the curriculum, building trust that teachers use instruction effectively, but also providing support and feedback through frequent classroom visits.

Further examination of the literature reveals that building principals play a crucial role in teachers' professional development within the school building. Because the principal is in the position to influence the implementation of quality teacher professional development, it is imperative that such programs adhere to educational reform and school improvement. Bredeson (2000) cites several components of teacher professional development that are found in schools:

(a) stable, high quality sources of professional development, (b) incorporate teachers' learning into their daily lives, (c) establishing professional development as a central element of state and local reform, (d) transforming professional development to meet urgent educational needs, (e) using alternative forms of traditional training models, and (f) developing new practices that support current methods of teaching, learning, and schooling.

Determining what characterizes a classroom as high-quality has taken several different forms in the past years (Curby, Grimm, & Pianta, 2010). Different stakeholders have defined quality in different ways, but most have agreed student test data are important. While test data may show improvements in instruction, they do not get at the underlying picture of the developmental process for students within that classroom and what causes students to make gains in achievement (Pianta & Hamre, 2009); thus, research shows that teachers set the tone in the classroom and developing supportive and encouraging relationships with students can lead to an increase in student achievement (Curby et al., 2010; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Mashburn et al., 2008).

Downer et al. (2007) suggested that "children at risk for school problems particularly benefit from higher classroom quality within more demanding instructional contexts" (p. 413), and further asserts that classrooms of high quality promote behavioral engagement in learning. Pianta et al. (2003) advised that children whose families have low incomes may be less likely than children of high-income families to experience a high-quality classroom. Further investigation in the research suggests that high-stakes testing outcomes are often strongly influenced by an assortment of influences beyond the control of the school system such as student's family background, family income, and community environment.

The role that the principal serves as the overarching, direct and indirect influence on teachers and classrooms is imperative in aiding in classroom practices and promoting student learning and achievement.

### **Principal Behaviors that Influence Student Achievement**

Building principals are sometimes faced with the challenges of serving as a leader in an underperforming school, and ultimately given the task to turn a school around. By establishing a trusting school environment for all stakeholders--parents, teachers, students, and community members, cooperation and collaboration become a central focus for school improvement; thus, allowing for improvement and success to occur (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). Goddard, Sweetland, and Hoy (2000) propose the following with regards to examining the importance of student achievement:

As states move toward models that embrace systems of student assessment and minimum standards for advancement, public awareness of differences between schools in student achievement is heightening. Indeed, as educators look for means to improve school performance in response to this policy development, the time is ripe for consideration of school organizational features that facilitate teaching and learning and improve student achievement (p.683).

According to The Marzano Center (2017), the three chief problems faced by a Title I school are: (1) interventions put in place are minimal in preparing students for higher level achievement, (2) new standards require a whole-school buy-in, (3) formative data must be constantly analyzed and used to drive instruction.

Hopson and Lee (2011) contend that students who participate in free and reduced lunch programs are likely to underperform in reading and math assessments, which could be attributed

to stress from the students' homes, schools, and communities as a direct result of a lack of resources. Furthermore, school environments play a crucial role in a student's learning and development. In fact, they assume that academic achievement can be a result of a school climate in which there are supportive relationships, emotional and physical safety, and shared goals for learning.

Principals have an implicit impact on student achievement; however, their leadership styles set the tone for the school and the climate within (Williams, 2009). In schools where the principal fosters a trusting, cooperative, and open environment with staff input, the overall climate tends to bolster higher levels of satisfaction and school connectedness among the faculty (Price, 2012).

Principals and teachers play a collaborative role in the school environment and are often mutually dependent on one another. Murley, Keedy, and Welsh (2008) affirm that leadership should be distributed within a school and more importantly, high poverty schools undergo reform efforts more successfully with the collaborative relationships between the principal and teachers. Stone-Johnson (2014) posits that effective leadership is second to teaching in regard to student achievement.

The role of the principal not only takes on a collaborator, but also an instructional leader by (a) planning and supervising instruction, (b) providing instructional support, (c) monitoring the school's progress, and (d) protecting staff from unrelated external demands (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2008). Similarly, May, and Supovitz (2011) suggest that as an instructional leader, the principal (a) observes classes, (b) reviews test scores with faculty, (c) facilitates collaboration among teachers around instruction, (d) secures resources, and (e) maintains visibility within the school.

Hays (2013) examined school leadership of four charter high schools in Boston, who were composed of primarily Black and Hispanic low-income students who have made progress in narrowing the achievement gap. There were three themes that emerged from his study: (a) high expectations for student achievement, (b) safe and orderly learning environment, and (c) all-school adherence to the leadership's vision and mission.

School leadership is an essential element in catalyzing the characteristics of a school for a dramatic transformation; leaders have the knowledge and skill to raise the achievement of all students (pg. 40).

Additionally, school principals faced with the task of transforming a school with a low socioeconomic status must look at all elements that have effects on student achievement, such as race, teaching and learning, curriculum, and the student-teacher culture.

In order to foster student achievement, principals must be able to disaggregate student data and convey needed reforms to stakeholders. Specifically, there are seven types of data that principals use to make informed decisions about curriculum and instructional programs: (a) state-wide standardized test scores and local benchmark assessments, (b) attendance and discipline data, (c) teacher-generated formative assessments and observational data, (d) student demographic data, (e) information about best practices for instruction, (f) feedback/satisfaction data from teachers, (g) parent and community perception data (Sun, 2015). Furthermore, in moving a school forward, principals not only use data to make informed curriculum decisions, but also to identify goals, both long and short-term, and staff development needs.

Collective leadership, as studied by Leithwood and Mascall (2008), was conceptualized as distributed influence and control, meaning that the staff is involved in organizational decision



making. Results of their study indicated that school decisions are influenced not only by teachers, but also by other staff members, students, parents, and community members. Within their study, Leithwood and Mascall (2008) specifically examined motivation, capacity, and work settings in relation to student achievement. Motivation was described as personal goals, beliefs about one's capacities, and beliefs about one's situation. By setting goals, a person is able to direct attention and effort towards targets for performance and are able to strengthen their efforts if the target is not met. This self-efficacy may be the result of supportive feedback from administrators, peers, or students. Capacity was defined as the knowledge and skills required to accomplish work-related tasks. Understanding how learning occurs within the individual person, a small group of teachers or staff members, and the whole school is instrumental in building capacity, as well as examining its goals, culture, and structure. By building a collective capacity within a school, improvement in student achievement is likely, which is in part from having teachers and administrators that take initiatives head on in understanding ways to make sense and disseminate information in a meaningful way. Work settings, in relation to the study about collective leadership, referred to supports available for instruction within a school (curriculum, time for professional development, budget) and the degree of teachers' workloads (class size, number of subjects taught, dispersion of special needs students, teaching assistants). Results of the study indicated that schools with high levels of student achievement also showed high grades for capacity, motivation, and setting.

## **Conclusion**

While high-quality classrooms are important in aiding student achievement, the role of the school principal is paramount in fostering student achievement both on the forefront and behind the scenes. From establishing clear goals and a vision, maintaining high expectations for

teachers and students, to developing relational trust with staff, students, and community members, the school principal must work tirelessly to form these cohesive interdependencies that affect student achievement, especially while facing the demands of a Title I school.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this chapter is to lay the groundwork for how this case study will be conducted. Research questions will be presented, variables will be defined, and appreciative inquiry will be discussed as a means to conducting this study.

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine how stakeholders perceive leadership behaviors that may be contributing to gains in Reading SOL scores at a Title I school. This study aims to highlight the importance of stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's behaviors and practices in moving this school in a positive direction.

#### **Research Questions**

The following inter-related research questions inform the methodology of this study:

1. What are stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's behaviors that have impacted school climate?
2. What are stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's behaviors that have impacted classroom practices?
3. What are stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's behaviors that have impacted student achievement?

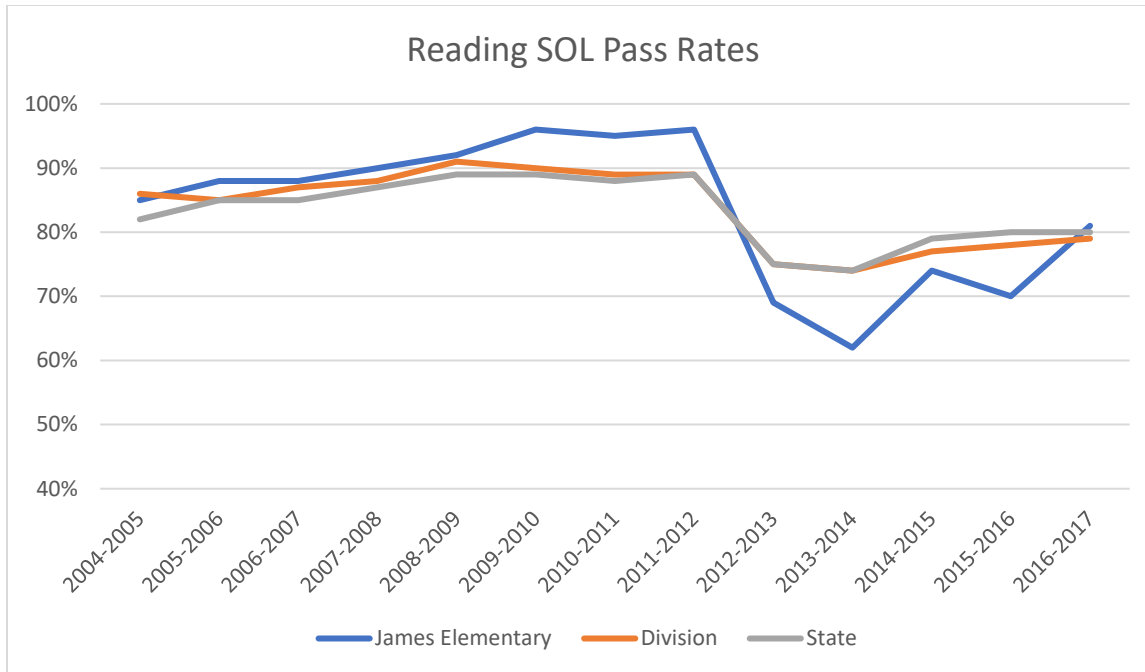
#### **Case Study**

The case study design is used in qualitative research to make sense of a phenomenon, usually within a small group for the purpose of contributing to theory, practice, policy, or action (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). A case study allows the researcher to become immersed in face-to-face interactions in order to obtain data. Case studies use purposeful site selection and

sampling because it enables the researcher to focus specifically on a particular group (bounded case) and the specific phenomenon under investigation.

### **Site Selection**

Within this division, there were 19 schools that offered a school-wide Title I program. The researcher wanted a school that was similar in demographics to her own and narrowed down the list from nineteen schools down to four. From there, the researcher examined the length of time that the principals have been at their respective schools and was able to ascertain that the principal from James Elementary School (JES), anonymous name given and used from this point forward, had the longest tenure of the four, and the only principal of the four to have obtained a doctorate degree. JES is unique in the fact that because its SOL Reading test scores were at one point higher than the district and state, followed by a sharp decline, and then a noticeable gain in scores to meet state accreditation standards, as shown in Figure 3.1. The student demographics of JES, as compared to the district in terms of students who are economically disadvantaged, showed that JES was up against a challenge of ensuring that their students are given opportunities to excel in achievement, despite external factors that may not be found in other areas of the district.



*Figure 3.1.* Reading SOL Pass Rates. This chart displays comparison scores for Reading SOL pass rates at the school, district, and state level. It should be noted that reading test scores took a sharp decline in the 2012-2013 school year, which may have been the result in the change in format of the SOL test.

Table 3.1 presents demographic information for JES and the school district it resides in. All data was based on the Fall Membership reports, which took accounts for all students enrolled in a school, district, and state on September 30.

Table 3.1

Demographic Data for James Elementary and the School District

	2014-2015		2015-2016		2016-2017		2017-2018	
	<i>JES</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>JES</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>JES</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>JES</i>	<i>District</i>
Males	54%	52%	55%	51%	55%	51%	54%	51%
Females	46%	48%	45%	49%	45%	49%	46%	49%
Black	83%	36%	85%	36%	84%	36%	84%	36%
White	2%	42%	2%	41%	1%	40%	2%	39%
Hispanic	12%	8%	9%	8%	11%	9%	12%	10%
Students with Disabilities	14%	11%	13%	12%	15%	12%	14%	12%
Economically Disadvantaged	75%	40%	76%	43%	73%	40%	69%	36%
English Language Learners	11%	7%	9%	8%	11%	10%	12%	10%
Homeless	2%	1%	3%	1%	3%	1%	2%	1%

Source: Virginia Department of Education, 2018.

