IMPROVING PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE IN LOW INCOME SCHOOLS: AN 
APPLIED STUDY

by

Bethany Nicole Straub

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this applied study was to further understand the problem of teachers’ perceptions of school climate in low income schools and to formulate a solution to address the problem using both qualitative and quantitative data gathered from teachers. The problem was that factors outside of the scope of control of teachers and administrators have the potential to affect school climate because teachers use multiple factors to gather and make a decision on their perception of their building’s school climate, and educators and researchers must understand these multiple facets in order to suggest improvement. In Chapter One, the researcher provided the reader with a background of school climate, the relevance of the study, proposed research questions, and important definitions to understand when working with school climate. This research aimed to answer the central question of how to improve school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school. Sub-questions included factors that teachers use to determine school climate, proposed solutions by the teachers, and the teachers’ perception of the impact of the student population has on the school climate. Chapter Two provided a theoretical framework for the research and summarized and analyzed the current literature. Chapter Three proposed the research design for this applied study that includes quantitative survey administration and qualitative data collection of interviews and focus groups. Chapter Four analyzed and described the results of the data gathered from the qualitative and quantitative methods. Chapter Five presented a solution to address the problem of low school climate at low income schools.

Keywords: school climate, teachers’ perceptions, low income, multimethods, Ecological Systems Theory, Authoritative School Climate
Dedication

For my mother (Jodi), father (Stephen), and sister (Devin) – your love, encouragement, and dedication from the very beginning will always mean the world to me. I am forever thankful for you all.
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To my family and friends, thank you for your constant support, love, and words of wisdom. You all have supported me throughout all my passions and stayed with me through the hard times. I love you all so very much, and I know I would not be where I am today if it was not for your kindness, motivation, laughter, and love.

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To God, thank you for putting me on this path and giving me the opportunity to make a difference. Thank you for providing me with the right people to help me along the way. “I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever.” (Psalm 86:12, NIV)
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List of Abbreviations

Authoritative School Climate (ASC)

Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Ecological Systems Theory (EST)

Revised School Level Environment Questionnaire (RSLEQ)

United States Department of Education (USDOE)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

School climate research has grown in the recent decades as both educational leaders within the schools, institutions of higher education, and governments have shown interest in the importance of understanding school climate (Malinen & Saolainen, 2016; VanLone et al., 2019; Voight & Nation, 2016; Wang & Degol, 2016). School climate can be broadly defined as the environment within a building, including norms, expectations, behaviors, and the learning environment for both students and teachers (La Salle, 2018). This dissertation provides readers with a solid understanding of school climate, information regarding the historical, social, and theoretical importance of school climate, the impacts of a negative school climate, and a potential solution to solving the problems and issues in regard to negative school climate within a building. This chapter will provide an introduction and overview of current information regarding school climate research and findings. The background section gives introductory details regarding the historical, social, and theoretical context of school climate. The chapter continues by introducing the proposed study and explaining the problem statement, purpose statement, and significance of the proposed study, which was to add research and proposed solutions to the problem of low school climate ratings within schools that are identified as low income.

Background

Educators, researchers, and policy makers have shown increased interest in school climate research with a focus on improving school climate as it has positive connections to student achievement (La Salle, 2018; VanLone et al., 2019; Voight & Nation, 2016; Wang & Dogel, 2016). School climate can be examined through a historical, social, and theoretical
context in order to understand the importance of examining and studying school climate in order to improve teacher perceptions.

**Historical Context**

School climate has been recognized by leaders for over a century but has just recently become of increasing importance (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014). School climate research has grown tremendously in popularity as both researchers and educational leaders have seen the impact and importance of the subject (VanLone, 2019). This growing interest in reforming school climate can be attributed to the realization that improving school climate is a research-based method that promotes “safer, more supportive, and more civil K-12 schools” (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013, p. 357). Additionally, addressing school climate is now seen as a way to improve behavior, safety, and relationships within schools (La Salle, 2018; Lenzi et al., 2017; Voight & Nation, 2016; von der Embse et al., 2016).

The definition and understanding of school climate have changed over the years, and often there is still no complete consensus or universal definition of school climate and the correct way to measure it (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Wang & Degol, 2016). While a variety of definitions have existed over the years, it has been noted by many researchers the importance of measuring and understanding school climate as it can have a multitude of effects and impacts on the overall school (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Huang & Cornell, 2018; Lenzi et al., 2017; Lezha, 2017; Malinen & Savolainen, 2016; Thapa et al., 2013). Recent research has focused on the connection that school climate has between teacher satisfaction, academic achievement, bullying, student discipline, engagement, and administration (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Heilbrun, Cornell,
This increased focus on school climate in educational research led to an increase in focus by the federal government on school climate research within public schools. In 2010, the United States Department of Education (USDOE) granted $38.8 million in Safe and Supportive Schools grants with the goal of measuring school safety at building levels and providing funds for interventions (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2010). These grants were aimed at recognizing the importance of improving school climate and safety by awarding funds to develop measurement systems for individual schools to analyze school climate. More recently, schools have increased their understanding of school climate through new surveys and guides that the USDOE (2016) released, which inform educational leaders on how to improve school climate. The USDOE (2016) stated that strong school climates encourage students who are “more likely to engage in the curriculum, achieve academically, and develop positive relationships” (p. 1). Due to the increased importance that the USDOE has placed on school climate, researchers are finding new ways to measure and assess school climate in quantitative and qualitative methods (Bear, Yang, Pell, & Gaskins, 2014; Bradshaw et al., 2014; Malinen & Savolainen, 2016; Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014).

Social Context

Previous research has shown that a positive school climate has the ability to impact student achievement and job satisfaction (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Dutta & Sahney, 2015; Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014; McLean et al., 2017; Wong, 2017, Yao et al., 2015). Positive school climates promote positive working environments where teachers feel supported and have higher levels of self-efficacy (Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014). Teachers who feel that their
administrators are approachable and supportive are more likely to rate school climate more positively and have higher levels of job satisfaction (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016). Research also supports the concept that a positive school climate promotes an environment where students are cooperative, have mutual respect for one another, and trust both peers and teachers (Thapa et al., 2013). When students experience these supports, student achievement will be higher, leading to environments where students take more risks both academically and socially, and feel higher levels of overall safety and comfort (Bradshaw et al., 2014).

Furthermore, environments that foster positive school climate have also been linked to strengthening social-emotional aspects in both students and teachers. Trach, Lee, and Hymel (2018) solidified connections between schools that foster socio-emotional learning and behavior rates in children. Additionally, teachers who feel supported through the social aspects of school climate are more likely to implement new programs within a building (Malloy et al., 2014). School climate also has connections to feelings toward school safety, and those who feel safe, socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically, will be more likely to thrive within the school environment (Bear et al., 2014; Bradshaw et al., 2014; La Salle, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013; VanLone et al., 2019). Positive school climate has also been connected to discipline, bullying, and suspensions of students. School leaders who have a more authoritative approach to their school climate tend to have lower levels of bullying and peer victimization (Cornell, Shukla, & Konold, 2015). Also, schools with positive climates also support lower levels of negative consequences, such as out of school student suspensions (Huang & Cornell, 2018). This current research shows that the social aspects of school climate, including peer and teacher relationships, are vital to the developmental of school climate, and are important to factor in when researching school climate and its impact.
Theoretical Context

School climate can also be linked to theoretical and conceptual frameworks within the field of education and human development. Multiple factors play into the development of a child, and one of those factors is the experiences students have while attending school. According to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST), there are systems that impact childhood development on different levels, and the interactions of these systems play a large part in who a child becomes as they grow and develop. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory allows researchers to understand that development is not a single track, but instead is based upon “complex, reciprocal interactions between an active, bio-psychological human organism and the persons in its immediate environment (Wang & Degol, 2016, p. 317). Essentially, in order to understand human development, researchers must analyze the multiple constructs within an individual’s daily life (Rudasill, Snyder, Levinson, & Adelson, 2017).

School is one important factor in human development, and children come to school with a variety of systems that can play a key role in the way that school climate is constructed and viewed within a building. Researchers need to examine not only the family construct, but the ecological, social, and community constructs in order to help understand the development of a child within a school setting (Quin, 2017). Understanding this development can help researchers understand and analyze the factors that impact students across a variety of settings (Trach et al., 2018). Many factors contribute to the formation of school climate including “levels of conflict or cooperation among teachers and students, academic expectations for students, and the sense of collaboration between teachers” (Rudasill et al., p. 39). In order to gauge and impact school climate within a building, researchers must take into consideration a variety of factors, including the historical, social, and theoretical background of school climate research.
Problem Statement

As it stands, current school climate research often connects leadership and relationships to positive school climates (Bear et al., 2014; Lenzi et al., 2017; VanLone et al., 2019; von der Embse et al., 2016). One measure, the revised School Level Environment Questionnaire (R-SLEQ) is a popular tool for measuring school climate using five domains of instructional innovation, collaboration, decision making, school resources, and student relations (Johnson, Stevens, & Zvoch, 2007). While this tool was found to be a valid and reliable measure of school climate, it does not take fully into consideration other factors that teachers may use to perceive and measure school climate. Teacher support and sense of community also play a part in the development of school climate (Lenzi et al., 2017). Administrators can also play a role in the way teachers view school climate (Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014).

In order to fully understand school climate, researchers must take into consideration factors beyond the leadership and comradery within a building, as teachers use a variety of factors to judge their perceptions of school climate within their school. The current research falls short in its ability to measure school climate comprehensively through both questionnaires and interviews. The problem is that factors outside of the scope of control of teachers and administrators have the potential to affect school climate because teachers use multiple factors to gather and make a decision on their perception of the building’s school climate, and educators and researchers must understand these multiple facets in order to suggest improvement within the field of education.

Purpose Statement

Therefore, through a multimethods approach, the researcher utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the school climate of a low income school to see what factors
impact the school climate and to provide a solution to address the problem. The purpose of this applied study was to further understand the problem of teachers’ perceptions of school climate in low income schools and to formulate a solution to address the problem. A multimethod design was used consisting of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The first approach was qualitative structured interviews with six teachers. The second approach was a focus group with a group of teachers within the school. The third approach was a quantitative survey given to all certified teachers at the low income school.

**Significance of the Study**

As mentioned above, there has been an increased focus on school climate research by educational leaders both at the school and government levels. The United States Department of Education (DOE) has increased funds for school climate research in an attempt to find ways to increase school climate across settings (Malinen & Savolainen, 2016). Research has shown that there are positive correlations between school climate and student achievement (Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014). In addition, there are correlations between school safety and school climate, another topic of growing interest within educational leaders and researchers (Booren, Handy, & Power, 2011). This increased focus on school climate requires that research is comprehensive and current in order to best help policy makers, administrators, and educators within the field of education.

The researcher in this study was employed by the school division in which this study was completed. This allowed the researcher the opportunity to add suggestions and possible solutions to problems that leaders face within the school division. This research allowed the researcher the opportunity to enhance school climate research and continue to support the need for a more thorough understanding of the topic, as deemed necessary by educational leaders.
Furthermore, the topic was relevant to the researcher’s current position as an administrator as it added skills to help understand the problems faced by low income schools and allowed for more information to be added to current research that suggests methods for improving school climate (VanLone et al., 2019).

There are various stakeholders that were relevant to the significance of this study, including teachers, educational leaders, and school community members. School climate can impact students, parents, and even members within the community as the influence of a school can impact views towards the community (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Schueler, Capotosto, Bahena, McIntyre, & Gehlbach, 2013; Sweeney & Von Hagen, 2015). Teachers are impacted by school climate in numerous ways including self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and stress (Dutta & Sahney, 2016; Malinen & Savolainen, 2016; McLean et al., 2017; von der Embse, 2016). In addition, educational leaders must have an understanding of school climate given the recent importance of the topic emphasized by the USDOE (2016).

Research Questions

Central Question: How can teacher perception of school climate be improved at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school located in central Virginia?

Sub-question 1: How would teachers in an interview solve the problem of negative perceptions of school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school located in central Virginia?

Sub-question 2: How would teachers in a focus group solve the problem of negative perceptions of school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school located in central Virginia?
Sub-question 3: How would quantitative survey data inform the problem of negative perceptions of school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school located in central Virginia?

Definitions

1. School Climate – School climate can be defined as the overall environment in a school, which includes the set of and shared norms and expectations that others have for students, level of teachers’ morale and empowerment, students’ perceptions of the school and the behavior within a school (Johnson et al., 2007).

2. Teacher Perceptions – A feeling or overall impression that a teacher has regarding a concept, a means to understanding an idea (Johnson & Stevens, 2001).

3. Low Income School – Low income schools are schools where there is a high percentage of students who attend the school that qualify for the free or reduced lunch program (London, Westrich, Stokes-Guinan, McLaughlin, 2014).

4. Multimethods – A type of research design in which the researcher utilizes both qualitative and quantitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts, and languages to explore a particular phenomenon (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

5. Revised SLEQ – A quantitative instrument used to measure the environment within a school. The R-SLEQ contains 21 items in five scales (collaboration, decision making, instructional innovation, student relations, and school resources, all measured on a Likert scale with ratings from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly agree (Johnson et al., 2007).

6. Ecological Systems Theory – A theory developed by Bronfenbrenner that explains a method for understanding a child by analyzing the full environment in which the child
lives, including the home, school, community, and culture, and how those environments interact with each other (Burns, Warmbold-Brann, & Zaslofsky, 2015).

7. *Job Satisfaction* – A topic of interest within educators that impacts school climate. Job satisfaction can be defined as the positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job and corresponding experiences (Malinen & Savolainen, 2016).

8. *Teacher Self-efficacy* – “Teacher’s personal judgment or belief about his or her capabilities to teach” (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016).

9. *Mental Health* – A term used to define the emotional, physiological, and social well-being of a person, including the presence or absence of mental problems or disorders, as well as the state of being (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018).

10. *Authoritative School Climate* – A model of school discipline, based on Baumrind’s (1968) parenting theory, which creates a school climate of structure (strict but fair) where students feel supported and cared for (Heilbrun et al., 2017).

**Summary**

In this introductory chapter, the researcher provided background information relevant to understanding the topic of school climate as it relates to the proposed research study. School climate is the overall feeling within a building and can be impacted by administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community members. It is important for researchers to understand how teachers perceive school climate and to identify factors that impact that perception for teachers. Current research documents the importance of school climate on student achievement and demonstrates ways to gauge school climate using survey instruments. However, there is a gap in the literature that explains if school climate is impacted by the title of being a low income school, and if so, how can teachers help improve this perception. The purpose of this study was to
understand the factors that impact school climate at a low income school and to propose ways to improve the negative school climate within a low income school.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

An in-depth review was completed to gather research that pertains to teachers’ perceptions of school climate in the kindergarten through twelfth grade setting. This chapter will provide an overview on the recent literature surrounding the importance of understanding perceptions of school climate with regards to teacher perceptions but taking into consideration the other stakeholders and relevant factors that deserve attention. The first section describes the theoretical framework around school climate, including a theory used to understand the importance of school climate and a definition of school climate. The second section synthesizes the related literature surrounding the dimensions of school climate and provides a justification for the specific research, demonstrating why it is important for educational leaders to understand the various factors that impact school climate. Finally, the summary addresses limitations and provides suggestions for an area of study using the theoretical framework and recent literature.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST) and the Authoritative School Climate (ASC) theory. EST has helped researchers understand and explain human development as a process that is “influenced by a variety of proximally located individual, interpersonal, organizational, and socio-cultural environmental systems” (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012, p. 19). Additionally, ASC is helpful for researchers to understand the “key dimensions of school climate associated with student misbehavior and school disorder” (Berg & Cornell, 2015, p. 123). Using these theories, the researcher shows that school climate is developed and impacted by a level of systems that each individual within the school system experiences, inside and outside of the building, on a daily
basis. These experiences are not limited to any one environment and can include a combination of multiple systems. These experiences and systems that an individual is exposed to can influence the perspective that an individual has on school climate.

**Ecological Systems Theory**

Ecological Systems Theory (EST) is a foundational component that can be used in understanding the importance of studying and researching school climate. EST was first described by developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) as a theory to help educators and psychologists understand human development and the influence of contexts within development. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory explains that there are many different environmental levels that influence a child, and these variables can impact and predict the child’s development (Rudasill, Snyder, Levinson, & Adelson, 2018). In order to understand individual development, researchers must first understand and take into consideration the multi-tiered environment in which a person functions on a regular basis (Burns, Warmbold-Brann, & Zaslofsky, 2015). Individuals are exposed to a multitude of systems that influence their everyday life, including parents, children, communities, and life events. These systems, depicted in Figure 1, are intertwined and range from immediate (microsystem) to broad (macrosystem).
The variety of systems that influence human development are also instrumental in the development of a climate within a school. Researchers should take an ecological approach when working to understand school climate as it will help make sense of the variety of components that impact school climate within a building. EST is a comprehensive model that allows for researchers to examine these components (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). According to Rudasill et al. (2018), the school is “the microsystem in which school climate is created through the combined perceptions of its members” (p. 39). There are levels of individual, immediate, and environmental interactions that are important to understand as they are representative of the systems of development of an individual (Burnett, 2015). Therefore, the multiple levels that impact an individual also have the ability to impact and determine school climate; contributing factors could include academic expectations, levels of cooperation and conflict, or sense of
teamwork and collaboration (Rudasill et al., 2018). The developmental factors and levels, whether prominent or minuet, impact the overall school climate on a daily basis. Examining ecological factors within the school, such as peer relationships, and outside of the school, including community and cultural norms, can help researchers understand the multiple levels that are used by an individual to determine a perspective on school climate (Trach et al., 2018).

Furthermore, EST explains that there are a multitude of proximal processes that a child goes through on a daily basis, and these interactions help define a human’s development (Burns et al., 2015). These processes and contextual factors influence development of the child inside and outside of the school setting (von der Embse, Pendergast, Segool, Saeki, & Ryan, 2016). One important aspect of school climate research is “the way individual behaviors are shaped by the school environment,” and Bronfenbrenner’s multidimensional theory helps explain those behaviors (Wang & Degol, 2016, p. 319). Whether analyzing children or adults, school climate research must investigate the variety of layers that impact the way someone views the school climate within a building. In order for school climate research to take an ecological approach, researchers would need to ensure that all data is collected with the environmental context in mind and that they “maintained the integrity of and represented the real-life situation” (Burns et al., 2015, p. 250).

**Authoritative School Climate**

Authoritative school climate (ASC) theory is a model for school climate that is based around the research that a positive school climate promotes student wellbeing and is associated with a number of positive outcomes for students, including reduced rates of violence, aggression, and student suspensions, as well as higher numbers of graduation rates, and improved academic achievement, student engagement, and motivation (Huang & Cornell, 2018; Huang, Eklund, &
Cornell, 2016). ASC is a model developed from the findings of Baumrind (1968) on parents who exhibit an authoritative style, meaning parents exhibit two general qualities labeled as demandingness and responsiveness (Jia, Konold, & Cornell, 2015). Parents who have high academic expectations and strict discipline are exhibiting demandingness, while parents who are supportive with warmth and emotions exhibit responsiveness (Huang et al., 2016). In this theory, disciplinary structures that include both qualities are critical to developing and maintaining a positive school climate (Berg & Cornell, 2015). The ASC model suggests that students are more compliant with school discipline when “they experience the school climate as authoritative (structured and supportive) rather than authoritarian, permissive, or indifferent” (Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2012, p. 402).

ASC uses these two parenting qualities to dictate that school discipline must be structured, where there is strict but fair discipline and high academic expectations, and supportive, where students feel that their teachers care for them (Heilbrun et al., 2018). Students and teachers should feel that discipline within the school is enforced and strict but also fair in that punishment is not excessive, that all students are able to defend themselves, and that all students are treated in the same manner when it comes to discipline (Cornell et al., 2015, p. 1187). Schools must have a high disciplinary structure while also having high student support to model the theory of ASC (Crowley, Datta, Stohlman, Cornell, & Konold, 2018). Using the ASC theory, researchers may begin to understand the connection between discipline and overall school climate.

Recent research has shown that when implemented effectively, ASC can have positive impacts on school climate, student discipline, academic achievement, and relationships within the school (Cornell et al., 2015; Heilbrun et al., 2018; Huang & Cornell, 2018; Huang et al.,
The use of ASC can help increase positive school climate and reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions (Huang & Cornell, 2018). In addition, schools where students and teachers perceived school rules as structured and teachers as supportive have lower suspension rates than their counterparts (Heilbrun et al., 2018). ASC can have positive benefits for student and teacher as well as peer relationships as both groups feel safer and supported within the authoritative climate (Berg & Cornell, 2015). ASC can also decrease peer victimization, as it creates environments where students feel supported and there is less prevalence of teasing and bullying (Cornell et al., 2015).

**Connection with School Climate Research**

While current research has helped frame the connection between both EST and ASC to school climate, this research helps strengthen the connection as it allows for deeper understanding of the multitude of layers of school climate as perceived by teachers. EST explains that human beings are deeply impacted by the social systems around them in which they have various roles and responsibilities (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The climate of a school is impacted greatly by the individuals within the school, and therefore, in order to understand school climate, and ways to improve it, future research must focus on the individuals within the building. In addition, ASC frames the way for a school climate model where teachers feel supported, safe, and hold high academic expectations (Jia et al., 2015). Researchers must spend time analyzing the setting in which the individuals are in on a daily basis in order to fully comprehend their development (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). This research took the understanding that human development occurs “within interactive, nested social systems,” therefore, the income and status of a school is important to understand when examining school climate (Trach et al., 2018, p. 12). This research also supported the connection between school climate models and student
achievement. The researcher used the theories and corresponding literature to frame and analyze the research in a way that can bring more understanding to school climate and the connections between the teachers and other stakeholders.

**Related Literature**

School climate is a multi-faceted topic that researchers have worked to understand throughout the recent years. Educators and researchers over the past three decades have acknowledged the importance of understanding school climate around the world (Thapa et al., 2013). Current research surrounding school climate is aimed at understanding what school climate is, the importance of spending time and money to research it, and how it can be improved (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Bear et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2007; La Salle, 2018; Malinen & Savolainen, 2016; Thapa et al., 2013; VanLone et al., 2019; Voight & Nation, 2016).

In order to understand how to address the impact of school climate, and the connection between the theoretical framework and this study, a solid definition of school climate and the factors and dimensions that surround it must first be established using related literature.

**School Climate Definition**

School climate is comprised of a variety of domains (VanLone et al., 2019). In its simplest form, school climate can be defined as the overall environment within a school, including all aspects of the school experience (Wang & Degol, 2016). While schools can be defined by their physical characteristics, such as location, size, and type, these are simply one aspect of the school climate (Voight & Nation, 2016). School climate can include the relationships, goals, norms, expectations, shared values and beliefs, and personal experiences that students, teachers, administrators, and community members bring to a school (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Thapa et al., 2013). School climate can also include the level of teachers’ morale and
empowerment and the students’ perceptions of the school and the behavior within the school (Johnson et al., 2007). In addition, school climate refers to the “quality and character of school life, including the norms, values, and expectations that a school accepts and promotes” (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016, p. 293). Researchers argue that school climate is multidimensional, and it can be defined in both an abstract and theoretical or a concrete and fitted way (Wang & Degol, 2016). In summary, the overall school climate is created through factors that affect both the teachers’ working climate and the students’ learning climate (Meristo & Eisenchmidt, 2014).

**Development of School Climate**

School climate research has been recognized as important over the recent years as its impact has been measured and proven by many researchers (Bradshaw et al., 2014). While this recent recognition has caused school climate to grow in its importance, the topic has been around in the field of education for many years. School climate research was born out of the need for understanding both organizational climate within a building and the effects of school on children (Anderson, 1982). While researchers have been interested in the impact that school has on children and the specific characteristics that may enhance or hinder that impact, the development of school climate research has helped increase the awareness of the effects on academic achievement (Chirkina & Khavenson, 2018).