This table shows the comparison between JES and its overall school district. The biggest discrepancies between JES and the district was that of race, specifically black and white students enrolled at JES versus within the district, as well as the percentage of students categorized as economically disadvantaged. JES does show similar characteristics to other Title I schools

within its vicinity in the district in relation to Reading SOL scores and demographics as noted in Appendix E.

### **Population**

The population of the school consisted of various teachers and staff with varying years at that school. From that group, sampling shifted from purposeful to convenience in that the researcher was limited to those from the population who agreed to participate. The teaching staff at JES is comprised of around 40 teachers and staff members from grades pre-kindergarten through fifth grade, as well as exceptional education teachers and instructional assistants, a Title I Reading teacher, guidance counselor, and resource teachers. Forty percent of the staff have a bachelor's degree and fifty-eight percent of the staff have a master's degree. The principal holds a doctoral degree. In comparison to the district, thirty-eight percent hold a bachelor's degree, fifty-nine percent hold a master's degree, and one percent holds a doctoral degree. The experience of the teachers at JES ranged from first year teachers to veteran teachers with over 30 years of experience, totaling just over 300 years of experience and a collective longevity of time spent at JES at just over 200 years as seen in Figure 3.2.

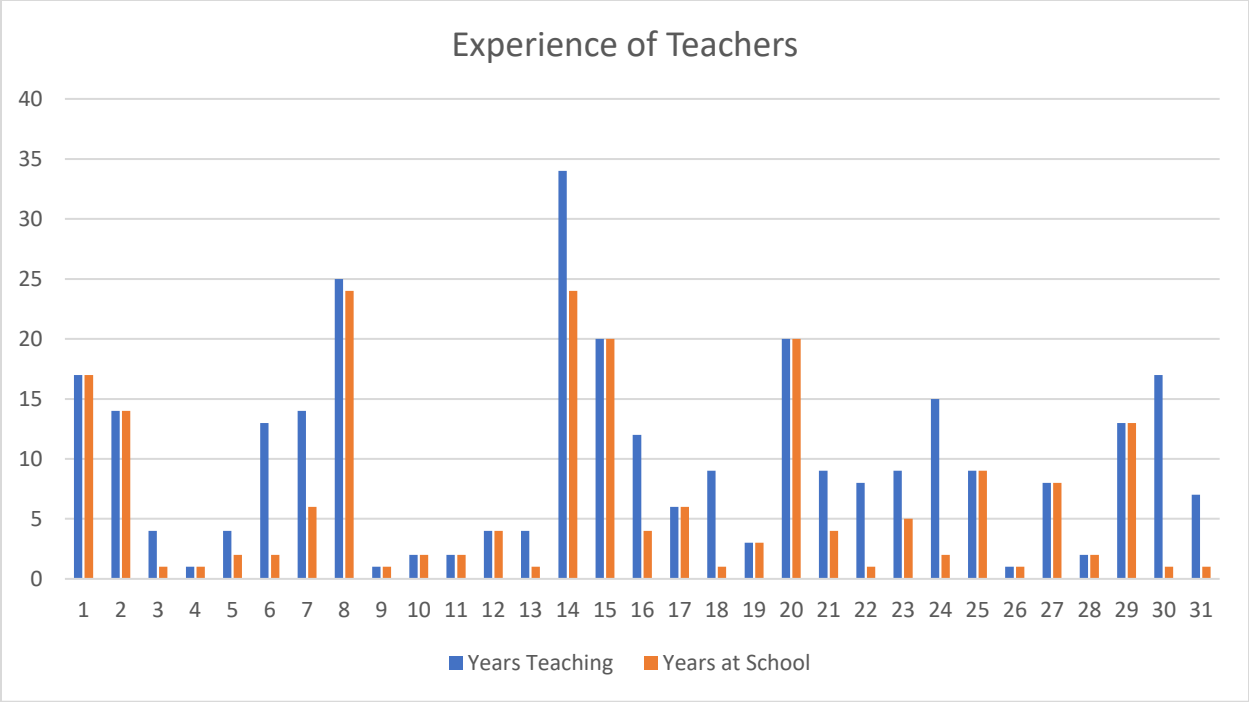


Figure 3.2. Experience of Teachers. This chart displays the teachers’ total years of experience and the time spent at JES.

**Data Collection and Methods**

In order to ascertain more specific stakeholders’ perceptions about the school culture, and how it has changed over time, along with leadership behaviors that may have contributed to turning around the school, it was important to talk directly with a specific sample of stakeholders. In conjunction with the principal, the researcher coordinated the interviews and focus groups based on events happening at the school, as to not disrupt the daily jobs of the school personnel. The researcher talked with the building principal before scheduling any interviews and focus groups and was given access to email the grade level chairs to coordinate when to meet.

**Interviews and focus groups.** To answer the research questions, the researcher conducted 30-minute interviews with the respective building principal, associate principal, and



the elementary director that serves these schools (Appendices A-D). There were approximately 40 teachers on staff at JES (Pre-K-5, exceptional education, instructional assistants, and Title I Reading, guidance, and resource); it was the hope of the researcher to gather 15-20 people of the teaching staff to participate in focus groups. Individual interviews will be conducted with the principal, associate principal, and the elementary director. Thirty-minute focus groups were held after school hours in teachers' classrooms and included the teachers that made up each grade level, the resource teachers, and the guidance counselor and Title I teacher. Table 3.2 shows the number of people from each stakeholder group that participated in the study.

Table 3.2

Stakeholder Interviews and Focus Groups

<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Type of Data Collected</b>
<b>Principal</b>	1	Interview
<b>Associate Principal</b>	1	Interview
<b>Elementary Director</b>	1	Interview
<b>Grade K</b>	5	Focus Group
<b>Grade 1</b>	4	Focus Group
<b>Grade 2</b>	3	Focus Group
<b>Grade 3</b>	2	Focus Group
<b>Grade 4</b>	3	Focus Group
<b>Grade 5</b>	4	Focus Group
<b>Resource Teachers</b>	4	Focus Group
<b>Exceptional Ed Teachers</b>	4	Focus Group
<b>Guidance and Title I</b>	2	Focus Group
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	

Table 3.2 displays the total number of people that would be eligible to participate in the interview process.

Interviews and focus group conversations took place during the spring of 2018. All interviews were scheduled at the interviewee's convenience and took place at JES, except for the Elementary Director, which was held in her office. The interviews and focus groups lasted approximately 30 minutes each and followed a semi-structured format in which the researcher asked questions, but also allowed for conversation, as it pertained to the context of this study. Interviews and focus groups were conducted behind closed classroom doors to protect anonymity. Consent forms were generated, and permission was granted before the interviews and focus groups began each session. Anonymity was offered to protect the identities of each participant. Recordings were taken of each interview and focus group session through Audacity, a recording program on the computer. Sound files were then sent via a password protected site to a professional company. Transcripts were provided and coded with Person 1, Person 2, etc. for each set of interviews and focus groups transcriptions. Transcript files were then given back to the researcher. All paperwork (signed consent forms and transcriptions) were kept secure in a locked office only accessible by the researcher. The participants had the opportunity to later review the transcripts and make any corrections if necessary. Recordings and transcripts will be kept for the required amount of time and then will be shredded and destroyed.

**Observations.** To further provide validity to this study, the researcher also held three observations at JES at the discretion of the principal. These consisted of three daily classroom and hallway observations. During these observations, the principal's behaviors were noted along with responses from stakeholders present. The principal's behaviors observed were then coded according to the transformational leadership characteristics: shared vision and goals, motivation,

distributed leadership, and relationships. These observations took place during the spring of 2018 and the fall of 2018 at JES.

**Document review.** The Winter 2016 School Climate and Culture Survey was used as a document review of JES and was provided to the researcher by the division. This survey is given in each school in the division every two years and the results are compared with the district and national responses and prepared by the National Center for School Leadership. The results of the survey are presented in data tables and graphs that represent the following overall dimensions: (a) school pride, (b) internal communications, (c) parent connections, (d) work environment, (e) organization dynamics, (f) accountability, (g) meeting student needs, (h) readiness for change, (i) direction of the organization, and (j) leadership dynamics. Results were given in favorable and unfavorable percentages from the response rates. This survey is administered to all faculty and staff without the administration present and completed individually online.

**Case Analysis.** Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2013) give a great description of qualitative case analysis and the steps necessary to analyze data, beginning with coding. Recordings from stakeholders were recorded and later transcribed and examined with analytical notes taken during the interviews to find meaningful descriptions of answers that participants gave and given a code so that subsequent interviews could be “chunked” into similar categories. Figure 3.3 gives a matrix of how the research questions were analyzed.

<b>Research Questions and Subquestions</b>	<b>Data Collected</b>	<b>Method of Analysis</b>
What are stakeholders’ perceptions of the principal’s behaviors that have impacted school climate?	Interview  Focus Groups	Transcribe and Code  Field Notes and Code

	Observation	
What are stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's behaviors that have impacted classroom practices?	Interview	Transcribe and Code
	Focus Groups	Field Notes and Code
	Observation	
What are stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's behaviors that have impacted student achievement?	Interview	Transcribe and Code
	Focus Groups	Field Notes and Code
	Observation	

Figure 3.3. Research questions matrix. This matrix shows an overview of how the research was conducted using interviews, focus groups, and observations.

After the initial coding process, applying a pattern code was the next step in the analyzing process. “Pattern codes are explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. They pull together a lot of material from First Cycle coding into more meaningful parsimonious units of analysis” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013, p.86). Narrative descriptions were then given to the pattern codes for elaboration and field notes were added in. From there, a matrix display and/or network display was used to visually summarize any codes and materials used in the analytical process. Data was then analyzed and interpreted to make meaning and draw conclusions. The researcher created an “overall emerging themes” chart that drew upon the initial coding gained from the transcripts and observations using broad, thematic categories that included the following: environment, instruction, leadership (teacher perspective), and leadership (administrative perspective). From there, an

“expanded emerging themes” chart was created which drew out specific quotes and sub-categorical themes within the initial broad, thematic themes. To organize the findings within this research study, the researcher developed a “findings” chart to highlight the research questions and subsequent findings and recommendations.

### **Limitations**

This study was a single case study of a Title I elementary school in a suburban setting. It is not generalizable to every school, as the make-up of teachers, students, and school principal are not identical throughout the division and other schools. The faculty of JES was primarily comprised of white female teachers, with the school principal being an African American female. This study could possibly yield different results if looked at from other angles, such as through race and/or gender specific roles within the school. Also, it would benefit the educational community to duplicate this research at a school that is not meeting accreditation standards to analyze what differences (if any) in leadership behaviors are identified.

The researcher of this study is a fourteen-year teaching veteran and currently has a supervisory role in her own job within the same division; thus, was able to perceive information gathered through an administrative lens as well as through a teacher’s lens. This could be both a strength and weakness in the research design and findings.

Another limitation that was identified was the disconnect between the survey results and the focus group findings. This may be due in part that the survey is administered individually, and the focus groups were held by grade levels. By having the teachers within each grade level speak in front of each other, there may have been feelings and responses that were given that did not necessarily reflect the survey, as a means of agreeing or feeding on what was stated out loud, especially when teachers who were friendly with each other shared opinions.

## **Appreciative Inquiry**

This study is further defined as an appreciative inquiry because it focuses on the strengths of what is working in an organization rather than the weaknesses (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Appreciative inquiry has been used in research throughout the past three decades, primarily servicing corporations and international aid organizations, but has had limited usage in the education field (Tschannen-Moran, 2015).

Tschannen-Moran (2015) hypothesizes that appreciative inquiry has five interrelated principles that help shape the way that people get ready for change. The *positive principle* builds on strengths and empowers people to move in a new direction of change. Building on the constructivist epistemology, the *constructionist principle* focuses on the understanding through interactions and constructions of the reality that people live. The *simultaneity principle* embraces the fact that conversations become positive when questions are asked in a positive manner. Keeping with the positive nature, the *anticipatory principle* suggests that questions and reflections are based on the outlook that one holds. The final component of appreciative inquiry, the *poetic principle*, implies that people anticipate a positive future when enriched with things that add significance to life.

The appreciative inquiry framework, in short, seeks to identify what works, celebrate successes, dialogue about what is needed to bring about change, implement the needed changes, and monitor the effects (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Using this framework in a low-performing Title I school can help build on small successes and build momentum in turning around and rebuilding the school.