Arthur Perry (1908), a New York City principal, detailed the need for schools to provide a quality learning environment where students can grow and learn in more than a building. Perry (1908) described that in addition to focusing on academic progress, schools should be places that foster moral development, and administrators can do that through discipline, attendance and punctuality, habits and ideals, and school spirit (p. 242). These factors outlined by Perry (1908) were one of the first recognitions of the importance of understanding school climate by
educational leaders (Wang & Degol, 2016). However, school climate research would not continue to grow in importance until later in the twentieth century (Thapa et al., 2013).

**School Climate Factors**

As mentioned above, school climate is not affected, nor defined, by one singular factor. Research shows that both physical characteristics, as well as leadership styles, teacher attitudes, and self-efficacy, have the ability to positively or negatively impact school climate (Dutta & Sahney, 2015; Lee & Quek, 2018; Malinen & Savolainen, 2016; Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014; von der Embse et al., 2016). Perceptions that teachers have regarding school climate can also be impacted by uncontrollable factors, such as the physical environment within a building (Sulak, 2018). Given that research has demonstrated many positive links between school climate and teachers in recent years, it is important that future research continues to determine how and what factors teacher used to determine school climate (McGiboney, 2016).

In order to understand the importance of school climate, researchers must understand the physical factors that impact teachers’ perceptions of school climate.

**Size of school.** The focus of this dissertation was on the school setting in the primary education level. While school climate varies from school to school, it can also change based on the age of the students and type of school. In a secondary school, there may be more diverse and varied educational needs given the larger population of students than in the primary level (VanLone et al., 2019). While primary schools tend to have a smaller number of students, they come with a different set of parameters than the secondary level, and the relationships with students can be different (Bradshaw et al., 2014, Lee & Quek, 2018). These relationships can impact teacher attitudes, stress, and feelings towards their job (von der Embse et al., 2019). Meristo and Eisenchmidt (2014) found that teachers in a kindergarten or elementary setting with
less than 250 students had higher levels of self-efficacy and perceived school climate than teachers who taught a certain subject area in the secondary or vocational setting. This could be due in part to the fact that teachers at smaller schools have the ability to work closely together and find ways to create a team mentality. Additionally, in smaller schools, teachers have the ability to get to know their students better, which increases levels of support and trust (Meristo & Eisenchmidt, 2014).

**Location of school.** Physical or environmental location of a school is one determining factor of school climate that can be outside of the scope of control. Researchers have found that teachers in differing environments have the potential to have alternative views on the climate of their school. Wong (2017) explored school climate in rural and urban areas of China and determined that urban teachers had higher perceptions than their rural counterparts, while the rural teachers were more confident in their knowledge. Wong (2017) studied kindergarten teachers in both settings, demonstrating that similar teachers have the potential to have different views based on environment. Furthermore, Lezha (2017) found that schools in both rural and urban settings had similar perceptions to organizational climate within their schools, despite environmental differences. However, these varied viewpoints can be attributed to other factors such as administration differences or teacher experience (Lezha, 2017; McLean et al., 2017; Wong, 2017). While environment is not a factor that can change, it is something to take into consideration when measuring school climate.

Physical location of a school can impact school climate due to environmental differences that can be explained through EST. Macrosystems, one level of EST, explains that beliefs, policies, and influences within a community impact individuals and help create perceptions of the way school climate should be formed (Rudasill et al., 2018). While the community and
cultural norms within an environment have a broader influence, they are still part of the complex interactions that are used to form development (Trach et al., 2018). If the beliefs and regulations within a school system do not match the norms established within a neighborhood or community, then the school climate has the potential to suffer (Sulak, 2018). Researchers and educators should take into consideration the population the school serves and the beliefs of the surrounding community when determining school climate.

**Type of school.** It is important to note the type of school that is being analyzed when determining school climate. School climate throughout this literature review refers to a variety of levels within the educational setting, from preschool to the vocational setting. The level in which a teacher works can impact their perception of the school climate. Lee and Quek (2018) completed a research study with a variety of preschool teachers and found that despite similar work environments, there were not similar views of school climate and job satisfaction. While all schools were located in Singapore, teachers had significant differences in their perceptions of the school learning environment, leading to alternate views on climate, job satisfaction, and teacher self-efficacy. On the other hand, teachers in the elementary settings have been found to have higher levels of self-efficacy than teachers at the secondary level (Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014). Overall, Wang and Degol (2016) determined that research has been inconclusive in the differences between types of schools, determining that other factors such as safety, community, and academics play a greater role in establishing school climate than institutional factors, including size, type, and environment.

In EST, the school would be considered a mesosystem, as it is a place that is frequented daily by an individual (Dureden & Witt, 2010). However, the type of school would be a factor that could contribute to the exosystem, as different schools offer different types of professional
development or trainings that could impact perceptions. In order to understand the factors that impact school climate, a researcher must focus on the relationships and characteristics that are unique to both the school and the individuals within the school to gather a full picture of the climate within a building (Rudasill et al., 2018).

**Dimensions of School Climate**

Thapa et al. (2013) identified five dimensions of school climate that can be used to describe and focus on for school climate research. These areas are safety, relationships, teaching and learning, institutional environment, and the school improvement process (Thapa et al., 2013, p. 358). Other researchers have solidified these dimensions by proving that school climate is a multitiered framework (McGiboney, 2016; VanLone et al., 2019; Voight & Nation, 2016; Wang & Degol, 2016). These dimensions can help researchers and educators understand and focus on the different areas that impact school climate (Thapa et al., 2013).

**School safety.** One of Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs is safety. Both adults and children look for safety in their daily world and must have their safety needs met in order to progress through the hierarchy (Maslow, 1954). Therefore, in order to teach and learn, teachers and students, respectively, must feel safe in the school environment. Consequently, the feelings that teachers and students have within a building towards safety impact the perceptions they have towards the overall school climate. In addition, parents’ main concern when it comes to the school environment is safety within the building (McGiboney, 2016). The feelings that students and teachers have towards the community and environment around the school have the potential to impact the feelings that these individuals have towards the school climate (Kitsantas, Ware, & Martinez-Arias, 2004).
School safety as a dimension of school climate has multiple factors that surround it. While the aforementioned school climate factors (size, type, location) can impact feelings towards school safety, physical features are simply one dimension of school safety. Students and teachers can be impacted by the diversity within a building and feel safer when there are higher levels of ethnic diversity (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006). Sweeney and Von Hagen (2010) solidified that the community outside the school, and the way that students travel to and from school, also influences perceptions of safety. Researchers have also shown that in schools where students feel supported through the norms and structures, they are less likely to experience violence and victimization, which can improve attendance rates and feeling toward school (Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010). Students can use multiple factors to determine their feelings towards safety at school, including physical features, such as disruptive behaviors, type of buildings, and violence, as well as internal features, including feelings of connectedness towards the staff and their peers (McGiboney, 2016).

Feelings towards safety, including physical, social, and emotional, can impact overall feelings towards school climate. The systems that Bronfenbrenner (2005) explained create for a variety of experiences that students and teachers bring into buildings. Structured systems of discipline and school climate, such as ASC, can allow for increased positive feelings towards safety and can lower peer and teacher victimization within a school (Gregory et al., 2012). In schools where ASC was implemented, there were lower levels of student victimization (Cornell et al., 2015). When students and teachers are in an environment where they feel safe and comfortable with each other, school climate levels can also increase. Additionally, when schools utilize programs aimed at increasing school safety and security, there is likely to be a positive impact on student achievement (McGiboney, 2016).
**Relationships.** Looking past physical attributes, characteristics within a school such as relationships can also impact teachers and students’ feelings towards school climate. It is important that students and teachers within a school building feel connected to each other and also have positive feelings regarding their own selves and abilities (Thapa et al., 2013). Relationships are important to school climate, as it was found that at schools where students reported positive student and teacher relationships, there were more reported positive feelings towards school safety and climate (Williams, Schneider, Wornell, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2018). Lenzi et al. (2017) also determined that at schools where there were higher levels of sense of community and teacher support, there were less reports of students feeling unsafe at school.

Positive teacher and student relationships have the ability to influence multiple factors of school climate. A review of recent research showed that positive relationships “were associated with higher levels of psychological engagement, academic achievement, and school attendance and reduced levels of disruptive behaviors, suspension, and dropout” (Quin, 2017, p. 373). Positive relationships can also positively impact a student’s future performance and feelings towards school. Students who feel connected with their teachers could have more opportunities for educational advancement and pursuits (Wong, Parent, & Konishi, 2019). Additionally, another recent study showed that in schools were students had stronger perceptions of the climate, including relationships with teachers, there were lower dropout rates by seniors (Barile et al., 2011).

**Teaching and learning.** Thapa et al. (2013) identified teaching and learning as one of the most important dimensions of school climate (p. 365). Educators and leaders within a school must shape the building so that teaching and learning are at the forefront, and school climate
research should focus on the same (Cohen, Pickeral, McCloskey, 2009). In a positive school climate, teaching and learning is valued as educators promote “cooperative learning, group cohesion, respect, and mutual trust” (Thapa et al., 2013, p. 365). Furthermore, when perceptions of climate, including teaching and learning, are higher, student behaviors are more positive, leading to a decrease in risky behaviors (White, La Salle, Ashby, & Meyers, 2014).

It is important that school climate research focuses on student achievement and teacher and student satisfaction when evaluating school climate (McGiboney, 2016). While teaching and learning must be at the center of the school, understanding teachers’ experiences and perspectives towards teaching will help improve school climate for educational leaders (Gray, Wilcox, & Nordstokke, 2017). In order to effectively and efficiently study school climate, aspects of teaching and learning must be analyzed.

**Institutional environment.** The institutional environment is composed of both the physical structure and school connectedness/engagement. Physical structure was addressed earlier in this literature review. School connectedness is categorized as the belief by students that individuals within the school care about both the students and their learning (Thapa et al., 2013). School connectedness and school climate have been associated with each other as one can impact the students’ perception of the other (McGiboney, 2016). School connectedness supports school climate, which in turn influences student achievement and outcomes (In, Kim, & Carney, 2019).

Loukas, Suzuki, and Horton (2006) strengthened this connection by demonstrating that stronger feelings towards school connectedness can help mediate school climate relations. In 2009, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stated that students are more likely to succeed academically and engage in healthier behaviors when they feel connected to the
school. Leaders should work to create conditions where there is a positive school climate that encourages opportunities for students to feel connected to the institutional environment (McGiboney, 2016). In order to fully understand school climate, research must take into consideration the institutional environment and its relationship in regard to student and school connectedness.

**School improvement process.** Educational leaders and teachers’ ability to implement change can impact the overall school climate within a building. The assessment of school climate within a building has become instrumental in the school improvement process (McGiboney, 2016). Teachers who have more positive feelings towards school climate will be more likely to accept and support change within a building (Malloy et al., 2014). School climate efforts can also be improved when there is a positive outlook towards school improvement and teachers are more willing to implement whole school change (Thapa et al., 2013). Given that positive school climate is associated with factors including higher levels of teacher satisfaction and student achievement and lower discipline and suspension rates, educators and researchers should be focused on finding ways to improve school climate (McGiboney, 2016). These five dimensions of school climate are important to understanding how to improve school climate within a building where negative school climate is an issue.

**Mental Health**

Mental health can be defined as the absence or presence of mental problems or disorders or the overall mental wellbeing of an individual (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018). In reference to school climate and this research, mental health will include both definitions and encompass all terms related to the overall wellbeing of students and teachers respectively. Recent research demonstrates that a positive school climate can help support and encourage positive mental and
physical health within students (Piccolo, Merz, & Noble, 2018). Childhood development is a multi-faced topic, which includes the development of positive mental health and the impact on overall wellbeing (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018). Schools are important in this development because having a supportive school climate and personnel can foster positive mental health (Colvin, Egan, & Coulter, 2019). Furthermore, extensive research over the last several years has shown that schools can have both a positive and negative impact on social emotional health, physical health, and mental health depending on the overall school climate (McGiboney, 2016; Thapa et al., 2013).