Appreciative inquiry is an approach to organizational change that employs reflection, self-examination, and collaboration. According to Fifolt and Lander (2013), “appreciative

inquiry relies explicitly on input from individuals at all levels to uncover the organization's positive core (strengths)" (p. 22). Furthermore, through appreciative interviews, stakeholders are able to share experiences to further develop new visions and goals for the future.

Educators and education in general have received a large amount of negative press in recent years, which may be attributed to low test scores, working conditions, teacher behavior, and staff turnover. Based upon such negative backlash, Harrison and Hasan (2013) suggested that "when students and educators are bombarded with incomplete, negatively slanted representations of themselves, they internalize them" (p. 67), citing appreciative inquiry as an approach to change how schools are examined, thereby reframing the constructs odd reality around people.

Appreciative inquiry seeks to identify what is working best in an organization generally, and a school setting specifically, encouraging collaboration between administrators, teachers, staff, students, and community members. However, some criticize the approach for what is perceived as its naivety, discounting the role optimism plays to account for real challenges and changes (Harrison and Hasan, 2013).

### **Theoretical Underpinnings of the Method**

Qualitative case studies generally, and appreciative inquiries specifically, emphasize dialogue with stakeholders to explore their perspectives and identify what is working within an organization through interviews and shared stories and make meanings of those findings. Thus, it makes sense to approach this study using a constructivist epistemology and an interpretivist theoretical perspective.

**Constructionism.** According to Crotty (1998), constructionism, a type of epistemology, is based on humans constructing meaning in different ways as they engage in the world of

interpreting. Essentially, humans do not create meaning, but rather construct meaning based off of what we have to work with.

Constructivists believe that the process of meaning-making and sense-making are just as crucial as a physical event in determining how individuals will act towards one another and toward the event, and how events will be interpreted. Lincoln (2005) gives meaning to four aspects that determine how constructivists layout abstract space: (a) ontology, which is described as a definition of what will be considered, ultimately what is real, (b) epistemology, identified as a model of how an inquirer may come to know what is real, (c) methodology, which is a design strategy intended to gain information that is truthful, socially useful, and valuable, and (d) axiology which is a statement about purpose that values serve in the process and product of the inquiry process, and the influence on the product of research.

**Interpretivism.** There are a variety of frameworks that emanate from a constructionist epistemology; however, interpretivism is most suited for this particular study because taking an interpretive approach “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social-life world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67).

Within interpretivism are three individual approaches that are based on specific assumptions and used for particular purposes: (a) symbolic interactionism, (b) phenomenology, and (c) hermeneutics. Symbolic interactionism is based on the following assumptions: human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that these things have for them, the meaning of such things is consequential of the social interactions one has, and the meanings are handled, modified, and interpreted through the person dealing with the encounters. Phenomenology describes the concept that one may regain a new perspective of existence and meaning if closely examined through open eyes. Hermeneutics refers to the interpretation of texts, especially the



Bible or literary texts; however, in current times, it may also refer to how to “read” human practices, human events, and human situations in a way that brings about understanding.

While all of these individual emphases have elements that make sense, for this particular study I will draw most heavily on symbolic interactionism as a means to analyzing data.

Because humans act based off of meaning-making experiences, this study will attempt to show how transformational leadership affects school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement through the narrative lens of stakeholders in a suburban Title I school.

## **Conclusion**

This study is meant to gain an understanding of stakeholders’ perspectives on transformational leadership behaviors of a school principal as they affect school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement using an interpretivist lens as a means to collect and analyze data. This study is limited to reading achievement as measured by SOL scores from a suburban Virginia Title I school. The site selection of a Title I suburban school was important for the researcher, as this is where her interests lie and will be further discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

The data presented in the findings is not meant to generalize to every Title I school; however, the themes that emerge with regards to a principal’s behaviors may be useful in helping similar schools achieve and maintain accreditation.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

**A roadmap of findings.** The purpose of this study was to use an appreciative inquiry lens to examine the principal's behaviors, as perceived by the stakeholders of James Elementary, that may be contributing to the overall effectiveness of a Title I school, specifically looking at school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement. While the site selection of a Title I suburban school was important for the researcher, as this is where her interests lie, the teachers and administration within this study did not dwell on the fact that these students come from a low socio-economic background. In fact, it was rarely brought up as a factor when discussing the implications of the principal's behaviors (which will be addressed in Chapters 4 and 5).

The researcher used the appreciative inquiry lens while gathering the data from focus groups, interviews, observations, and document review. Specifically, when conducting the focus groups, the researcher had to remind the teachers that the purpose was to gather what was working within the school and what the principal had done to help foster school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement. This may have been in part due to the timing of the focus groups, which were held in the late spring of 2018, near the end of the school year and during testing. The researcher got a sense that some answers and comments during the focus groups may have been impacted by the end of school year demands, as a negative tone emerged from a select few teachers from various grade levels.

The findings in this chapter are organized and presented to show the importance that the principal's leadership has on school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement by using an appreciative inquiry lens to examine the principal's behaviors as being

an asset driving James Elementary School, which was the background driving force in designing this study and interpreting the data collected.

### **A View into the School**

James Elementary School (JES), a Title I school nestled in a suburban area outside of Richmond, Virginia, is surrounded by a quaint neighborhood filled with traditional two-story houses and neatly cared for yards. This is a school that also draws from various apartment complexes and houses a blend of students who are predominantly African American (84%), but also Hispanic (12%) and White (2%). The district enrollment of students is made up of African American (36%), Hispanic (10%), Asian (11%), and White (38%), according to the Virginia Department of Education school quality profile. The teachers within JES are majority white with a little less than half being African American, and the principal and associate principal are also African American. There are several male teachers within the faculty; albeit they are in the minority of the staff. JES has a staff of teachers where over 50% have attained their master's degree and range in experience from one to over thirty years.

An overwhelming majority of the students are absent 10% or less of the required school days and roughly 70% of the students at JES are eligible for free or reduced lunch rates. Inside the halls of JES, student artwork covers the walls, the building is kept clean and tidy, and there are learning opportunities such as interactive vocabulary matching activities and an interactive Virginia regions and products map placed in the hallways for students to use. The researcher had various opportunities throughout the 2018 spring and 2018 fall to collect data at JES from focus groups, interviews, and observations.

When one walks into this school during instructional time, they are met with an organized and orderly environment. Children were greeted during arrival time through various

points of entry into the building (bus and car drop off) by administrators and teachers. The principal was visible at the front of the building and knows almost each student's name and even made a point to address some on a more personal level. Her interactions with students match her beliefs that she is "student centered." The teachers help to monitor the hallways and students are greeted outside of their classrooms. The "community" sense that teachers gave during focus groups emulates throughout the building as colleagues are cordial with each other and most notably with students. There was little discipline that was seen within the hallways and students did not have to be reminded of the school's expectations and rules. At arrival and dismissal times, students were able to move throughout the building to their designated areas with little supervision. Even in the cafeteria setting, students entered the cafeteria for breakfast and lunch and were able to get their food and eat without having to be reminded of the behavioral expectations. When I mentioned this to Principal Jones during our interview, she boasted that the expectations for hallway and cafeteria behavior had been instilled within the students and that the teachers did a great job of holding them (students) accountable and reinforcing the expectations.

### **Principal Leadership**

Principal leadership is paramount in the overall function and success of a school, and that leadership can have a direct impact on school climate, culture, and student achievement (Newman, Holt, & Thompson, 2016). Chapter 2 gave indication about transformational leadership and relational trust as being driving forces with principals leading schools. Evidence of these perceptions coupled with transactional leadership was found when gathering data about JES.

James Elementary School has a dedicated principal who has been in her current position for seven years. While a select few of the teachers who participated in the focus groups were very candid about their feelings towards the school administration and the negative perspective they possess, overall, there was a unified sense that the principal is leading the school in a way that promotes a shared vision (providing a safe, efficient, and supportive environment so that all students feel valued and are encouraged to lead toward their personal best) along with attention to data and student needs. JES is a Leader in Me school, which promotes seven effective habits that are taught within the classrooms and throughout the school: (a) be proactive, (b) begin with the end in mind, (c) put first things first, (d) think win-win, (e) seek first to understand, then to be understood, (f) synergize, (g) sharpen the saw.

Scores from the Winter 2016 School Climate and Culture Survey echo what was observed during focus group meetings, interviews, and observations as overall school pride, work environment, accountability, meeting student needs, readiness for change, and leadership dynamics all scored in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile range. In comparison, each survey dimension question of the Winter 2016 School Climate and Culture Survey had a response rate from JES staff from 67-85%, which correlated with all elementary schools within the district and elementary schools at the national level. The high expectations that Principal Jones has of her staff is reflected in the School Climate & Culture Survey (Winter 2016) with regards to teachers' understandings of how their performances will be evaluated (95%) and knowing what is expected of them at work (100%). Even though Principal Jones gives off the persona of a person with a strong internal drive to succeed, both for herself and for her school, the researcher postulates that this "hard to approach" figure has the best interests of the school at the forefront. Further, sub-categories of

the survey triangulate this by revealing the following favorable responses: (a) having trust and confidence in the school leadership (97%) and (b) school leadership is effective (97%).

When Principal Jones began her job at JES, she did not immediately come in and make changes to what was already in place. She observed and completed her daily tasks, but as she began to “notice peoples’ strengths and weaknesses I made changes and we grew together. I like a little bit of order, so I fixed things.” As the only designated administrator within the school building for several years, all of the instructional and operational decisions fell upon her. While there was input sought from various stakeholders within the building, Principal Jones had the sole responsibility of implementing these decisions for JES. Because of this, high expectations were set, both with staff and students. “I make sure the teachers know I have high expectations and that we as a school have high expectations for the students. I am ‘kid-focused’ not ‘teacher-focused’, so I am working for the good of the school.” The researcher determined that the principal at JES does not fit into a mold of one definitive type of leadership style; but rather, a cohesive blend of varying leadership characteristics based on the data gathered from the focus groups and the interviews.

### **School Climate**

**A familial atmosphere among teachers.** As previously noted in Chapter 2, Gorton and Alston (2002) stated that the climate within a school is constantly evolving to account for characteristics of current members and problems, as well as current external demands. In order for a principal to build a learning community within a school, there must be a culture present within the school that fosters the stakeholders forming a community (Daresh & Lynch, 2010). The teachers that make up JES collectively have over 300 years of experience in the classroom,

with majority of their educational experience at JES. When talking with the teachers, the overall theme that kept repeating itself was a “sense of family” among themselves.

Taking a deeper look into the school environment, it is evident that the teachers have built a relational trust with each other, but there is a discord with the relationship between the principal and the teachers based from speaking with the focus groups. While the Climate Survey data represented an overall positive climate within the school, the tone that some of the teachers were using during the focus groups represented a more frustrated and irritated aspect. The principal, Principal Jones, projects a strong leadership tone and is grounded in making sure that teachers and students always meet her expectations. Focus groups agreed that Principal Jones is student-centered and data-driven but seems unapproachable at times (this will be unpacked more in the teacher voice section). One interaction that the researcher observed between Jones and a faculty member supported this when a faculty member was walking a student in the hallway during arrival time. Principal Jones, in a curt tone, asked who was watching the teacher’s class if she was away from her classroom. The teacher appeared to fumble for words as she explained that she was walking a student to her new classroom and that there was another adult in her room with the rest of the class. This encounter between the principal and a teacher echoed some of the sentiments that were given during the focus groups, where teachers stated that the principal was hard to approach and direct with her words. While there wasn’t an overabundance of negative feelings towards the principal, the researcher observed that of the thirty-one teachers who participated in the focus groups, there were five specific teachers who had strong feelings of negativity. Even though there was this negative feeling towards Principal Jones as perceived by the researcher via the focus groups, there was also a sense of trust that had been established as the teachers were proud of their work and admitted that they knew that not every decision was

Principal Jones' choice, but rather information and actions that came from out of her control. This view of how Principal Jones interacted with this particular teacher lends itself to a type transactional leadership style.

According to the School Climate & Culture Survey (Winter 2016), the question of “the people that I work with trust and respect each other” scored at a 95% positive response rate, which was up from 93% in 2014 and 90% in 2012. The staff at JES also scored higher than the county at 90% and nationally at 87%. Other sub-results within this survey also render favorable results towards the overall climate within the building at JES, yielding higher percentages than compared to local and national results: feeling safe at work (100%), working in a positive, professional work environment (95%), people that work together care about each other on a personal level (96%), and people working together to get the job done (100%) all depict an environment built on trust.

When conducting the focus group sessions with the grade level teachers, the familial references that were spoken of made reference to the peer relationships that were built within the building, rather than the relationships with the administration. Of course, this was not the case for everyone; however, it was the overwhelming response. That being said, there is a foundation of trust among the staff and administration that helps to drive the instruction and work functions within JES. The School Climate & Culture Survey (Winter 2016) asked questions about school pride and, just as the work environment questions, highly favorable responses were given by staff. The following statements represent the responses for the staff at JES:

- Considering everything, I am satisfied with school. (98%)
- I am committed to seeing my school/district succeed (100%)
- I would recommend my school to a friend seeking employment (98%)



- My school/district is well regarded in the community (98%)
- Overall, my school does a good job of meeting my needs (96%)

These sentiments expressed in the survey do not necessarily give the same perceptions as speaking with the teachers in the focus groups; however, there was no teacher that was totally dissatisfied with everything at JES, and the observations that occurred did not portray some of the frustration found during the focus groups.

Not only was there evidence of trust amongst colleagues, there was an overwhelming level of trust that was built on relationships with the students. The principal stressed the importance of having relationships with the students in order to engage them and teach them and the teachers echoed this in their focus groups. While observing at JES, students that entered the building at arrival time were greeted by Principal Jones, most on a name basis. Quick inquiries about class or home displayed a level of comfort between the students and principal and also emphasized the high expectations that Principal Jones has for her school.

The researcher found that relational trust was the crux of the underpinnings of what the teachers were conveying about their perceptions of the school, primarily with the familial references amongst the teachers, and by proxy, the administration. Because many of the staff have been at JES for a large number of years, the bond that they bring resonates throughout the building. They lean on each other for ideas, support, and guidance and serve as leaders for beginning teachers. It is some of these veteran teachers that reinforce what Principal Jones is doing within the building and bridge the gap that is felt by other teachers.

### **Classroom Practices**

**Instructional programs.** Classroom instruction is on the forefront at JES. Teachers have been given common planning times and forms to collaborate and document what is

happening in their classrooms. Data is used daily for instructional planning and the teachers and principal regularly analyze data to make informed decisions. While some expressed discord with the amount of material that must be covered, and at times, the lack of time for planning and implementation, there was clear recognition for the principal and her approach as an instructional leader. One participant indicated that, “The principal does a good job leading a discussion about data, especially where they (students) are achieving well and where groups of children need different kinds of instruction.” A student-centered instructional approach implemented by the principal has been the use of student data notebooks, in which students are responsible for recording their assessment data and set goals for themselves, which according to a teacher, “...Definitely is positive because it gives the child more accountability of what they’re doing.”

The reading instructional programs play an integral role in shaping JES, as reading is a primary focus for the school in regard to accreditation ratings. Teachers expressed that they are expected to implement programs with fidelity; however, there was frustration voiced by several teachers over the turnover in reading programs that have come from the top down (from central office) and how the principal implemented the changes within the building. Teachers have been given directives to follow in regard to particular programs to adopt, often times resulting in misplaced frustration as teachers have to learn the specifics of a program, implement it, and then track data. A point of contention that has resulted is the lack of data to determine if such program is truly effective due to the quick changes in program adoption. JES sets up its academic programs based on county guidelines. A particular reading program was implemented within JES several years ago, and for the most part, the teachers seemed to enjoy the program and saw the progress that students were making; however, due to the county adopting a new reading program, the original was disbanded within two years with little more explaining other

than, “It didn’t match the new county pacing guidelines.” The defeat that the teachers felt was disheartening since they had taken the time to learn and implement the original program which now was no longer going to be used, and a new program would have to be taught and implemented. One teacher stated the following:

We’ve revamped the way that we do reading using Jan Richardson plans and formal lesson plans and things of that nature. Again, it goes back to sometimes I feel like we do things just so that we can say we did them. They’re not necessarily effective. Or they might not necessarily even be the best practice, but we’re just doing it so that we can check off a box and say, “Okay, we did that.”

The focus groups and interviews at JES revealed common difficulties that teachers and administrators face each day within a school: time, mandated curriculum, discipline, and other external factors, all of which have an impact on student achievement. Knowing that schools are having to rely on student test scores via statewide assessments puts pressure on all stakeholders to continuously assess instructional programs and delivery of instruction.

Teachers have been tasked with keeping data notebooks for the students as a way for student ownership and buy-in to instruction as well as data tracking for instructional decision-making purposes. As part of keeping these data notebooks, teachers are able to identify students that may need targeted intervention and can express those concerns with the administration. “I would say that they’ve (administration) gotten really good about keeping a constant watch on who needs intervention and who doesn’t.”

While there is consensus that the principal knows her data and is kept abreast on students’ performances on classroom, county, and state assessments, there has been a shift in recent years with the amount of time that teachers have to dedicate to both instructional

programs and extra-curricular activities and programs. A common sentiment across the grade level teachers was the inconsistency with instructional programs throughout the years and the decline in “fun activities” for students during the school day. The Leader in Me program was implemented at JES at the beginning of Principal Jones’ tenure as a school-wide program to promote student leadership and self-reflection. This program, and its various components, was a common theme brought up by classroom teachers and administration alike during focus groups and interviews. The notion that this program teaches students how to develop a voice for themselves and to be reflective citizens was a common positive among all participants within this study; however, the inconsistency with which it has been implemented and the demands of other mandated academic programs have not allowed the Leader in Me program to fully thrive and have frustrated some teachers:

I love the program, when it works, but it’s not connecting. We need more parent support. We are saying the buzzwords and it’s such a nice program, but there’s so much pressure on us. Are we going to prep our lessons or are we—it really is a lot on top of everything we’re doing.

**Professional development.** The need for a formalized reading program has been adopted county-wide and has been fully implemented within the last couple of years. Professional development (PD) has been provided to the teachers, and the Title I Reading teacher at JES along with the administration, monitor the program and the lesson planning that goes along with it to help develop meaningful PD sessions for the teachers. The Title I teacher, who regularly meets with the administration at JES, had the following to add, “We were looking at small group plans, for example, teachers would share with me that they had never really been

told what was supposed to be in there. So, from that and what we saw, we were able to develop a PD.”

This development of PD for teachers based on the needs of the school is coupled with mandated PD programs that the teachers must attend. While the teachers felt that some of the PD has been worthwhile, the biggest issue that came about was the amount of (or lack thereof) time. Survey (Winter 2016) data suggests that of the majority of the sub-categories about the school climate and culture only have an 87% favorable response for teachers being satisfied with the PD opportunities that are available; however, that is an increase in previous years’ favorable responses: 79%-2014 and 76%-2012. “It’s frustrating to get all of the info and then say ok, do it. And then we are struggling to find time...And if our principal has the choice to give us some time, we’re very appreciative to have it.” It is clear through the teachers that the principal does value the staff’s time, as one person expressed that faculty meetings were direct and to-the-point and things that could be shared via email were done so.

One of the most significant views of instruction came from the elementary director for JES:

A typical teacher ten years ago would talk about instructional practices—inputs they did—and the expected level of achievement; now we’ve flipped that to look at where children are and based on that we examine instructional practices and materials and programs to see where is there misalignment with what that child needs, what do we do to adjust.

This is right in line with the principal’s thinking in being student-centered and looking at ways to maximize instruction for the good of the school. In her initial debut as the principal at JES, the

changes that were initially made were operational in nature. Changing the master schedule to fit around core instruction (reading and math) versus resource classes (PE, art, music, library) and adjusting the lunch times so that there was more organization for monitoring grade levels of students were the biggest changes that took place. Principal Jones recognized that JES had historically achieved well in SOL testing, but as the SOL's began to change, the school started to re-shift their focus on academics based on the students' strengths and weaknesses. During this time of transition with the SOL's, Principal Jones introduced JES to the Leader in Me program which promotes self-reflection among the teachers and builds on students' strengths to promote acceptance as who they are.

## **Student Achievement**

**Perceptions of achievement.** Success in a Title I school is often viewed as an obstacle with many hurdles. Newman, Holt, and Thompson (2016) rendered the following:

The education system today has placed enormous pressure on schools for students to achieve at high levels on state and national assessments. Schools provide for students from poverty an opportunity to acquire skills and knowledge that will help them find better paying jobs. Schools that are considered Title I have a great challenge when it comes to high achievement. Students coming to school from lower income backgrounds tend to have a more limited academic vocabulary and less exposure to literature. In order to improve society, children from all backgrounds and socio-economic levels need to achieve in school (pg. 36).

JES, according to Principal Jones and the elementary director, has been a school that has historically performed well on state assessments, but was continuously working to keep raising student achievement. Principal Jones is a very data-driven individual who capitalizes on the

abundance of data from within JES; however, this does not go without a price. “It’s like they’re being tested all the time” were the sentiments of one upper-elementary classroom teacher, while another stated “It’s like we’re testing to see how well they’re going to test.” In fact, for a school that is fully accredited according to state testing standards, there was never any commendation given by the teachers about their hard work towards their students and the results that were achieved because of this.

When asked about agendas that had been put into place at JES during her time there to bring about student achievement, Principal Jones focused on encouraging positive relationships, holding high expectations, and self-reflection:

Encouraging those positive relationships and keeping high expectations. Making sure that teachers know that we have high expectations. I don’t have a specific program that if the kid gets this, we’re going to do this. Because honestly, my belief is this is what they’re (teachers) supposed to be doing. So, let’s get it done. We are working on data notebooks-making sure that kids own their own data. So, they have to teach the kids the process the right way...but I also know it’s a learning process because I want it done right. There also just needs to be good, basic teaching.

This attitude towards holding high expectations by Principal Jones and her direct, blunt words that indicate teachers should inherently have “good, basic teaching” skills that they possess in order to get the job done, but also the need to learn along the way is a reflection of a transformative style of leadership.

With the primary focus on student achievement and test scores as means to measure this based on state accreditation standards, there has been a suffering against non-instructional activities during the school day. According to various classroom teachers, extra-curricular

activities such as the student-faculty basketball game, BETA club, and Debs and Gents have since disappeared from the instructional day. “I think we’ve gotten to the point where we want to maximize our instructional time so much that we’ve lost sight that they’re kids and they need to have fun sometimes.”

When probed further about student achievement, data continued to scratch the surface of most conversations. As touched on previously within this chapter, data is reviewed by students, teachers, and leaders (both in the building and at the county level). Instructional planning with coaches and leaders, along with analyzing assessment data within the classroom and at the school level has helped to drive the student achievement; however, there was little to no talk about how the student achievement is celebrated within the school. What was stated was that student celebrations have dwindled throughout the years, and teachers said that has been in part due to the increase on classroom instruction and lack of parental involvement. The thought amongst most teachers that participated with the focus groups was that “testing had taken over” and the teachers felt limited on how to assess students besides the required practices that were being driven by the state and county requirements.

It was of interest to the researcher that during the focus group and interview data collections, there was little talk of JES being a Title I school and the perceived implications that traditionally follow a Title I school and its impacts on student achievement (Kahlenberg, 2001). When asked about how things had changed within the school over the past years, the consistent answer given was the student population; however, the only comment of substance towards this was the following from a resource teacher:

Our population changed. We recognized right away that we needed to do something to embody these new students. And so there were some positive changes in terms of



behavior plans put in place, activities solely geared to the students that would help them to be motivated and excited about what they were coming here to do every day. And to have them think of this like their job versus we're going to come and sit here...

**Mission and vision—making it work for a common goal.** There is a faculty handbook that states the mission of JES, “We inspire lifelong learners to succeed in a nurturing community of leaders,” and a vision statement of, “Live, learn, lead.” In both, the word lead rings strong as a clear reflection of the attitude of Principal Jones. Her desire to work for the students is shared by the teachers and staff within the building. When speaking with the teachers there was a clear over-arching theme of family amongst themselves and the administrative team projected the emphasis on being student-focused. Building and maintaining relationships with students proved to be the cohesive theme that emerged from both sides of teachers and administrators, which lends itself to why JES is a successful school in regard to student achievement. The longevity of the teachers within the building, even though there was some discord towards some of the administrative encounters, demonstrates the common goal of working for the students.

When speaking with the teacher focus groups, there was this need to be heard and appreciated that the researcher felt the focus groups were trying to get across, and there was some dissatisfaction towards the administrative style within the building with regards to communication, teacher voice, and sometimes lack of disciplinary actions. However, there was a sense of cohesiveness that the teachers were not being micro-managed within their classrooms. When speaking with Principal Jones, she was very frank and matter-of-fact with what she expected of her staff. Even in watching some interactions with her, there was this direct approach that doesn't lend itself to coddling, which it seems that some teachers desired.