**Teacher mental health.** According to Piccolo et al. (2018), “school climate is a powerful, multidimensional construct associated with mental and physical health” (p. 7). This influential climate has the ability to impact the way teachers view their job and overall mental wellbeing. Teachers experience stress on a daily basis, and their ability to handle that stress plays a role in the school climate as heightened teacher stress may lead to a negative school climate (Gray et al., 2017). When teachers experience negative mental health symptoms such as depression and anxiety, it could lead to job dissatisfaction and teacher burnout (McLean et al., 2017). In addition, teacher wellbeing can impact student wellbeing, as better teacher mental health is associated with better student mental health and with lower psychological struggles (Harding et al., 2019). According to McGiboney (2016), school climate is “significantly dependent on the behavior of teachers and this in turn has a measurable impact on the social emotional development of students” (p. 55). This means that teacher mental health and their views towards school climate have the ability to impact more than just student achievement.

There is a growing interest in education on mental health issues over the recent years (Thapa et al., 2013). Educational leaders should work to create healthy relationships between
school climate and teachers as it can help create a more enriching environment for both teachers and students (Dutta & Sahney, 2016). When leaders support teachers, this can increase job satisfaction and classroom environments, leading to improved school climates (McLean et al., 2017). A positive school climate is as vital for teacher wellbeing as student learning and achievement (Gray et al., 2017, p. 207). School climate is equally as important for teachers as it is for students and their learning environments (McGiboney, 2016).

**Student mental health.** Similar to teacher mental health concerns, there has been an increase in prevalence of mental health problems among youth and adolescents in the recent years (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018). Current research has shown that in students there is a connection between perceived academic support and executive functioning, one aspect of mental health (Piccolo et al., 2018). A positive school climate fosters development and is necessary for students of all ages to meet their social and academic potential (McGiboney, 2016). Making the connections between student mental health and school climate can help school leaders find ways to increase school climate perceptions.

There are many factors within the school environment that research has found to impact student mental health (Harding et al., 2019). One of these factors is student motivation to succeed in the academic environment. A positive school climate impacts student motivation and willingness to learn inside and outside of the classroom (Gray et al., 2017). One way that student perception of school climate is created is through academic support and teacher relationships. Stronger teacher-student relationships increase student wellbeing and mental health (Harding et al., 2019). Students who perceive lower quality relationships between teachers and instructional interactions will have lower levels of academic achievement (McLean et al., 2017).
Social-emotional health is important to a student’s wellbeing and success in the educational environment. One aspect that impacts social-emotional health is school connectedness. As aforementioned, school connectedness is the “belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009, p. 3). In general, school climate and student connectedness tend to be positively connected; therefore, research should continue to focus on ways to improve the connection for teachers (In et al., 2019). The factors of school climate, school connectedness, and student mental health are all interwoven and important to analyze (McGiboney, 2016).

Furthermore, academic support and positive student perceptions of teacher relationships can help diminish the effects of socioeconomic status on a student’s wellbeing (Piccolo et al., 2018). However, much of this research has been focused on students’ achievement, behaviors, and mental health in the secondary years (Wang & Degol, 2016). In order to gather more data on student mental health and the connection to school climate, current research should focus on the primary level.

**Teacher Retention**

Another valuable factor that is important to understanding the significance of school climate is teacher retention. Teacher burnout and job satisfaction are of growing importance as teaching continues to be a field with high levels of stress. Research has shown there is a positive connection between teacher satisfaction and positive school climate, which can impact teachers in many ways, including mental health, self-efficacy, and attendance at work (McGiboney, 2016). The level of school climate within a building has the ability to impact teacher burnout and job satisfaction and the United States Department of Education has shown an interest in
improving school climate in an effort to increase teacher satisfaction (Malinen & Savolainen, 2016). A negative school climate is related to burnout within teachers, and while an effective teacher has the ability to overcome the negative climate initially, it can eventually lead to a negative impact on an effective teacher (McGiboney, 2016).

Teachers are a vital component of any school, and their perceptions of the school climate and environment are imperative to understanding the overall school climate (Collie et al., 2012). Recent findings indicate that it is important to understand teachers’ attitudes and expectations toward the school climate, as it can impact the school as a whole (McGiboney, 2016). Understanding teachers’ perceptions of school climate will help leaders increase their awareness of teacher self-efficacy and satisfaction in attempts to help improve both school climate and teacher retention.

**Negative teacher views.** When teachers have negative views of their school, it can have the potential to impact the overall school climate. In fact, the attitude of teachers towards students and climate, have the ability to influence students’ acceptance, well-being and academic success (McGiboney, 2016). Teacher views impact all aspects of the school. Ozen (2018) studied a school in Kutahya, Turkey and found that teachers’ views of the school can impact the environment across the entire school, including the learning process and personal development. In Ozen’s (2018) study, it was determined that the negative school climate was due to the teachers’ opinions and perceptions of how the school operated and of the administrative team, which lead to teachers who were closed off to new ideas, did not exert any additional effort for the school, and did not work to improve the school as a whole. Teachers who feel more positive towards aspects of their school, including behavior, expectations, and classroom management, have higher perceived levels of school climate (Voight & Nation, 2016). Teacher beliefs and
expectations of their roles within the institutional environment have the ability to impact school climate in low income schools (McGiboney, 2016). Hence, teachers who work hard to make the school successful will work to create a more positive environment for students and increase perceptions of school climate. In addition, a healthy school climate helps contribute to positive outcomes towards teacher views and job satisfaction (VanLone et al., 2019).

Educational leaders should work to understand teachers’ perceptions as it will help improve the willingness of teachers to work towards improving a school. Malloy et al. (2014) hypothesized and determined that when teachers have more positive perceptions towards their school, they will be more willing to implement something new in comparison to the teachers who tend to view their school in a more negative light. Stress also impacts willingness and can have implications on school climate as it can lead to teachers who have “negative physiological and emotional response[s] to job-specific pressures” (von der Embse, 2016, p. 494). The perceptions that teachers have toward their levels of stress with their job can predict whether there is a negative or positive school climate within the teachers (Collie et al., 2012). In addition, stress that is related to, or caused by, the school climate can impact the effectiveness of a teacher (McGiboney, 2016). Given these influences of both the teacher and school climate, it is important for leaders to take the time to understand how their school climate is impacted based on the staff as it has the ability to greatly impact a leader’s effectiveness.

**Teacher self-efficacy.** Teacher self-efficacy is another important factor that can have an impact on school climate, as it is another fold in the ecological approach. Teacher self-efficacy is defined as the “evaluation of one’s own capability as a teacher” (Malinen & Savolainen, 2016, p. 146). It involves the factors that teachers use to determine how they view their ability to effectively perform their daily job. Higher levels of teacher self-efficacy have been associated
with positive outcomes for school climate (Collie et al., 2012). Teachers who have high self-efficacy can also be linked to positive results such as higher standardized scores and grades for students (Wang & Degol, 2016). Teachers with low self-efficacy could view the school climate as negative because they do not feel supported or appreciated by the administration. Malinen and Savolainen (2016) found that teachers who rated school climate more positively had higher levels of job satisfaction and self-efficacy than their counterparts. Teachers who feel supported in aspects of self-efficacy such as professional growth, recognition, and working conditions also can have higher perceived levels of school climate (Dutta & Sahney, 2016). In addition, teachers who have higher self-efficacy in their ability to manage student behavior can have stronger feelings towards school climate (Malinen & Savolainen, 2016).

Teachers use a variety of factors to determine self-efficacy. Teacher expectations and consistency are two factors that can also impact school climate from the teacher perspective (La Salle, 2018). Teachers have expectations regarding the structure of their classroom and the way that a school should be run that, if different from administration, can lead to negative views toward a school. Teachers who feel they work in a positive social and effective environment, have more positive feelings towards job satisfaction (Dutta & Sahney, 2016). A school climate that is positive and healthy can help teachers develop the belief that they are able to influence student learning (McGiboney, 2016). In summary, when teachers have positive views toward the administration and feel supported by others, they have higher perceived levels of school climate and self-efficacy (Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018). Consequently, if teachers have poor self-efficacy towards themselves and their teaching, they are more likely to have job-related stress and experience burnout (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016).
Novice teachers. Teachers who are new to the field of education can bring fresh ideas and experiences but can also bring a unique twist to school climate. Novice teachers often have little experience within a classroom setting and have to rely on their training and assistance from other individuals to make decisions regarding instruction and management within the classroom. This lack of experience can lead to depressive and anxious symptoms when these teachers do not feel supported by those around them (McLean et al., 2017).

Novice teachers benefit from environments where they are supported and can increase feelings of self-efficacy (Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014). Teachers can also have increased levels towards school climate in environments where institutional resources, such as organization and availability of resources and teaching supports, are supported (Wang & Degol, 2016). These resources can be beneficial to novice teachers and experienced teachers alike in improving school climate (VanLone et al., 2019). Furthermore, McLean et al. (2017) found that a negative school climate “may have exacerbated negative mental health symptoms;” however, it is also possible that those who have a negative perception of school climate also experience more depression and anxiety (p. 238). Teachers are impacted by poor views toward school climate, which can lead to negative consequences such as ineffective teachers and job burnout (McGiboney, 2016). While an exact correlation cannot be made at this time, it is clear that novice teachers are impacted based on their perception of the school climate within their building. School climate research should focus on both experienced and novice teachers in order to gather a full understanding of how perceptions of school climate impact teachers.

Teachers Compared to Other Stakeholders

There are a variety of stakeholders within a school system, including teachers, students, parents, administration, and community members. While this research focuses on the
perceptions of teachers, it is important to understand the impact that other stakeholders can have on the teachers, as well as the connection of this impact to school climate research. School climate is impacted by a variety of factors, including students, leaders, teachers, parents, and the community (McGiboney, 2016). Research supports that teachers have the ability to impact school climate through relationships with students and home-school communication (Bear et al., 2014). In addition, the view that teachers have towards support within the community and administration can impact the views that teachers have towards a school (Voight & Nation, 2016). The experiences and communication that teachers have between parents and the community, especially within a low income school, could be a factor that impact school climate perceptions and feelings for teachers.

Administration. The connection between colleagues is vital to understanding how a school operates and can be a key component in school climate for teachers. While it has been mentioned how teachers independently impact the school climate, it is also important to see the connection between administrators and teachers within a school and how that impacts the school climate, as the principal of a building can directly impact school effectiveness through the actions that he or she takes to help shape the school’s learning climate (McGiboney, 2016). Positive relationships with colleagues and administration are vital to creating an atmosphere where teachers feel supported and empowered (Meristo & Eisenchmidt, 2014). Teachers and administrators must be in agreement with school climate in order to have a successful program within a building. It is possible that in buildings where misconceptions exist between the leaders and the teachers, there could be conflicting communications, expectations, and behaviors, which could have negative results on teaching and learning (Alston, 2017). Teachers’ perceptions of
school climate must align with administrators in order to guarantee that a school is functioning at the optimal level.

Administrators must promote school connectedness by fostering positive school climates within their schools. Principals who have “school climate-conscious leadership” styles positively impact teacher relationships and student achievement (McGiboney, 2016). By clarifying behaviors and characteristics within schools, administrators are able to help solidify the relationships between school climate and school connectedness (Sulak, 2018). Educational leaders must support “systematic and universal strategies” that can help nurture a positive learning environment and climate in the long run (La Salle, 2018, p. 560). It is also important that leaders are supporting teachers by using interventions that address and improve school climate as it can minimize the negative impacts of social adjustment issues that students have in order for them to be able to succeed in school (McGiboney, 2016, p. 41).

Furthermore, as administrators are implementing change within a building, they must take note of the teacher retention factors including efficacy and stress. Negative factors of mental health in teachers, such as depression and anxiety, can lead to burnout and job dissatisfaction within the school environment (McLean et al., 2017). Administrators should foster institutional environments in which teachers experience healthy interactions daily, which can increase positive perceptions within a building (Dutta & Sahney, 2016). Administrators who have a willingness and desire to listen to teacher opinions and perceptions, as well as engage teachers in the decision making process, will help increase positive levels and attitudes toward school climate (McGiboney, 2016). When administrators are supportive of teachers and find innovative ways and practices that expand student achievement, the results on job satisfaction, stress, and overall school climate will also be improved (Collie et al., 2012).
Students and parents. Student and parent perceptions of school climate are important because of the impact that teacher relationships and the community can have on school climate. Students and parents are typically equal in their feelings and perceptions towards school climate, including attitudes towards positive relationships between community, school, and home (McGiboney, 2016). Bear et al. (2014) attributed teacher-student relations and teacher-home communications as two important scales in a school’s overall climate. Teachers should work not only with students, but also with parents, to ensure that all have similar expectations. Schueler et al. (2013) determined that parents, similar to teachers, distinguish between both academic and social aspects of a school when determining school climate.

Determining school climate and connectedness for a student, teacher, and parent goes beyond the surface level connection. The CDC (2009) stated that creating an environment which facilitates healthy development for children is the responsibility of families, schools, and communities. One study found that students also distinguish between a variety of domains when determining their perception of the overall school climate (Bradshaw et al., 2014). Bradshaw et al. (2014) found that students perceived higher levels of school climate in schools where they felt engagement from both the teachers and the parents and a better structure within a school. When all stakeholders within a school address school climate, there are better results for the students involved (Kitsantas et al., 2004).

Connection Between Theories and Literature

School climate cannot be measured through a single lens; it must be measured, managed and implemented with various stakeholders. EST documents the various layers that impact a child on a daily basis and how human development plays a factor within schools (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These components of development impact both children and adults and
require a global lens when analyzing any aspect of a school, including school climate (Rudasill et al., 2018). While students impact school climate, the teachers and their feelings towards school climate are important to understand as it can impact multiple factors towards schools such as retention, job satisfaction, mental health and safety (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Dutta & Sahney, 2015; Malinen & Savolainen, 2016; McGiboney, 2016; Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016). In addition, school climate is an important topic within schools for educators as it impacts student achievement and satisfaction within the school (McGiboney, 2016).

ASC is a structure that allows administrators, teachers, and students to all understand and recognize how discipline and situations will be managed within a school building. Having a specific climate structure, such as ASC, allows teachers to feel supported and safe, therefore, creating a better environment for everyone, including students who feel safer with both their peers and other adults within the school (Berg & Cornell, 2015; Gregory et al., 2012). Discipline and the ability of a principal to create a positive school climate is one factor that teachers use to determine the effectiveness of a principal, as well as their view towards school climate (McGiboney, 2016). Allowing principals the ability to choose their own discipline models and structures could help improve school climate (DeAngelis & Lueken, 2019).

Positive school climate models, including ASC, allow students to have higher levels of engagement and social adjustment, better behavior, and more positive teacher relationships (Heilbrun et al., 2018). Students come into schools with a variety of factors that school leaders are unable to change, and finding ways to address these issues through school climate research can help minimize the negative impact on school climate from outside of schools (McGiboney, 2016). Additionally, higher structure and support within a school can lead to lower levels of
student victimization and increased peer and teacher relationships (Crowley et al., 2018). It is important that leaders work to create environments where students experience healthy interactions between peers and teachers as this will help create a more enriching environment for teachers and students alike (Dutta & Sahney, 2016). Increasing the structure within a school can lead to a more positive school climate, which results in positive impacts for both students and teachers (Gray et al., 2017).

School climate is a puzzle that requires any researcher to analyze multiple moving parts. McGiboney (2016) wrote, “school climate as a whole is more than the sum of its parts” (p. 1). In order to gather more research on school climate and the impact it has on teachers and students, current research should focus on finding the connections between school climate and the various factors that impact it. Positive school climate can result in many positive benefits for teachers and students alike, including achievement, mental health, and motivation (Gray et al., 2017; Thapa et al., 2013). When researchers see school climate as an input-output relationship, it allows researchers to view school climate in an ecological manner that focuses on a variety of factors (inputs) that impact the overall climate (output) (McGiboney, 2016).

For this reason, further research must continue to focus on teacher perception of school climate and ways to impact and improve those perceptions. Interventions that leaders can identify which improve school climate are critical to addressing issues that students have on a daily basis that could impact their lives (McGiboney, 2016). Research should also focus on investigating the experiences and perspectives of teachers in relation to school climate in an effort to provide a stronger understanding of the contextual factors that influence school climate (Gray et al., 2017). Teachers have the ability to create healthy classroom environments that increase effective teaching and learning experiences for students on a daily basis (Dutta &
Leaders should understand the factors that teachers use to create their perceptions of school climate in order to foster environments that lead to higher quality school climates for both teachers and students.

**Summary**

Current research within the field of education demonstrates a wide array of topics surrounding school climate. School climate can be impacted by a variety of factors including, but not limited to, school size and type, student and teacher mental health, teacher retention, school location, school safety, and administration. While many factors of school climate are controllable, there are those that are uncontrollable, and educators and leaders should understand the importance of analyzing both factors when determine school climate levels (Sulak, 2018). Current research shows the ability to gather data on school climate through the use of questionnaires and surveys, and the importance of understanding both controllable and uncontrollable factors. However, it can be very difficult to accurately pinpoint the effects that school climate can have on schools when teachers feel differently about the school climate. Therefore, in order to appropriately measure perceptions of school climate, the researcher’s study analyzes school climate through the teachers’ perspectives both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Recent research has identified factors that can either improve or decrease school climate perceptions. Some of these factors include the mental health of teachers and students, levels of support by administration, and the variety of demographics within schools. Research shows that negative mental health experiences of teachers can negatively impact student learning, overall classroom quality, and even increase student mental issues (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Gray et al., 2017; Harding et al., 2017; McGiboney, 2016; McLean et al., 2017). Student wellbeing can also be a factor on school climate as students who do not feel academically supported or
cannot identify positive teacher-student relationships often have lower ratings toward school climate (Harding et al., 2017). Additionally, mental health issues are often associated with social connectedness/relationships in school climate factors (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018). This could mean that students that have identified mental health concerns or issues could struggle with feeling socially connected, leading to poorer feelings toward school climate.

Current school climate research works to explain many factors within school climate using a variety of methods and explanations. However, the current research is limited in its focus on primary schools, including low income schools and how teachers perceive the climate within these schools. This research adds literature to the field that demonstrates the low income school designation can impact school climate and can be improved through analyzing interviews and suggestions of the teachers within the school. Currently, a gap exists in the understanding of school climate as it relates to low income schools and the teachers’ perceptions of how to improve the school climate. The current research focuses on identifying how teachers impact school climate but does not offer a multitude of suggestions for improving the climate. Therefore, this study was necessary to understand how school climate can be impacted based on the type of school or the population it serves, and this study aimed to determine how school climate can be improved at low income schools. The multi-method approach of this study will allow the researcher to provide suggestions for improving school climate within low income schools through the teacher perspective.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

School climate and teachers’ perceptions of school climate are growing topics of interest within educational leaders and reformers. In recent years, the United States Department of Education has increased funds designated for school climate research and improvements (Malinen & Savolainen, 2016; National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2010). The purpose of this study was to further understand the problem of teachers’ perceptions of school climate in low income schools and to formulate a solution to address the problem. In this research study, the researcher aimed to find ways to improve the teacher perception of school climate at a low income school through the use of both a qualitative and quantitative research design. Through interviews, a focus group, and surveys, the researcher gathered and analyzed data to have a comprehensive understanding of school climate at a low income school and used the teachers’ perceptions of the school climate at that school to propose possible suggestions for improving the climate.

Design

A multimethod research design was used for this applied study. In a multimethod design, the researcher utilizes both qualitative and quantitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts, and languages to explore a particular phenomenon (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 33). According to Rovai, Baker, and Ponton (2014), the use of a multimethod design allows the researcher to “provide a better understanding of a research problem or issue than either research approach alone” (p. 67). In a multimethod design, there is an integration of both quantitative and qualitative data that can create advantages over using one method independently of the other (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013).
Mixed method designs allow for the researcher to collect and analyze data in a way that is different than using either a quantitative or qualitative approach independent from the other. The key difference between mixed method and other research designs is the integration of both data methods, which allows for inferences that are unable to be made with a single approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009). For this study, the researcher used a parallel mixed design to allow for collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. According to Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009), a parallel design contains two interconnected strands of data, in which one is qualitative in nature, and the other is quantitative in nature. Parallel mixed method design allows for qualitative and quantitative data to be collected and analyzed separately but then merged for a final interpretation (Näström, Luttik, Idvall, & Strömberg, 2017). The researcher determined this was the most appropriate method as it allows for a deeper understanding of the factors that impact teachers’ perceptions of school climate through a synthesis of both qualitative and quantitative research (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). The researcher was able to gather both quantitative and qualitative data concurrently and then interpret the data together to be able to analyze the school climate at a low income school and offer suggestions for improvement.

The researcher utilized a multimethod research design for this applied study. The first and second approaches were both qualitative and were interviews and a focus group, respectively. The third approach was a quantitative survey where the teachers’ perceptions of school climate and environment were examined. For the qualitative methods, the researcher aimed to gather information surrounding the factors that teachers use in the low income school to rate school climate through the use of interviews and focus groups. Additionally, the qualitative methods
allowed for the researcher to examine and gather data for how to solve the problem of low school climate through the teachers’ perspectives.

Research Questions

Central Question: How can teacher perception of school climate be improved at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school located in central Virginia?

Sub-question 1: How would teachers in an interview solve the problem of negative perceptions of school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school located in central Virginia?

Sub-question 2: How would teachers in a focus group solve the problem of negative perceptions of school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school located in central Virginia?

Sub-question 3: How would quantitative survey data inform the problem of negative perceptions of school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school located in central Virginia?

Setting

The setting for this study was Oakley County Public Schools (pseudonym), a rural school division located in Central Virginia. Oakley County Public Schools (OCPS) was comprised of one high school, one middle school, and four elementary schools and serves approximately 5,000 students from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. The demographics of the students enrolled in the school system were 70.4% White, 15.2% Black, 8.0% two or more races, 5.4% Hispanic, and 1% other. OCPS employed approximately 300 certified teachers. This setting was chosen by the researcher due to convenience and relevance. The researcher was employed as an
administrator within the school division and had an interest and passion in understanding more about the factors that impact school climate within the division.

For this study one of the elementary schools in OCPS was used, Yellow Lane Elementary (pseudonym). Yellow Lane was identified as a low income school. Low income schools are schools where there is a high percentage of students who attend the school that qualify for the free or reduced lunch program (London, Westrich, Stokes-Guinan, McLaughlin, 2014). The free and reduced lunch program is a nationwide assistance program based on household income status, which can also be used to categorize a neighborhood or community as having high or low income (Owens & Candipan, 2019). At Yellow Lane Elementary School, 60.5% of its students received free or reduced lunch and were considered economically disadvantaged.

Yellow Lane Elementary served students in preschool through fifth grade and had a population of both general and special education students. In the 2018-2019 school year, Yellow Lane had an enrollment of 623 students of which 64.7% were White, 16.1% Black, 6.6% Hispanic, 11.6% two or more races, and 1.1% Asian. At Yellow Lane, the population of students with disabilities was 15.9% student with disabilities and 6.1% of the students were identified and receive services as English Language Learners.

Yellow Lane Elementary School employed approximately 50 certified teachers. These included general education teachers, special education teachers, English as Second Language teachers, Title I math and reading teachers, and resource teachers (music, art, physical education, library). The school had one school counselor, a school psychologist, and instructional assistants that work with the students on a daily basis. The school administrative team was comprised of one assistant principal, one principal, and an administrative intern position (which was the same for all elementary schools within the division). Teachers could have leadership roles within the
school by serving on the building leadership team or as a grade level chair. These demographics were relevant to the study as they have the potential to impact how the teachers viewed school climate.

**Participants**

This multimethod design utilized participants for both quantitative and qualitative methods. Pseudonyms were used for all participants in the study, but demographic information was collected for the interviews and focus group, as it was deemed a necessary factor for part of the study. Demographics included the number of years that the participant had been teaching (both in all and at the specific school) and gender.