In examining the mission and vision of JES, even though some discord was noted, it's important to realize that Principal Jones' leadership style does in fact lend itself to driving the teachers to become nurturing leaders within their classrooms. Her expectations of having teachers handle discipline within the classroom, learning new instructional programs, reflecting on current practices, analyzing data, and building relationships with students does in fact make them leaders within the school, and because of the strong familial relationships built between the teachers, there is an overall nurturing environment within the building, which attributes to the overall student success.

With regards to the school's mission and vision, Principal Jones prides herself on "knowing" her building and being an instructional leader that works for the good of her students and follows what is being asked of her from her superiors. Based on feedback from teacher focus groups and individual interviews of the associate principal and the elementary director, Principal Jones is viewed as a strong leader that is driven by student success and the success of her school, albeit that sometimes there was a perceived lack of compassion on her part towards the staff and certain student situations.

### **Other Factors**

**Teacher voice.** Within JES, the principal, associate principal, and the elementary director all feel that there is an open-door policy in place for teachers to be able to voice concerns and/or ideas for the school. "I have an open-door policy. So, they just bring an idea, and if they have an idea and a plan and we can do it, we'll do it." In fact, it was noted that in the Winter of 2018, teachers were individually called to meet with the principal and associate principal to hold a discussion about concerns and questions that they may have had; however, this was not brought up by the teachers when meeting with the focus groups. JES has a faculty handbook that is

almost one hundred pages that outlines specifically how the school is run and policies in place. Principal Jones made mention of this several times during her interview, recalling that if teachers have a question about a policy, they should first consult the handbook, which gives very clear, concise information about the school's mission and vision, along with expectations for instructional practices, teachers' responsibilities, classroom management, and safety to highlight a few areas.

Principal Jones' student-centered thought focus is evident with the teachers; however, to some extent, there are some hard feelings about teacher input (or lack thereof) within the building. Discord about teachers not having a voice or input about switching grade levels each year and ideas generated by teachers to implement within their classrooms that were not approved was a common view shared during focus groups. It was also common among focus groups that certain teachers had more "pull" within the building, so these teachers were sought after to bring ideas to Principal Jones, as she was described as being "hard to approach." When asked during focus groups about expressing concerns to the principal, a number of classroom teachers were hesitant to give open concerns and opinions to the administration. "If it's an idea that they (administration) would need to okay, I usually would go to someone who I know could possibly word it correctly to make it seem that it was not presented by a teacher."

Though there were some negative sentiments towards a lack of teacher voice within the building, there was an overwhelming sense of "family" and "community" among the teachers and staff. Focus groups and interview conversations highlighted the familial atmosphere among the staff. "When I first came to the first staff meeting, coming from where I did, I was happy to see older teachers who had been here for a while. Because it meant that people were invested here..." Another teacher even stated:

I feel like most of the teachers are here for a good reason...they're here for the children. You know, this is a challenging population we work with...so you have to have a real love for this and a love for the kids. So, I think the relationships we build with the students and with each other are very important for the success of the school.

Even coming from the administration, there was clear evidence of a school community: “stable staff, strong culture, believing in students, high expectations, families of teachers.”

**Parental involvement.** A common theme that was brought up among all staff, including administration, and has been briefly touched upon within this chapter, was the apparent state of concerns that there is a lack of parental involvement within JES. In the School Climate and Culture Survey (Winter 2016), the overall category of parent connections received the lowest favorable percentage (55% at JES) amongst all major dynamics within the survey. This was a sharp decrease in comparison to the district elementary results (75%) and the national elementary results (80%). Sub-categorical questions within this survey that had the most undesirable favorable results for JES included parents being engaged in the learning of their child (40%), teachers within the school being well-supported by the parents with respect to discipline issues (52%), and parents at the school being involved in their child’s school life (22%). However, it should be noted that when asked about teachers having positive relationships with most parents at the school, there was a 92% favorable response by the staff at JES.

As of the spring of 2018, there was not a current Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), so student performances and fundraisers were actually run by teachers within the building, adding to the responsibilities of what the teachers had assigned to them. Because JES is a Title I school, there are parental workshops that are provided throughout the school year as a requirement under Title I guidelines, but those are often not well-attended. And while there were programs put on

by teachers to generate parental involvement (Muffins for Mom, Donuts for Dad, field day), there was no mention of programs held and led by the principal to engage families. JES does have a family advocate within the school that seeks to reach out to parents about student and family needs (coats, glasses, school supplies, food); however, there was some concern about her level of engagement when asked by teachers and the administration and the lack of follow-through on her part.

Teachers across JES utilize Class DOJO, a free-online app that allows teachers and parents to communicate throughout the school day. Teachers are able to give positive points to students for completing tasks and/or following rules. They also can send pictures and messages to parents to show what is going on in the classroom. This has been shown as a major tool in communicating with parents and is the favorable choice among teachers because it allows the teacher to get information to the parents quickly and efficiently without having to disrupt anyone's school and work day.

Both the teachers and the administration have specific parents that they can call-on to help with activities within the school, but there has not been enough follow-up with these parents in wanting to re-build the PTA. Principal Jones said the following:

It is difficult to find someone that you can trust to do that work and put that time in. I've had a few people come to me and say I want to meet with you and do it. Then they never come back. You know, "when my schedule clears up, I'm going to come do this." But I know I can call on them.

She re-iterated the fact that her teachers are go-getters and take on the role of organizing events for the school because that is the personality they have. The issue of trust with Principal Jones

and finding a parent to take on this responsibility highlights the fact that she likes things done a certain way and makes the researcher question how she interacted with the parents who sought out this role, as in having high expectations that were relayed to the parents and the parents wanting to deliver those expectations and the time constraints they would entail.

**Student discipline.** As noted in Chapter 1, Figure 1.2 represents the relationship between transformational leadership and school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement, with external factors that could play an indirect role in those dynamics. One external factor that came up during focus group meetings was that of student discipline and the impact it has during the instructional day. Looking at discipline referrals over the past several years, Principal Jones had the following to say:

Our discipline referrals have gone down simply because the expectation from my end is that we need time on task...and what can always be improved is the communication between the office and the teacher about the referral. But what we want teachers to understand is you own the discipline unless it's a major infraction. And a lot of things we can ignore, because in today's society this is how kids act, so this is how we're going to have to respond. And our response just needs to be a little bit different to move the kid away from that behavior.

This mindset of Principal Jones and her view on discipline is a shift from some of the teachers' views and expectations, and in particular of the more novice teachers. One particular teacher, with less than five years of experience, recalled that at times, she was told, "This is what you called me down for?" for a student who had been yelling and using inappropriate language in class. Another teacher stated, "They just put them back in the room, and it just becomes the norm," when speaking about discipline referrals and the follow up, or lack thereof, from the

administration. A veteran teacher, who has also worked at another school within the county of the same demographics as JES, said that discipline and negative behavioral occurrences actually seemed to be low in comparison. During the focus groups there were frustrations displayed about student behaviors and sometimes, as described by some teachers, the lack of follow-through with administration, but the teachers have developed their own route to utilize until calling for administration is a must. Collectively, most teachers within JES said they depend on each other as a primary tool in handling discipline at the minor level. Having students talk with former teachers or taking breaks in other classrooms seemed to be the norm amongst them, unless it was something major that needed to be addressed by administration. Teachers across grade levels echoed that sometimes they will have students check-in with their former teachers to help start the day. Others will occasionally use their grade level team as a resource to give the student a “break” when needed. This familial dependence on each other really shows the positive relationships that have been built between colleagues, but also brings to light the resistance felt by the teachers towards the principal and associate principal when dealing with students.

The associate principal, “Mrs. Smith,” who just completed her first year at JES, but who has been an associate principal for five years and has been in education for over fifteen years, parallels the sentiments of Principal Jones with regards to discipline, with an importance on relationship building. Mrs. Smith acknowledged that she sometimes handles student discipline and other issues based on the writings and interpretations of author Ruby Payne, whose books provide a framework for understanding poverty and the challenges that arise in schools. She made reference to being open with the teachers when she communicates with them about their knowledge of Payne’s work and will refer to Payne’s ideology to help the teacher understand

how certain discipline decisions are made. “Sometimes they (teachers) questioned what I did with the students as far as discipline.” An example given was about a second grader who told another student he was going to punch him in the eye and the teacher wrote it as a major referral. “First of all they are second graders. This is what they say all the time in their culture. It’s understanding that cultural thing.” In her prior experience as an associate principal, she worked at another school in which she claimed was more socioeconomically disadvantaged students than at JES, and the strategies of Ruby Payne were of frequent use during her time there, so she has brought that pieces of that philosophy over to JES. When talking with teachers about discipline issues or questions that teachers bring up about decisions that were made based on discipline, Mrs. Smith works to discuss how to build on current relationships to curtail discipline issues.

Both the associate principal and Principal Jones stressed the importance of the relationship building that they strive for with the students. Principal Jones had the following to say:

If we’re building positive relationships, we can rehab a kid. We’re going to keep them here at school as best as possible. Some people don’t like it and it depends on what the infraction is. I mean if it’s real egregious, they’re going to be suspended. But if it’s something that we can work with, we’re going to have to deal with the behaviors.

The frustrations about discipline expressed by the teachers, especially those with fewer than 10 years of experience, seemed to rally around having to do more and being questioned what they’ve already done by the administration. “They want to know how I’ve already addressed the problem and everything that has been done and want a referral, or sometimes saying I need to do something else.”



Highlighting a point of student discipline, a beginning teacher reported that she often feels that “there is little help...they (students) are usually sent back to class.” Another teacher stated that they are encouraged to try corrective actions within their classrooms first and document what has been done. Deeper investigation into what the teachers were saying revealed a more student-centered approach, “...as far as the discipline of the students, it used to be very cut and dry. Now they tend to work with the students more on a level of making sure their emotional needs and things are met.” Another teacher indicated, “I believe each kid is taken on a one-to-one basis and depending on the history of referrals and the level of the behavior, consequences are given out that way.”

Because the demographics of the school have changed over the years, leadership styles and instructional styles have also changed. According to some of the most veteran teachers, the initial principal that started the school had a more relaxed way of running the building and seemed more approachable and willing to listen to teachers’ ideas. While this seems that there was a dynamic shift in leadership styles, it should be noted that the way that instructional programs are rendered and assessed has also drastically changed, which could have effects on how the leadership makes decisions. The administration and teaching staff have had to adapt to the varying dynamics that each group of students bring coming into JES as well as curriculum mandates and instructional programming mandates that have been pushed down. It was reported to the researcher by veteran teachers that over the years, the school has welcomed more students of poverty and English Language Learners (ELL’s). This trend and change in demographics have made the teaching staff and administration work together to try to understand how to best engage the students and reflect on behavioral and instructional strategies that fit within the walls of JES, specifically keeping the school’s vision and mission in mind, along with best practices.

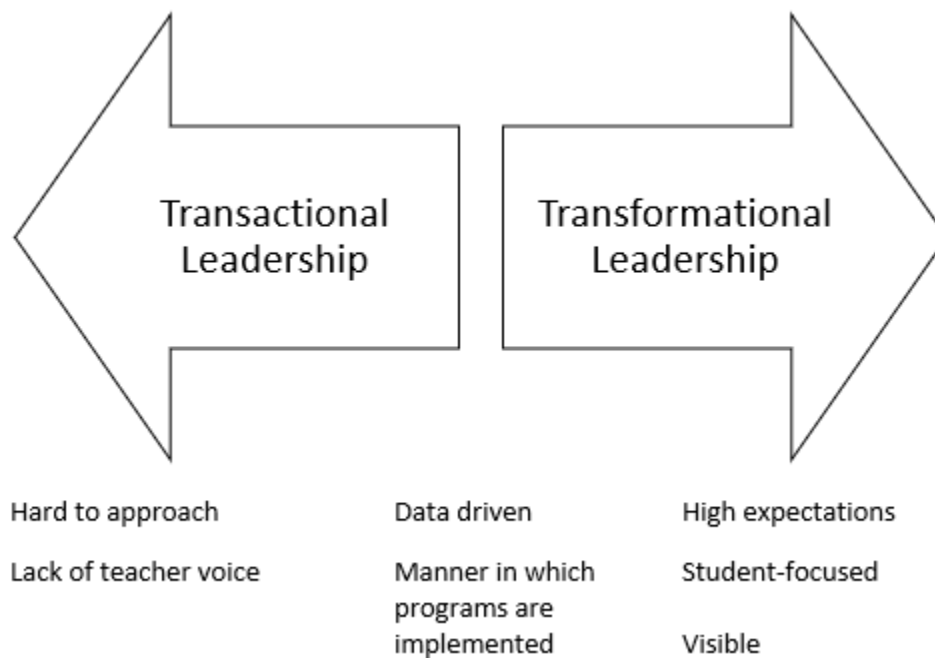
## **Conclusion**

Principal Jones radiates a self-confidence that most certainly comes across, both in the physical presence and in the reflective presence, as a no-nonsense person who thrives on an orderly environment and positive relationships, but also attention to detail and is driven by what the data says. JES participated in a county-wide school climate and culture survey in Winter 2016 that was given to all staff and compared to the district at an elementary level, full district level, national elementary level, and full national level (Appendix F). The staff at JES responded with an overall favorable outcome ( $\geq 93\%$ ) in each dimension of school pride, work environment, accountability, meeting student needs, readiness for change, and leadership dynamics. These dimensions, which echo the data that was analyzed for this study, reiterate the overarching sentiments that are held about JES and the administration. Albeit that not all teachers in this study responded with a positive approach to Principal Jones, the school climate and culture survey does reflect the amount of pride that the teachers have in their school, the familial atmosphere between colleagues, and the vision of the administration.

With her visibility in the building, from greeting students at morning arrival to doing walkthroughs with district coaches and leaders, Principal Jones has a hand in seeing what instructional practices are being employed within JES. Because of her attention to detail, her expectations are set to a high standard, in which she likes order and knowing there are procedures in place in making the school successful. While there were teachers that emulated frustration with the administration, the majority of staff recognized Principal Jones' hard work and dedication to serving the students.

Chapter two gave insight to the different types of leadership styles that school leaders may possess, and there is no doubt that Principal Jones retains a combination of various styles

that she uses to successfully run her building. There is a clear showing of authoritative leadership characteristics versus a collaborative leadership style within JES, and the implications of this will be further cultivated in Chapter 5. Also evident is the underlying need for some of the teachers to feel more care towards them from Principal Jones and this sense that there is a higher level of trust amongst colleagues (teachers to teachers) versus trust amongst teachers and administration. Figure 4.1 represents a leadership continuum that that gives characteristics of both transformational and transactional leadership styles as perceived by the researcher about Principal Jones.



*Figure 4.2. Leadership Continuum.* This is a representation of leadership characteristics that emerged from the data collection of Principal Jones' behaviors.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

#### **Key Findings**

In this chapter, the researcher will convey the overarching findings that support the data collected and reported in Chapter 4. It is important to keep in mind that the researcher used an appreciative inquiry lens when determining the influence that the principal's behaviors had on school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement, focusing on the positive aspect in which these areas impact this Title I school. The key findings will be presented followed by recommendations for future research and policy.

#### **The Leadership Continuum**

Using the appreciative inquiry framework to analyze data, the researcher was able to conduct focus groups and interviews to find out what exactly keeps JES moving in the right direction of maintaining accreditation and working towards maintaining its mission and vision. At its most basic definition, transformational leadership, as mentioned in Chapter 2, refers to a type of leadership in which the school leader works collaboratively with staff to create a vision that guides them through change; whereas transactional leadership uses rewards to obtain cooperation from followers and maintaining the status quo (Bogler, 2001). Transformational leaders have a vision and a passion and depend on the knowledge of their employees in order to meet organizational goals (Nazim & Mahmood, 2016). A transactional leadership style uses rewards and consequences in order to achieve desired results, which often results in the leader maintaining the status quo (Bogler, 2001), and sometimes can be synonymous with a managerial leadership style (Stewart, 2006). As a branch of this type of leadership, an authoritative, or autocratic leadership style may often rear itself, in which a controlling and/or close-minded

perception is given; and even though this harshness may be present, there may also be clear structure and rules (Veale, 2010).

Menon (2014) hypothesized that the integration of leadership models provides the most effective system in schools. If transformational and transactional leadership were on a continuum, Principal Jones would fall somewhere in the middle as she possesses characteristics of both in her leadership of JES. Because of this, the focus groups revealed some discord among some of the teachers and the administration, due to Principal Jones' high expectations and standards, which was supported by one observation in which a teacher came to Principal Jones in the hall to ask about a student. The teacher was met with a curt tone from Principal Jones because of the concern of being away from the classroom without supervision of the students. It was apparent that the teacher felt belittled and was upset at being questioned.

### **Principal Leadership and Expectations**

The principal leadership of Principal Jones came across as “kid-focused” and data driven. She has created a vision and mission within her school, and as the sole administrator for previous years until the 2017-2018 school year, had the responsibility of making and upholding decisions within the school.

Principal Jones thrives on order and high expectations, lending herself to an authoritative leadership style; however, she wants what's best for her students and values what her teachers are doing within the building, though her actions are not always expressed in an affectionate manner, as perceived by the researcher and the teachers. While this display of feedback may be perceived harsh, the feedback given is direct and aligned with the principal's beliefs. The mission and vision of the school, “Inspire lifelong learners to succeed in a nurturing community of leaders,” “Live, learn, lead,” respectfully, follow the transformational leadership practices of

having a shared vision, modeling the way, enabling others to act, and encouraging relationships (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

The researcher discovered a mix of leadership behaviors that influenced school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement at JES, and within these behaviors, examples of both transformational and transactional leadership practices. Principal Jones emulates the characteristics of a no-nonsense leader and was very frank within her interview and the observed interactions at her school; however, her student-centered way of thinking really shows that she is doing what she perceives best for the students to be successful. Looking back at the early works of Bernard Bass and his pioneer research on transformational leadership, Anderson (2017) conceptualized the characteristics that promote such behaviors: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Of these, Principal Jones favored the transformational approach with inspirational motivation (holding high expectations) and idealized influence (providing a mission and vision with commitment to each) and a more transactional, sub-authoritarian approach towards individualized consideration (coaching and mentoring teachers with feedback) and intellectual stimulation (challenging workers to find new ways of thinking and showing tolerance for mistakes). The “hard to approach” persona that Principal Jones displayed did not leave room for error nor lend itself for cultivating teachers’ perceptions of implementing positive change within the building regarding instructional programs that have been imposed on the school by local and state authorities. This was one area that caused strife amongst the teachers because of the quick turnaround of mandatory instructional practices and the inconsistency in program mandates. Even though the instructional practices seemed to stem from someone higher than Principal Jones, because she did not involve

the staff in how to implement them, there was frustration among the teachers because of their lack of voice.

Even though there was a perceived annoyance with some teachers towards the administration about a lack of voice with regards to instructional programs and some discipline issues, there was support for the principal and the understanding that her high expectations and visibility within the school, along with her drive to analyze data, was helpful in driving the school towards success (accreditation). Principal Jones worked with her staff to continuously analyze data from assessments in order to make instructional decisions (a transformational approach) versus maintaining the status quo (transactional approach) in order to run the school.

### **Transformational Leadership and Trust**

Perhaps the most poignant extension of transformational leadership that emerged from the data collection is the concept of relational trust. Tschannen-Moran (2014) conceptualized how important trust is within a school building in order to build and maintain relationships to ensure student achievement, highlighting that successful principals will create an environment where trust flourishes between stakeholders. Within JES, there is a clear level of relational trust that lends itself to a familial atmosphere among the teachers. The longevity of the teachers at the school helped to build a relational trust that allowed them to rely on each other for support with instruction and discipline. Both the administration and the teachers have depended on the notion of building and maintaining relationships with colleagues and students to effectively run JES. Their reliance on each other for ideas, communication, and discipline drive them to work towards the common goal, which is student achievement, as measured by the Virginia SOL's and whether a school receives accreditation.

The classroom teachers gave insight as to how they rely on each other to help check-in on students or give students a break from their own classrooms. By doing this, teachers that feel frustrated if there is a lack of response by administration for discipline, can work together to build relationships with students and ultimately continue with the instruction that takes place within the classroom.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) posit that strong leaders put words to actions to maintain a high level of trust between a staff, and this was shown by the results of the School Climate and Culture Survey (Winter 2016) and the discussions that evolved from the focus groups. The survey highlighted a positive atmosphere within JES and a trust in school leadership. In fact, there was a 98% rate on overall satisfaction with school leadership and a 97% rate on trust in leadership.

Principal Jones elicits strong, clear expectations from her staff and students at all times. Feedback is given when these expectations are not met; albeit, sometimes that feedback is not perceived in a loving manner. At times, the researcher felt a sense of dissonance from the teacher focus groups when they spoke about their frustrations with discipline issues and the administration and the turnover of instructional programs. While it seemed that some of the teachers needed more of a coddling experience from the administration, there was an inherent level of trust between Principal Jones and the staff which was shown by the longevity of the teachers within JES. All teachers and Principal Jones spoke to the importance of building relationships with the students and the importance this played in classroom practices, school climate, and student achievement. Even though the dynamics of the students and school have changed over the years, the common goal of “for the good of the students” was highlighted by both veteran and novice teachers, as well as Principal Jones.



## **Climate, Teacher Practices, Student Achievement, and Other Factors Influenced by a Principal's Behaviors**

Bryk (2010) rendered that a principal can promote organizational climate by promoting instructional practices and the means in which to accomplish these tasks. Principal Jones makes it a priority to hold student achievement as the crux of JES. She has implemented student data notebooks and fosters dialogue between teachers about student achievement. Although there was some discordance about the influx and wavering of instructional programs as brought on by division and state mandates, Principal Jones expects her teachers to adhere to these with fidelity and offers support when needed. An overwhelming majority of the teachers that participated in the focus groups implied that Principal Jones had a knack for leading data discussions and uses data points to determine what is best for student instruction, which has also made the teachers more aware of how to use data within their own classroom. Data was a common term used by both the administration and the teachers. Principal Jones and the teachers relied heavily on data to help drive instructional programs and classroom practices, which sometimes cut out special extra-curricular activities. Teachers recounted how there were more school celebrations that took place in years prior and other opportunities for students to excel outside of academics; however, there has been less of that in recent years due to the demands of high-stakes testing.

While Principal Jones emulates a strong persona and holds herself and her building to high expectations, there is also a side that, whether perceived or not by her staff, values what her staff have to contribute and keeps her focus on the students and the good of the school. Given the way that she presents herself to her staff and students, she sometimes does not draw on positive feedback from teachers; however, no one in this study could deny that she is moving the school in the right direction regarding student success. Looking at the work of Kouzes and

Posner (2007), transformational leadership practices allow the principal to achieve specific goals as set by an organization and to acquire extraordinary results. Moreover, leadership practices reflected in their work were identified as inspiring a shared vision, modeling the way, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. Some may see the curt tones and actions of Principal Jones (expecting “good, basic teaching” and “just needing to get it done” in reference to instruction) as a hindrance in transformational leadership practices; but there are definite aspects of transformational leadership practices that match the beliefs of Kouzes and Posner. The longevity of the teachers at JES hint on the relationship that has been built within the building and the thought that the school is working collectively to foster student success. Principal Jones’ daily presence within the building and her high expectations of staff and students enact the mission and vision of “We inspire lifelong learners to succeed in a nurturing community of leaders,” and “Live, learn, lead” respectively.

Principal Jones does want to empower the teachers to take on responsibility for their instruction and handling of discipline, as that plays a part in developing the relationships within the building. Several teachers at JES felt that discipline within the building has not always been handled appropriately and cite a lack of support from administration. Teachers have come to rely on each other to help support students and to provide self-relief.

Instructional programs at JES have gone through frequent turnovers in recent years, specifically in reading, although Principal Jones has had little control over that. PD has been provided to teachers to help with the influx of changes associated with this; however, there was frustration expressed by some teachers for having to constantly learn new programs to implement within their classrooms. There was appreciation for Principal Jones and how she has offered support for the teachers to ensure their comfort level in implementing these changes.

Parental involvement was a concept that both the administration and the staff wanted to see more of. At the time of the data collection, there was no active PTA for the school; therefore, the teachers were having to carry the brunt of organizing fundraising and community activities for the school.

### **Tying it Altogether**

Figure 1.2 in Chapter 1 gave the reader insight as to how the researcher interpreted literature surrounding principal leadership and its effects on school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement and depicted that a transformational leadership style could influence those concepts. The researcher, thought that the site selection of JES, being an accredited Title I school, would highlight the perceptions of what is expected in a Title I school; however, this was not the case. In retrospect, especially when examining the data through an appreciative inquiry lens, the idea of being a Title I school and the nuances that come with that (Kahlenberg, 2001), were not discussed or fleshed out by the researcher. This may have been in part that the researcher has spent her whole career in Title I schools, and the longevity of the teachers at JES may have become accustomed to the demands of a Title I school environment.