For the interview portion of the study, the researcher interviewed six teachers at Yellow Lane Elementary School. Purposeful sampling was utilized for the qualitative methods as only teachers who had taught at the school for at least three consecutive years were asked to participate (Rovai et al., 2014). This sampling method allowed the researcher to select participants that were “information rich” and develop an in-depth understanding of the selected teachers’ perceptions at Yellow Lane Elementary (Gall et al., 2007). Once permission was obtained by the school division, the principal, and the Institutional Review Board, an email was sent out to the sample pool of 50 certified teachers at Yellow Lane, asking for participants in all phases of the study. Participants for the interviews were required to have taught at Yellow Lane Elementary for at least three consecutive years. The researcher aimed to have a sample size of six teachers for the interview data collection. Once six participants were identified, their demographic information including teaching experience, leadership experience within the building, and gender was listed in a corresponding table.
The same method was utilized for the focus group in the last step of the data collection. For the focus group, the researcher interviewed three teachers from the school in a group setting. These teachers were all teachers who participated in the interview and required the same qualifications; therefore, the researcher used the same list of eligible participants that was gathered in the interview sampling to elicit participants for the focus group. No additional demographic identifying information was used other than what was gathered from the interviews, and pseudonyms were identified.

The participants for the quantitative method consisted of a convenience sample of all certified teachers at Yellow Lane Elementary School. The researcher chose a convenience sample as this population was readily available to the researcher, and the researcher aimed to generalize the population at this specific school using all available participants (Rovai et al., 2014, Warner, 2013). The survey was sent out to the sample pool of approximately 50 teachers. Follow-up occurred with the sample pool in order to gather a sample size of at least 30 certified teachers at Yellow Lane Elementary School. 35 teachers participated in the quantitative portion of the study.

The Researcher’s Role

I was a doctoral student at Liberty University who was interested and passionate about education, most specifically school climate research and the impact and influence it has on a school. This passion could lead to bias and as a researcher I must be aware of this fact. Through my research outlined in Chapter Two, I firmly believed that school climate can have an impact on student academic achievement, teacher retention, and feelings surrounding school safety (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Booren, Handy, & Power, 2011; Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014). It was possible that this research could impact my interpretation of the data, and therefore I took
steps to ensure that the data was analyzed through multiple measures that allow for the ability for themes to form naturally.

At the time of this research study, I was employed as an administrator in the school division that is the setting for this study. Prior to being an administrator, I was a special education teacher in the division and I also attended school within this division as a child. This research allowed for the possibility to make change within the division as the applied approach to this study resulted in possible solutions to the problem being identified. Furthermore, given that I worked with many of the participants in this study, it was possible that the participants could know me on a personal or professional level, which may have led to a potential bias in the study. The participants were reassured that none of the information or data collected as part of this study would be used as part of their performance rating or shared with any administrators within the division. Pseudonyms were used for all identifying information and only the researcher and the participants knew those who participated in the study.

**Procedures**

The following section details the procedures that the researcher followed to complete the study. First, the researcher approached the superintendent of the school division to ask permission to complete the study. Next, the researcher obtained permission from the principal at Yellow Lane Elementary School to conduct the study. Once written permission to conduct the study was obtained from the superintendent and the principal, the researcher followed Liberty University’s guidelines for obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). No research was conducted or data gathered by the researcher until approval was granted by the IRB. All permission approval letters from the division superintendent and school principal (see Appendix A & B) and IRB approval letter (see Appendix C) are included in the appendices.
The next step was to elicit participants for both the qualitative and quantitative portions of the study using the guidelines documented in the participants section. Consent for the study was given by all participants and included the agreement that administrators responsible for the participants would never see the answers and all information shared within the data collected was confidential and unidentifiable. Participants signed the corresponding consent form (see Appendices D-F). Once consent was granted from all of the abovementioned entities, the researcher began data collection and analysis, which are outlined in the following sections.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

This applied dissertation utilized a multimethod research design that contains both quantitative and qualitative procedures and analyses. The following sections outline the data collection methods and corresponding analyses. The first method was qualitative interviews, the second was a qualitative focus group, and the third was quantitative survey administration.

**Interviews**

The first sub-question for this study explored the factors that teachers identify as impacting school climate for the teachers at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school located in central Virginia. The researcher elicited six teachers at the school to complete one-on-one, in person interviews. The interviews were planned to take place at a neutral environment, as designated by the researcher and participant, outside of school contracted hours. However, due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic, the interviews were unable to take place face-to-face and were instead completed via online video conferencing. Prior to the interview, the researcher had the participant electronically sign a consent form (see Appendix D) and ensured that the participant did not have any questions about the study. The interviews
lasted approximately 30-40 minutes in length and were video recorded by the researcher to allow for later transcription.

The researcher completed the interviews with proper protocol as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018). The researcher developed interview questions that aligned with the research questions, which are listed below (Yeong, Ismail, Ismai, & Hamzah, 2018). The researcher chose a semi-structured approach, in which specific questions were asked, but also allowed for the researcher to respond to differences between participants (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The researcher was an active listener and allowed further discussion of topics as the participants chose (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher believed that a semi-structured approach allowed for the most useful data in regard to the school climate at the school and focused the participants’ answers.

The researcher used guidelines set forth by Magnusson and Marecek (2015) and Creswell and Poth (2018) for conducting qualitative interview-based research. The researcher chose fourteen questions that allowed for rich talk and were open-ended to allow for best data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). These questions were designed to provide data for both the central question and research question one.

**One-on-One Interview Questions**

1) Please introduce yourself, including your name, your teaching position, and how long you have been at Yellow Lane Elementary.

2) Why did you become a teacher?

3) Please describe your teaching philosophy and style in the classroom.

4) What is your definition of school climate?

5) What words do you use to define and describe school climate at your school?
6) What factors do you feel impact your school climate positively?
7) What factors do you feel impact your school climate negatively?
8) In what ways, do you think your school climate impacts your teaching style?
9) How are school climate and student learning connected?
10) How do you think students’ learning environments are impacted by your school’s climate?
11) How do you think school administrators and school climate are connected?
12) How much of an impact does school administration have on school climate at your school?
13) What specific steps do you feel can be taken by teachers to improve school climate?
14) What specific steps do you feel can be taken by administrators to improve school climate?

Questions one, two, and three allowed the researcher to analyze the type of teacher the participant is and establish a relationship with the participant (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). Questions four and five related to the study and established meaning by determining the participant’s definition of school climate, both in general and at the specific school (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015, p. 47). Questions six and seven documented the participant’s feelings towards their building’s school climate and gathered factors they felt were relevant to school climate, part of the research objective of this study and those studies related to school climate (Ozen, 2018). Questions eight through twelve allowed the researcher to hear the participant’s personal connection and reflections regarding factors that research has shown impact school climate (Dutta & Sahney, 2016; Magnusson & Marecek, 2015; Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014; Voight & Nation, 2016). Lastly, questions thirteen and fourteen related back to the central question of the
researcher’s study and allowed for a connection between the research questions and the interview questions (Maxwell, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Magnusson & Marecek, 2015)

Once interviews were complete, the interview data was analyzed first by transcribing the interviews using TranscribeMe, an online transcription software. Once the interviews were transcribed, the researcher began reading and memoing the data to allow for ideas to emerge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher focused on using words and phrases while transcribing to allow for primary data to be analyzed (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2018). The researcher used Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis tool, to analyze the data collection from the interviews and the focus groups. Nvivo assisted the researcher with coding and kept track of the common themes as they emerged. Each theme was given a code, and the researcher arranged the codes into a table that is displayed in the findings section. The researcher analyzed the data and used the top codes to determine the top three themes from the interviews.

**Focus Group**

The second sub-question for this study explored how teachers in a focus group would solve the problem of negative perceptions of school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school located in central Virginia. The second data collection procedure was a focus group, as it allowed the researcher to gather information in a group setting with multiple participants who have observed a particular phenomenon. Focus groups are a way to collect data that accounts for the interaction and sharing of information in a larger setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This focus group allowed the researcher to obtain information about the topic and to gather data on similarities and differences between the participants in how they viewed and proposed to change school climate within their building (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2009).
Similar to the interviews, the focus group required the researcher to elicit three different teachers at Yellow Lane Elementary School for a focus group. Initially, the researcher desired to complete the focus group in person, but due to COVID-19 restrictions, the researcher opted to complete the focus group via Zoom, an online video conference tool. Prior to beginning the focus group, the researcher had all participants electronically sign a consent form (see Appendix E). The researcher followed the same procedures as outlined above for individual interviews (video recording), and the researcher limited the focus group to a one-hour time frame.

The focus group questions were designed using the premise that focus groups are well suited for broad, exploratory research (Stewart et al., 2009). Additionally, the focus group interview questions were aimed at obtaining general information regarding stakeholders in school climate and generating new ideas for improving the school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary School.

**Focus Group Interview Questions**

1) Please introduce yourself to the group, including your number of years teaching in general and at this school.

2) Describe your definition of school climate.

3) How can administrators support school climate?

4) How can teachers support school climate?

5) How can students support school climate?

6) How can other stakeholders (parents, community members, etc.) support school climate?

7) Describe the school climate at your school.

8) What factors do you feel impact school climate at your school?
9) On a scale of one (lowest) to ten (highest), how would you rate the school climate at your school? In other words, how happy do people seem at work every day?

10) Think back to the past three years. Has the school climate improved, worsened, or remained the same?

11) What can the teachers do to improve the school climate at your school?

12) What can the leaders do to improve the school climate at your school?

13) What else can be done at your school to improve school climate?

Question one allowed the researcher to gather background information on the participants in the focus group and introduce all participants to each other (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Question two addressed the research question in a broad manner to allow for the participants to give personal feedback and explain their positions (Stewart et al., 2009). Questions three, four, five, and six allowed the researcher to gather information regarding the participants’ perspectives on each of the involved stakeholders that surround school climate (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015; Thapa et al., 2013). Questions seven, eight, nine and ten allowed the researcher to gather specific data on how the teachers in the focus group describe school climate within Yellow Lane Elementary and created a whole picture of the school climate from the focus group (Dutta & Sahney, 2016; Magnusson & Marecek, 2015; Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014; Voight & Nation, 2016). Lastly, question eleven, twelve, and thirteen emphasized the fact that the researcher wanted to know specifics on what the teachers feel can be done to improve school climate within their specific school (Magnusson & Mareck, 2015).

Focus group data was analyzed in the same format that the interview data was analyzed. Once the data was transcribed, the researcher used the coding and memoing software similar to the interviews. Once this was completed, the researcher used the coded focus group data to
allow for the development of themes, which were different from the interview themes. The researcher analyzed the data through inductive reasoning to allow for conclusions to be made of the teachers’ perceptions of school climate.

**Survey**

The third sub-question for this study explored how quantitative survey data informed the problem of negative perceptions of school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school located in central Virginia. The researcher administered the Revised School Level Environment Questionnaire (R-SLEQ) to all certified teachers at the school identified in the setting and participants’ sections above. The R-SLEQ is a revised version of the original School Level Environment Questionnaire, created as a method to determine school climate on a variety of domains. The R-SLEQ (Appendix A) consisted of 21 items in five scales: collaboration, decision making, instructional innovation, student relations, and school resources (Johnson et al., 2007). Questions were presented in a Likert scale format in which participants rated their level of agreement from strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree (Gall et al., 2007). Johnson et al. (2007) determined the validity and reliability of the R-SLEQ with an overall school climate alpha of .90, and the five domain alphas ranged from 0.77 to 0.86, proving it to be a valid and reliable instrument to measure school climate. The data collected from this survey allowed for an overall school climate rating, as well as individual domain ratings, as perceived by the teachers to be made by the researcher. This will formulate answers to the central question, as well as sub-question three.

The survey was administered through an online format. The researcher formatted the test questions (see Appendix F) into Google Forms and sent out the survey through secure email to
all certified teachers at the school. The survey remained open for a four-week period and follow-up emails occurred after one week and two weeks in attempt to meet the required 30 participants as outlined by Liberty University. The survey was administered in the spring academic semester. Given that the survey was administered in an online format through a secure link, no data storage techniques at the school were required. Data was stored and monitored through a password-protected spreadsheet format that only the researcher could access.

Prior to any questions appearing on the form, the consent form had to be acknowledged by the participant (see Appendix F). For this portion of the study, the consent form appeared prior to any questions on the online form. No identifying information was collected from survey participants, and the researcher saw the results in a spreadsheet format where each response was assigned a number. Questions appeared in the order and format noted in Appendix G on one screen after they have acknowledged the consent form. The survey should have taken participants approximately 15 minutes to complete, and participants were encouraged to take the survey when they had enough time to answer the questions, without basis from anyone or anything.