Figure 5.1 represents a findings chart and recommendations of the data collected through interviews, focus groups, observations, document review and current research.

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
What are stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's behaviors that have influenced school climate?	Principal Leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High expectations</li> <li>• Hard to approach persona</li> <li>• Student-focused</li> <li>• Visible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflect on what is working and what can be improved upon</li> <li>• Continue to build upon relationships with students (interests, choices)</li> <li>• Provide leadership team with opportunities to have honest dialogue with teachers</li> <li>• Provide high-quality opportunities for school leaders to</li> </ul>

	<p>Familial atmosphere among teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relational trust</li> <li>• Longevity of teachers</li> <li>• Relationships with students</li> </ul>	<p>work with their respective colleagues to identify transformational leadership behaviors and build upon current research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tailor leader preparation programs to include specific strategies that focus on adult development</li> </ul>
<p>What are stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's behaviors that have influenced classroom practices?</p>	<p>Instruction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandated instructional programs and inconsistency in programs over time (even though this comes from central office, the frustration from the teachers comes from the delivery by the principal)</li> <li>• PD</li> <li>• Data driven</li> <li>• Lack of teacher voice</li> </ul> <p>Discipline</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher handled unless something major</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solicit feedback from teachers about which instructional programs are working/not working and why</li> <li>• Continue to provide meaningful PD</li> <li>• Support teachers with time and support for implementation of specific program(s) and the use of data to drive instruction</li> <li>• Offer help to teachers with student discipline issues</li> </ul>
<p>What are stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's behaviors that have influenced student achievement?</p>	<p>High expectations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students</li> <li>• Teachers</li> </ul> <p>Less extra-curricular activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tested all the time</li> <li>• Data driven</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer new opportunities for students to show content mastery (variations besides high-stakes testing)</li> <li>• Showcase student achievement within the building and community</li> <li>• Use data in meaningful ways to drive instruction</li> </ul>

*Figure 5.1 Key Findings and Recommendations.*

As seen in figure 5.1, the recommendations can primarily be implemented by the principal with feedback and buy-in from the staff. Building on relationships both professionally and personally may allow the staff and principal to re-establish a culture built on relational trust, which would further bring teacher voice into the school that could showcase new ideas for promoting school culture, improving classroom practices, and enhancing student achievement.

### **Recommendations for Future Research, Policy, and Practice**

Schools and school systems today are faced with the enormous task of ensuring student success and achievement, primarily through rigorous instructional standards and high-stakes testing (Anderson, 2017). The need for accountability is often felt from the top-down, and school principals have the unique job of disseminating instructional practices to teachers and students. The data collected and analyzed while conducting this research can serve others in the educational field for purposes in which to better understand the importance that leadership behaviors play on school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement.

From a policy perspective, the accountability system that is in place for student achievement is the overarching structure in which schools are identified as reaching accreditation. While the sentiment of the teachers at JES reflected that there is too much testing, which has taken away from some of the extra-curricular activities that took place in the past, this will not change until the policy changes. It should be noted that now there are steps being put in place by the state to reduce the number of high-stakes tests that students will have to take; however, there will be some form of assessment to measure accountability. Until there can be a change that removes high stakes testing and the pressure to meet certain standards, a principal will need to support his or her staff in instructional programs and demands that are put in place

from the top-down. This may be done by providing appropriate PD and additional supports if available, working alongside the teachers versus over them (DuFour & Marzano, 2011)

Principals may designate having “focus groups” within the school building where the teachers can talk openly with the principal without fear of judgement to discuss happenings within the building can be beneficial to determine what is working and what is not, and how issues can be addressed. Of course, for this to be effective and even a possibility, there would need to be established norms that set guidelines for discussions to build up the relational trust between the two groups. Constant reflection and aspiring to make necessary changes would need to be in place by the principal and the teachers in order to move forward with maintaining an overall positive climate, which could then influence classroom practices and student achievement. Current and future school leaders should want to seek out from their stakeholders what is and what is not working within their building. This could be done by conducting in-house focus groups, using a survey, or soliciting feedback privately with stakeholders involved, and possibly done at the end of each marking period. While a school leader may or may not fit one category of leadership style, being open to feedback, reflection, and accepting change to move or maintain a school will help to build the trust that is needed from all involved to run a school in an effective manner.

Building on the reflective piece, using leadership cohorts within a school division would help to facilitate the process in developing transformational leaders. The structures of the cohort: selecting participants, creating a vision, collaborating with colleagues, and defining ways to measure success would all boast a leader’s view of what to do within his or her own school and would serve as a model of how to identify and incorporate transformational leadership qualities (Basom, Yerkes, Norris, & Barnett, 1996).

Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2014) maintain that leadership preparation programs should focus on adult development, the school leaders and the staff they will lead, to develop internal growth to make them better prepared on how to lead in complex, high-stakes situations.

While more traditional, managerial approaches to learning are essential, we must also help leaders grow their relational, collaborative, and reflective capacities so that they are better prepared to address and understand the complexities and ambiguities of current challenges—including new evaluation systems for teachers and principals, the Common Core State Standards, and increasingly complex accountability demands—so leaders are better equipped to forge new directions and definitions of success. (pg.114)

Leadership preparation programs should focus on the importance of building relationships with staff and students. Relational trust is the crux for any working environment, but even more importantly in a school building where there are various types of stakeholders. These preparation programs should foster experiences in which reflection is a large component of the program, along with feedback, both giving and receiving. Providing leaders with various strategies to incorporate teambuilding and build trust with the stakeholders of a school will help a leader be successful, which can in turn influence school climate, classroom practices, and student achievement.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to identify a principal's behaviors as perceived by stakeholders (teachers, associate principal, and elementary director) that influence school climate, teacher practices and student achievement in a Title I school. A case study, qualitative approach, was used to gather data from participants in focus groups and interviews, a document

review of the School Climate and Culture Survey (Winter 2016) and observations conducted in the spring of 2018 and fall of 2018. Using appreciative inquiry as a means to obtain and analyze data gave the researcher a purpose on focusing primarily on what was working in this Title I school.



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*Appendix A: Interview Protocol for School Principal and Associate Principal*

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself (your name, position, and how long you've been here)?

1. Were you a building principal before coming to this school? If so, can you describe what that experience entailed?
2. What was your perception of this school when you got here? Were there any goals that you had for this school?
3. Have there been specific things you have done in your school to bring about change in regards to school climate?

Probe: Were they effective? How do you measure this?

4. Have there been specific things you have done in your school to bring about change in regards to classroom practices?

Probe: Were they effective? How do you measure this?

5. Have there been specific things you have done in your school to bring about change in regards to student achievement?

Probe: Were they effective? How do you measure this?

6. As the school principal, how do you prioritize when it comes to professional development?
7. What are your thoughts on student and teacher voice? Are there any processes in place at the school to facilitate this?
8. What resources or strategies are in place to communicate with parents and community stakeholders?
9. How have you addressed external factors (discipline, socioeconomic status, parental involvement) at this school?

*Appendix B: Interview Protocol for School Teachers*

Can you tell me a little about yourself (your name, position, and how long you've been here)?

1. What was your perception of this school when you got here? How have things changed over the last several years?

2. Have there been specific things done in your school to bring about change in school climate?

Probe: Were they effective? How do you measure this?

3. Have there been specific things done in your school to bring about change in classroom practices?

Probe: Were they effective? How do you measure this?

4. Have there been specific things done in your school to bring about change in student achievement?

Probe: Were they effective? How do you measure this?

5. What is your perception of the professional development that is provided to you?

6. Do teachers and students have a voice within the school? Is there a process that facilitates this?

7. What resources or strategies are in place to communicate with parents and community stakeholders?

8. How are external factors (discipline, parental involvement, socioeconomic status) addressed at the school?

*Appendix C: Interview Protocol for Elementary Director*

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself (your name, position, and how long you've served this school, background)?

1. What was your perception of this school when you started in your position? Were there any goals that you had for this school?
2. Have there been specific things you and have worked with the principal on to bring about change in regards to school climate?

Probe: Was this effective? How was this measured?

3. Have there been specific things you have worked with the principal on to bring about change in regards to classroom practices?

Probe: Was this effective? How was this measured?

4. Have there been specific things you have worked with the principal on to bring about change in student achievement?

Probe: Specific supports for teachers? Was this effective? How was this measured?

5. As the elementary director, how do you prioritize professional development for members of this school?
6. What are your thoughts on student voice at this school?

Probe: Are there processes in place to facilitate this?

7. What are your thoughts on teacher voice at this school?

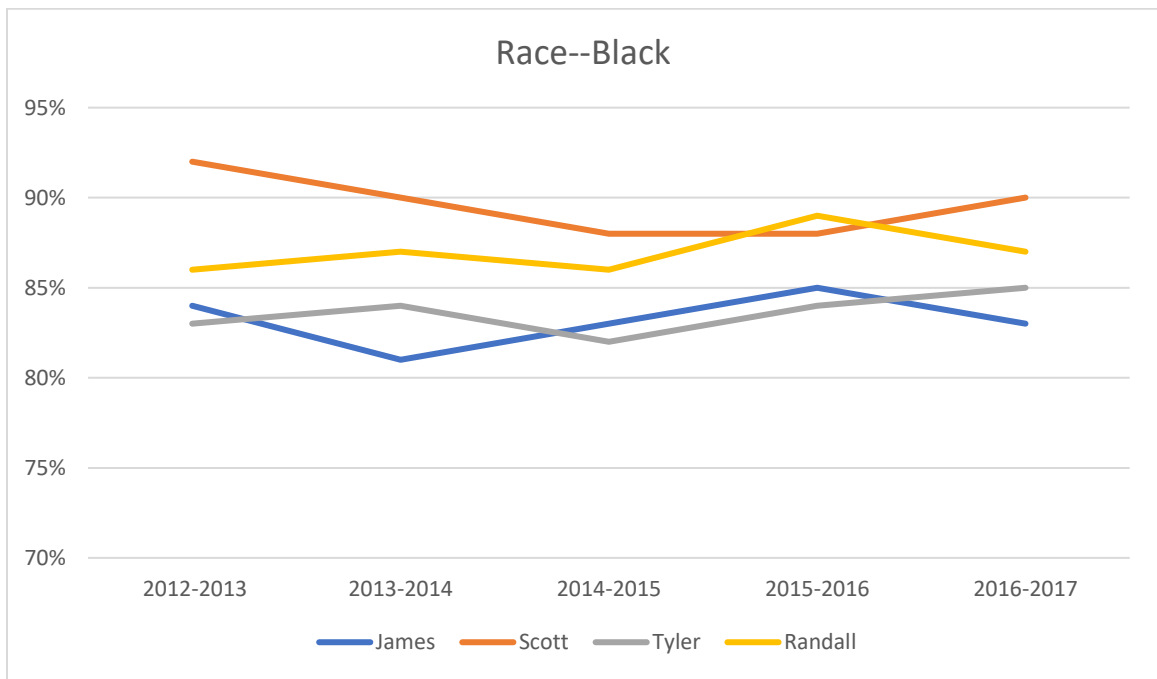
Probe: Are there processes in place to facilitate this?

8. What are your thoughts on parent and community voice at this school?

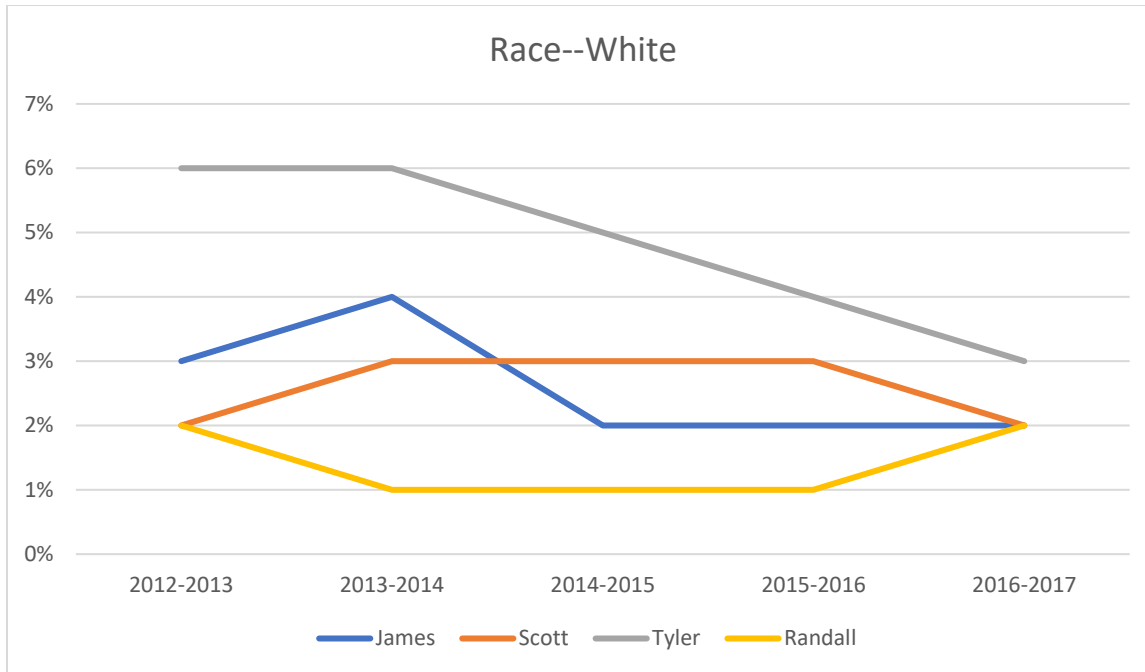
Probe: Are there process in place to facilitate this

*Appendix D: Demographic Data for Four Title I Schools*

The figures below, as derived from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) website based on the September 30 fall counts, capture reading SOL scores and student demographics that represent these schools, including race, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged, and English Language This data focused on school years 2012-2013 through 2016-2017, to coincide with the decline of reading test scores followed by marked improvement in reading achievement.



*Figure A-1. Race—Black.* This chart displays racial demographic data. Based on the 2016-2017 data, there was little difference in the percentage of Black students at the four schools.



*Figure A-2. Race—White.* This chart displays racial demographic data. It is evident that during the last four school years, the percentage of white students has declined or stayed stationary.

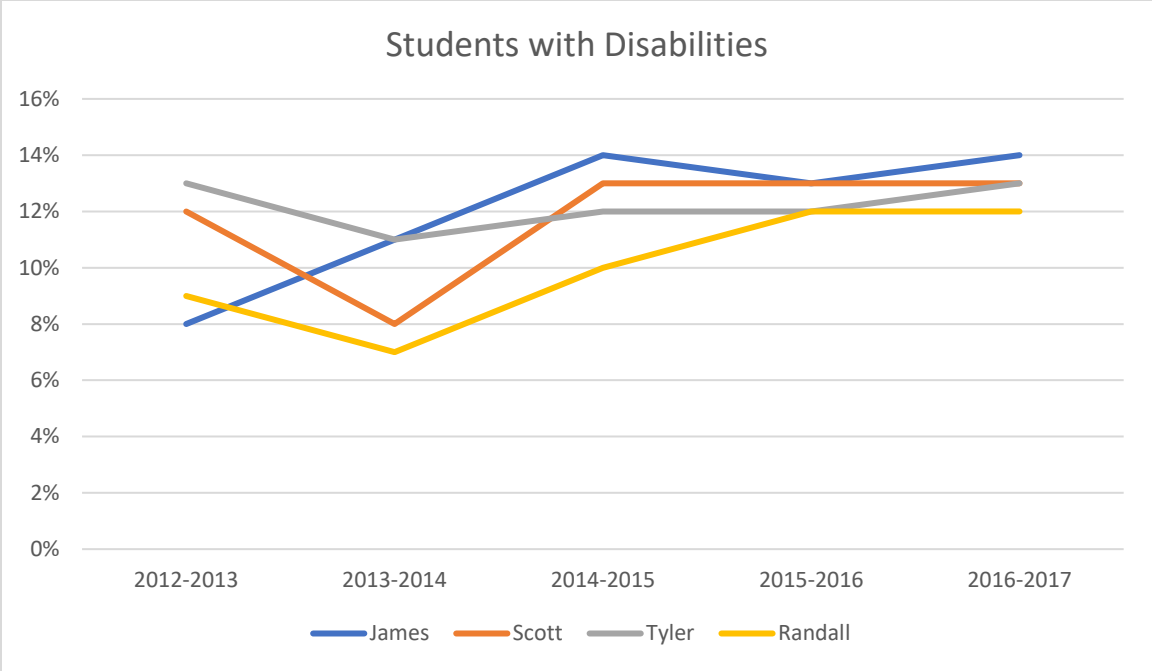
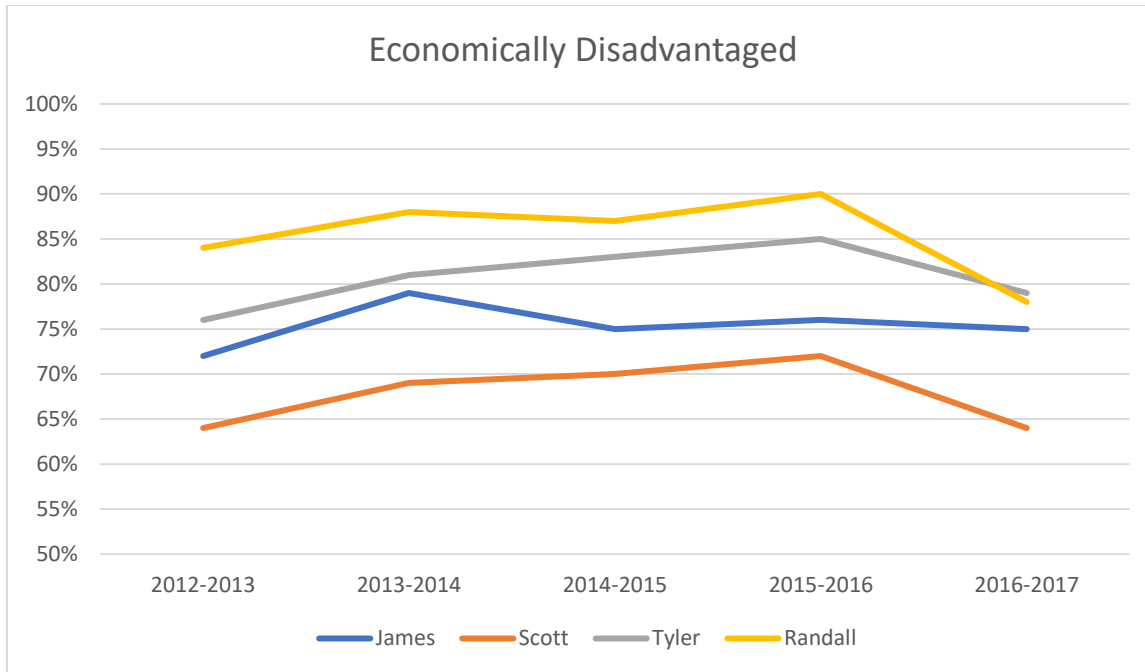
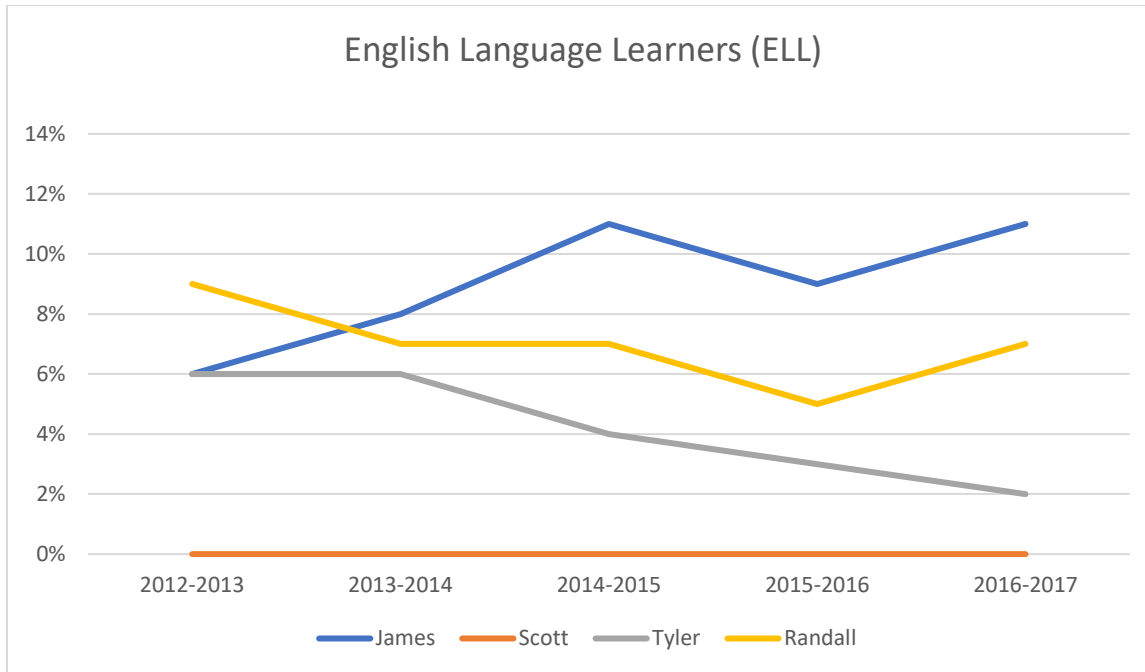


Figure A-3. Students with Disabilities. This chart displays the percentage of students with disabilities. All four schools appear to be remaining steady at under 15 percent.

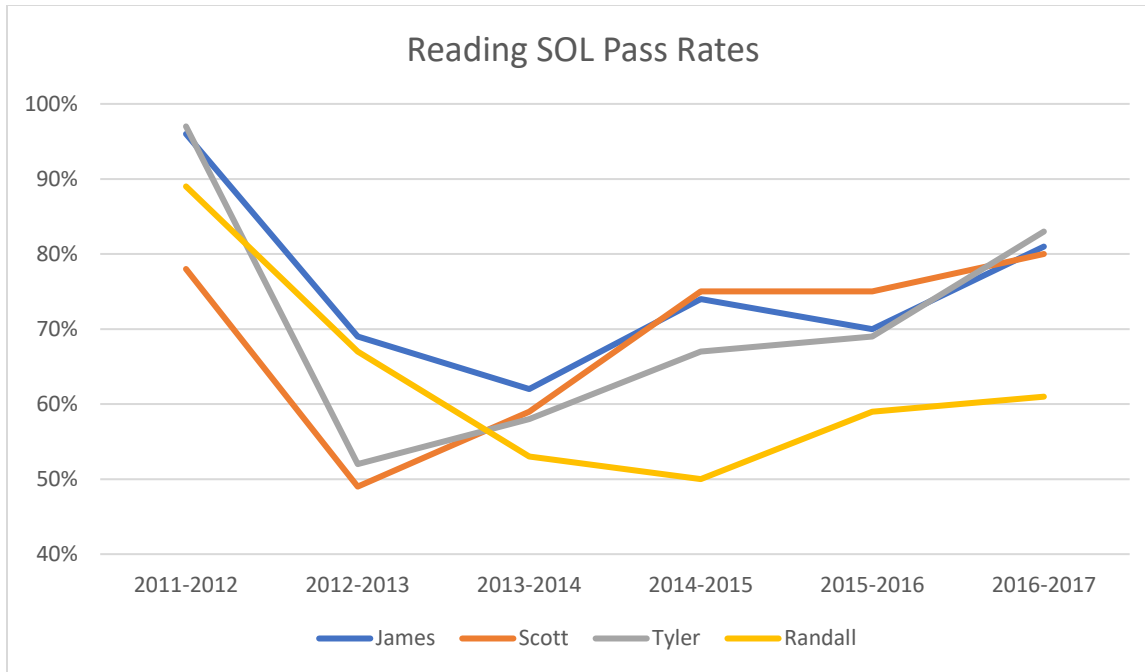


*Figure A-4.* Economically Disadvantaged. This chart displays the percentage of economically disadvantaged students. As can be seen, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students continues to increase until the 2016-2017 school year.





*Figure A-5.* English Language Learners (ELL). This chart displays the percentage of ELL students. One of the four schools shows a decline in this demographic, while one school as less than ten ELL students (showed at 0%), and two schools showed an increase during the 2016-2017 school year.



*Figure A-6. Reading SOL Reading Pass Rates. Reading scores take a sharp decline during the 2012-2013 school year, but show a gradual increase at meeting the accreditation benchmark.*