After quantitative data collection was complete, the researcher analyzed the quantitative data collected using an online survey through IBM SPSS statistical software (Warner, 2013). The researcher analyzed descriptive statistics to gather the frequency and percentage for each question and corresponding domains. The data was displayed using tables that list the five domains identified in the survey and the average for each domain. This analysis allowed for the researcher to gather an overall picture of the teacher’s perceptions of school climate and to identify factors that could potentially have a negative impact on the school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary School.
Ethical Considerations

As mentioned, the researcher was employed by the school division during this study; therefore, precautions were taken to ensure that participants in the study cannot be identified and remained confidential. The data collected throughout this study was only used for the purpose of answering the identified research questions and providing a possible solution to the issue of negative school climate. Information provided by participants was not shared with any supervisors and did not impact any employment within the school division. Furthermore, all identifying information was removed from all parts of the study, and pseudonyms were used to ensure that participants (both individuals and the schools) were not identified. Data was collected and stored through secure online formats that are password-protected and only accessible by the researcher. Data collected through the videotaped interviews was stored on a password-protected drive and individual footage was not shared with anyone. Only data that has been transcribed and coded has been shared within the context of this study.

As an educator and a doctoral student, it was important for the researcher to identify bias that may occur with the strong connection and passion towards this topic. The researcher adhered to the guidelines set forth through the data collection procedures to ensure that bias or individual experience did not impact the collection or interpretation of the data. Through the use of multiple methods, however, the researcher was able to triangulate the data and help prevent individual bias from occurring (Gall et al., 2007). The researcher followed all of the Liberty University guidelines for the dissertation and study, which included observing the Liberty University applied dissertation template and dissertation handbook.
Summary

This chapter presented the research methodology for the study titled *Improving Teacher Perceptions of School Climate in Low Income Schools*. The purpose of this study was to explore the school climate at a low income school through the teachers’ perceptions and develop possible solutions to the issue. The central question of the study was “How can teacher perception of school climate be improved at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school located in central Virginia.”

Using a multimethod approach, the researcher collected and analyzed both qualitative (interviews and a focus group) and quantitative (survey) data surrounding teachers’ perceptions of school climate at a low income school. The researcher utilized interviews, focus group, and survey administration, which allowed for an in-depth understanding of school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary School. Data analysis occurred after data collection and included transcription and coding, which allowed for themes to emerge. The researcher also noted ethical considerations of the study prior to, during, and after data collection occurred.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this applied research study was to analyze the school climate of a low income school to determine factors that impact the school climate and to provide suggestions to assist with the problem of how to improve negative school climate in low income schools. This chapter details the data that was collected by the researcher through interviews, a focus group, and a survey, as well as a summary of the participants. The researcher used coding to determine themes that emerged across the research. The findings are illustrated in the corresponding tables and detailed throughout this chapter. Overall themes of this data were the need for positivity, the importance of building strong relationships, the impact of the physical building, and inconsistency with leadership and decision making.

Participants

The researcher used purposeful sampling for qualitative methods and convenience sampling for the quantitative method. All participants were required to be a certified teacher at Yellow Lane Elementary School. For qualitative methods (interview and focus group), participants had to be a certified teacher at Yellow Lane Elementary School for at least three consecutive years. A total of 41 participants were included in this study and all participants met the criteria for at least one part of the study. Participants in the interviews and focus group were assigned a pseudonym so that participation remained confidential. Demographic data was collected for each interview participant to assist with the data analysis process.

Interview Participants

A total of six participants participated in the one-on-one interviews. At the time that IRB approval was granted for this study, schools were mandated to shut down due to the ongoing
COVID-19 Pandemic. Therefore, due to safety, the researcher completed all interviews via Zoom, an online video conferencing tool. All interview sessions were password-protected for confidentiality and recorded using the webcam on the researcher’s computer. A second iPad device was set up for audio recording in the event of any technology failures. For all interviews and the focus group, the researcher was in a private location with others not around, and all interview participants were located in their respective homes. All six participants had been a teacher at Yellow Lane Elementary for at least three years. The average years of experience between the six teachers was 20. The demographics of the interview participants are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics of Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Total Years of Experience</th>
<th>Years at Yellow Lane</th>
<th>Years at Another School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher One</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Two</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Three</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Four</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Five</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Six</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Teacher One.** The first interview participant was Teacher One, who was a third grade teacher at Yellow Lane. Teacher One had taught at Yellow Lane for 15 years (12 of those years she was a first grade teacher), and prior to that, she taught three years at a low income school in another division. Teacher One described her route to teaching as “an interesting adventure,” as
her undergraduate degree is in fashion merchandising, but then she decided after graduating that she wanted to be a teacher. She described her teaching style as “expressive and silly,” but when asked about her teaching philosophy, she stated that in the classroom she “uses data to drive instructional decisions” and “tries to make the environment fun while challenging with the end goal in mind of where they [the students] need to go.” Teacher One described school climate as the “perceived atmosphere” and stated that it involved multiple parties in the school building.

**Teacher Two.** The second interview participant was Teacher Two, who was a second grade teacher at Yellow Lane. She had taught in second, third, and fourth grade at Yellow Lane for the past 14 years. Prior to teaching at Yellow Lane, she worked for another rural school division for five years, which brought her total years in education to 19. Teacher Two started her career as a social worker and went back to school later on to become a teacher because she “just always wanted to be a teacher.” Teacher Two described herself as a “benevolent dictator” in the classroom. She stated that her classroom was organized and productive, but at the same time, the students had the flexibility to do what worked best for them while maintaining high expectations for everyone in the classroom. Teacher Two described school climate as having many components and stated she felt lucky to work in OCPS because between her children attending schools and working as a teacher in the division, she had always had supportive administrators and central office staff that helped create positive environments for the students and staff.

**Teacher Three.** The third interview participant was Teacher Three, a special education teacher at Yellow Lane Elementary for 35 years. She stated that for her entire career she had taught at Yellow Lane and taught a variety of grade levels and content areas as a special education teacher over the years. Teacher Three credited a personal experience as the reason why she became a teacher and felt that as a teacher she is “all about the love and the fun.” She
shared that school climate is the “atmosphere from the moment you pull into the parking lot and walk into the building…it’s what’s on the walls…what are the adults’ faces looking like...what are the kids’ faces looking like?” She went on to explain that school climate to her not only includes the things you can see, but the things that you can feel in the building. Teacher Three explained that she has seen Yellow Lane through three different buildings and many administrators, but through it all, they remained a team, and she attributed that team attitude to all members of their team working together and caring about each other.

**Teacher Four.** The fourth interview participant was Teacher Four, a fifth grade teacher. Teacher Four represented the early career teachers, as this was her fifth year teaching. She had also taught first grade at Yellow Lane and recently switched to fifth grade. Teacher Four described herself as having a balanced approach of both structure and choice in the classroom and shared that she always knew she wanted to work with kids and enjoyed being able to teach kids things they did not know before and watch them grow. Teacher Four described school climate as the “mood or perception that a school has towards different school-related topics.” She believed that school climate can be positive or negative regarding different situations and shared that Yellow Lane does a great job of making sure everyone in the building is happy.

**Teacher Five.** The fifth interview participant was Teacher Five, a fifth grade teacher at Yellow Lane. Teacher Five had been a teacher at Yellow Lane for 15 years but had been teaching for 22 years total. She shared that she became a teacher because wanted to make a difference in kids’ lives. When asked about her teaching style in the classroom, Teacher Five shared that she tried to create a family atmosphere in the classroom and maintain high expectations for her students while developing a relaxed, student-oriented classroom. Teacher Five defined school climate as “the feel of the school when you walk into the building.”
also shared personal experiences that have helped create a more positive environment at Yellow Lane and attributed much of the positive climate to positive relationships between staff and students within the building.

**Teacher Six.** The sixth interview participant was Teacher Six, a second grade teacher at Yellow Lane. Teacher Six had been a teacher at Yellow Lane for nine years and with the division for 21 years total. Teacher Six was the only male in the group of interview participants and had taught at both the secondary and primary level. Teacher Six described his classroom as a place where children could be flexible with their thinking and seating to help make it a relaxed environment. He shared that he felt that today’s students are often under a lot of pressure and could be very nervous, so he tried to make his classroom as “non-threatening as possible while still setting [his] expectations extremely high” and was known for being “no-nonsense but still friendly.” Teacher Six believed that school climate is defined as the atmosphere of a school building and includes individual parts, but the overall climate is the feel of the building as a whole. He also shared that he felt school climate can have a huge impact on both the adults and the students in the building.

**Focus Group Participants**

The focus group consisted of three teachers from the interview participants: Teacher Three, Teacher Five, and Teacher Six. The group consisted of two females and one male, and they had an average of 26 years of teaching experience as a group. The participants appeared very familiar with each other and shared that they had all worked together in one capacity or another over the years they have been at Yellow Lane. The focus group was also completed using Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions, but all members were able to share and feed off of each other throughout the format of the focus group.
Survey Participants

The quantitative survey instrument was sent out via email to all certified teachers at Yellow Lane Elementary School. All teachers were invited to participate if they were employed by Yellow Lane for the 2019-2020 school year. An initial email was sent with the survey link, and two follow-up emails were sent to recruit enough participants for the survey. Out of 50 possible participants, 35 certified teachers participated in the survey (70% response rate). No demographic data was collected for the participants as it was not deemed necessary for the purpose of this research.

Results

The purpose of this applied research study was to solve the problem of negative school climate through the use of teacher perceptions at a low income school. For this applied study, a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used. Results from the study have been divided into three sub-questions as outlined in Chapter One. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six teachers to determine themes related to school climate at a Yellow Lane Elementary, a low income school in rural central Virginia. Several themes emerged from the analysis of the initial interviews. After completion of the interviews, the researcher conducted a focus group with three of the interview participants to determine further themes surrounding school climate. Finally, a quantitative survey was administered to inform the researcher of the school climate at Yellow Lane and suggest any areas for improvement within the school regarding school climate.

Sub-question 1

Sub-question one for this study was: “How would teachers in an interview solve the problem of negative perceptions of school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low
income school located in central Virginia?” Interviews were conducted with teachers via Zoom and recorded for transcription in order to find themes related to school climate. The researcher utilized open-ended questions to allow for participants to explain more when necessary and to be able to explain both the past and present with regards to school climate at Yellow Lane. The researcher then used NVivo, a software for qualitative research that allows for open-coding across multiple transcriptions. The codes and frequency of codes are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

*Frequency of Codes from Interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atmosphere/environment in building</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Expectations</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcoming environment</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student/staff needs</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admin has large impact</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical features</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student/staff needs</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several Components</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rumors/Gossip</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works hard/productive</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Together</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovative</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The researcher used the above codes to determine themes from the qualitative interviews. The codes were grouped together to show similarities in order to formulate themes. Table 3 displays the codes grouped into three themes.

Table 3

*Interview Codes Grouped into Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>Atmosphere</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Physical features</td>
<td>Equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Welcoming</td>
<td>Innovative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>Works hard</td>
<td>Organized</td>
<td>Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Together</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Several Comp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Team</td>
<td></td>
<td>Rumors/Gossip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Admin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Together</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were several themes, displayed in Table 3, that emerged from these qualitative interviews that can help explain both the positives and negatives regarding teacher perception of school climate at Yellow Lane. The use of open-ended questions was particularly beneficial as it became clear that many of the interview participants’ views of school climate have changed over the most recent school year. These themes encompassed the general views of school climate and the factors that impact them from the interview participants. As evident in these themes, there were staff members around the school who already felt that were happening and those who have experienced negative views in the past and offered suggestions on how to continue to improve.
The following themes were ordered based on frequency, not particular importance of one theme over another.

**Theme #1: Need for positivity.** The first theme that evolved across all interviews was the recognition of the need for positivity. It was evident to the participants that a positive attitude or a positive feeling is necessary across the school in order to increase school climate for both staff and students. The participants highlighted the idea that positive changes to mindsets around the school can help increase perceptions of school climate. The following statements highlight the feelings and effects of positivity from the participants.

**Teacher One:** “I think when we feel better, we do better. And you had asked me about my definition of school climate earlier, and it’s that feeling.”

**Teacher Two:** “I feel like ours is more positive, the overall atmosphere is positive, and the children respond to that.”

**Teacher Three:** “I truly believe that what makes [Yellow Lane] positive is that you feel, as an adult, supported by other adults. There’s no stupid question. There’s no fear in asking for help. And I think it just flows. And because it flows, the adults seem happy. So, in return, I truly believe that the kids become happy.”

**Teacher Four:** “I truly feel like students have to want to be at school to be more receptive to learn, so having a place that’s positive and inviting really makes them want to learn, or at least want to be there to hear what you’re saying.”

**Teacher Five:** “So certainly, when the climate is strong and positive within the school amongst adults, it’s more enjoyable to come to work when people aren’t negative and not wanting to be there. But even when things weren’t great as the school culture, it made me work even harder to make sure it was positive in my room.”
Teacher Six: “I think if kids come to school with a positive school climate, I would say that their academic learning will flourish or vice versa. Where on the flip side of that, in a negative school environment, where they are constantly worried about behaviors or they don’t feel safe or don’t even want to come to school, well then they’re missing out on important things.”

Among these interview participants, it was clear that creating a positive school environment can lead to happier students and staff. It was also evident that this positivity can and should come from everyone in the building. The quotes selected highlight the impact that a positive climate can have on student learning, as perceived by the teachers. Teachers two, three, four, and six all believed that their perception of a more positive environment can influence the students’ views of the environment, which led the researcher to the importance of positivity as a theme. Administrators, teachers, staff members, and students are all responsible for creating a positive environment where everyone feels respected, safe, and appreciated. Regardless of whether the environment is positive or negative, there is always room for improvement by all parties. Many of the participants encouraged teachers to use their positive attitude to help change the attitudes of the students in their classrooms.

Theme #2: Importance of relationships. The second theme that emerged from the interviews was the importance of relationships among staff members, parents, and students. All interview participants shared similar concerns or strengths regarding relationships. The following statements were shared by the participants and highlight their feelings towards the impact that positive relationships can have on a school climate.

Teacher One: “With the parents, I would say try early on to make a connection with them, to get them on board, and get them speaking positively about school with their
kids. With the kids, be demanding. Definitely have high expectations for what you want them to achieve, but also try to build a personal connection with them and insert some fun in the process.

**Teacher Two:** “Teachers working together…whether it’s planning together, discussing student concerns together, creating safe havens together…working together as colleagues is one aspect of it.”

**Teacher Three:** “I will say that there’s a sense of unity and a sense of family at [Yellow Lane]. But it’s almost like having a family that might be a little bit – well, they live in different areas…Be willing to get to know somebody, to find that positive quality, and to recognize them when they don’t have maybe a strong personality.”

**Teacher Four:** “I think we just have to work harder at building the relationships with the population of students we have…I think just because of some of the home challenges, we have to be more cognizant of that and just kind of use different things to make those relationships, find a way to connect to them, so that way they can see school as that positive place it is for them.”

**Teacher Five:** “Building relationships, strong relationships between everyone…I think teachers need to keep a positive attitude and not go down the rumor mill train. And teachers can build strong relationships with their colleagues and students, which would positively impact climate.

**Teacher Six:** “I think the teachers remembering why they’re there and who they’re here for is the number one thing. Making sure that teachers take an interest and…invest themselves as much in the school division and the children as they can.”
As outlined in Chapter Two, students in a low income school can present with a different set of challenges compared to students from higher income areas. The interview participants stated that finding ways to connect with their students and their families often helps with student engagement and interest in the classroom. The quotes shared above document varying aspects of building relationships that were important to the participants. Teachers two, three, and five shared the importance of relationships between staff members, while teachers one, four, and six felt that the relationships with the students were of utmost priority. These quotes frame and define the theme of building relationships, as they show the importance of every member of the school feeling connected and supported with each other. Different participants shared different views on which relationships were more important, but ultimately all of the relationships impacted their perception of school climate. Since teachers have the ability to impact school climate through their perceptions, it is vital that the teacher model building positive relationships within a classroom to help increase the positive impact on students (McGiboney, 2016; Williams et al., 2018).

**Theme #3: Impact of physical atmosphere.** The third theme that emerged from the interviews was the impact that the physical atmosphere of Yellow Lane has on school climate. For some of the participants, this greatly changed over the past year. The interview participants stressed the importance of school administrators to build a welcoming physical environment to help improve the overall feeling of the school, teachers, and students.

**Teacher One:** “This past year our school building has had such an overhaul. People were redistributed to different teams. The building was sort of redone. There were paintings put on the walls, furniture added. There were definitely clear efforts to make
the physical atmosphere project what they wanted the interactions to look like, so they
designed spaces that promoted community.”

**Teacher Three:** “Taking the physical environment and making it pleasant, making it
inviting…So as long as admin keeps looking for…a special spot to keep building it and
making it inviting…I think that it will all pull together.”

**Teacher Four:** “I think just because of the physical structure of our school that students
have a chance to get what they need no matter what level they are.”

**Teacher Five:** “We have not always had the consistency [with the environment]. And
that was frustrating when decisions were made, and we would be told one thing. And
then the next day or week, they were changed. And people were not always treated
equally. And that made the school climate much different because it almost pitted the
adults against each other.”

**Teacher Six:** “If you can make your teachers feel warm, feel welcome, and make them
feel like you truly do have their best interests like we’re trying to do for our kids, then
you will have huge impact on your staff.”

For many of the interview participants, the physical features of the building were a vital
aspect of improving their perception of school climate. The participants echoed previous
research that school climate is impacted by physical characteristics (Voight & Nation, 2016).
However, for some participants it was about more than the physical environment, it was more
about the impact that caring can have on the staff. Based on the above quotes, it may not have
been that the participants were impacted by the physical features, but more about the idea that
someone cared enough to make these physical changes for the building. This idea is supported
by the quotes shared from teachers five and six, who shared the impact that physical features have on their feelings towards the administrators and the school.

Sub-question 2

Sub-question 2 for this study was: “How would teachers in a focus group solve the problem of negative perceptions of school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school located in central Virginia?” A focus group was conducted with three participants via Zoom and recorded for transcription purposes. The participants were three teachers who participated in one-on-one interviews: Teacher Three, Teacher Five, and Teacher Six. The researcher asked open-ended questions and allowed participants to engage in dialogue between the group participants prior to asking follow up questions. The researcher used the same format as the interviews and used NVivo to discover codes and possible themes. The codes and their frequencies are listed in Table 4.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building relationships</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive mindset</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of needs</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring about others</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atmosphere</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple stakeholders</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe space</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical features</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After the data was analyzed, the codes appeared to be very similar to those in the individual interviews. Despite the overlap, there were several themes that were worth analyzing due to the nature of a focus group versus individual interviews, as these codes allowed for further support of evidence mentioned in interviews. The researcher used the codes to help develop corresponding themes to summarize the main ideas presented throughout the focus group. These themes are important to understanding the dimensions that the participants use to determine their perceptions of school climate. While many of the codes were positively worded in nature, a few of the codes represent negative views of school climate. Table 5 lists the codes from the focus group data grouped into themes.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Codes Grouped into Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme #1: Building relationships.** All participants of the focus group detailed the importance of building relationships in a school climate, especially given the background of many of the students at their school. The participants agreed that building strong relationships is the foundation of their school climate at Yellow Lane. The participants also stressed the importance of everyone building relationships, regardless of position or title. They shared that
this was key to the creation of a family atmosphere. The following statements were shared by participants when asked what different stakeholders could do to help improve school climate. The statements are listed in the order in which they were stated during the focus group.

**Teacher Five:** “I think a key word for all three groups is building relationships, all of the relationships that you have in the building. So, adults…admin [administrators] can do it by building strong relationships. Teachers can do it by building strong relationships, and students can do it by building strong relationships.”

**Teacher Six:** “That one word [relationships] does bring the whole pyramid together.”

**Teacher Three:** “You have admin, you have teachers. In my opinion, I would love for all those titles to go away and we become adults and kids. And everybody build relationships together.”

These quotes continue to highlight the importance that relationships have on the way the interview participants view school climate. For teachers five and six, building relationships was a key word in school climate, while teacher three felt that relationships were important but they should not be labeled between parties. For the researcher, these quotes framed the impact that relationships can have on school climate. Without positive relationships within a building, the school climate has the potential to suffer negatively.

**Theme #2: Inconsistent.** The second theme that became evident in the focus group was inconsistency. One of the focus group questions asked participants to reflect on how school climate has changed over the past three years. The participants of the focus group described the inconsistency that Yellow Lane has experienced and explained how they have grown from that. For the participants, the inconsistency often created boundaries and made it difficult for them to feel as though they were supported by their administration. The group shared that the current
year school has brought changes that have been positive. They credited much of the increase in school climate to the consistency that their current team had, which previous years may have lacked.

**Teacher Six:** “There’s a line drawn down the middle and you’re like, ‘Well, I don’t know who to listen to.’ Or getting told one thing one month and then getting told another thing another month and it was just inconsistent.

**Teacher Three:** “It could be anybody…you just never knew, and I know I ended up being [working] with one administrator and sticking with that one.”

**Teacher Five:** [On reflecting on the administration changes] “In the 15 years I have been at [Yellow Lane] …we’ve probably had 10 different adults.”

For the focus group participants, inconsistency is a key factor that has negatively impacted their view of school climate. For teacher five, the inconsistency was felt with the number of administrators that they have had over the years at Yellow Lane, while teachers three and six felt the inconsistency between the administrators themselves. When teachers can visibly see or feel the tension between administrators, it can create an environment where they are distant from others around the school. These quotes summarize the impact that school administrators’ personalities and styles can have both positively and negatively on a school climate

**Sub-question 3**

Sub-question 3 for this study was: “How would quantitative survey data inform the problem of negative perceptions of school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school located in central Virginia?” A quantitative survey was sent out to all certified teachers at Yellow Lane Elementary School to gather an overall picture of school climate and
determine possible themes from areas the domains teachers rated higher or lower. The researcher received 35 responses, out of the 50 administered, which is a 70% response rate for the survey. The researcher used the Revised School Level Environment Questionnaire (RSLEQ) (Johnson et al., 2007). The RSLEQ is divided into five domains of school climate: collaboration, student relations, school resources, decision making, and instructional innovation. The survey contained 21 questions and is on a Likert scale format in which questions were rated from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Appendix G). Survey questions were formatted with both positive and negative connotations. Table 6 displays the frequency and average of responses for each survey question as organized by the five domains.

Table 6

Frequency and Average of Survey Results Listed by Domains

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaboration</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers design instructional programs together</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good teamwork is not emphasized enough at my school.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom instruction is rarely coordinated across teachers.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have regular opportunities to work with other teachers.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I seldom discuss the needs of individual students with other teachers.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>65.7%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is good communication among teachers.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Relations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most students are well-mannered and respectful to the school staff.</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students in this school are well behaved.</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>65.7%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most students are helpful and cooperative with teachers.</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most students are motivated to learn.</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>77.1%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Resources</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructional equipment is not consistently accessible.</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video equipment, tapes and films are readily available.</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The supply of equipment and resources is not adequate.</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school library has sufficient resources and materials.</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision Making</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are frequently asked to participate in decisions.</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>54.2%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisions about the school are made by the principal.</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have very little to say in the running of the school.</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Innovation</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>23</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New and different ideas are always being tried out.</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>65.7%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New courses or curriculum materials are seldom implemented.</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teachers in this school are innovative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>26</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>74.3%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We are willing to try new teaching approaches in my school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>23</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>65.7%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By examining the numbers in each domain, this led to possible suggestions to a solution regarding different reasons why teachers may perceive a school climate as negative in a low income school.

**Theme #1: Inconsistent teacher input.** The data was analyzed by domains and the domain of decision-making stood out due to the high number of responses in the neutral category. This category contains questions regarding the amount of teacher input in decision-making by the school administration. The survey results indicate that this domain when compared to the others had the largest number of participants that were unable to determine that they either “agreed” or “disagreed” with the statements (see Figure 2). This may be an indicator that including teachers more in building-level decisions could help improve perception of school climate by teachers in low income schools. The results of the survey indicated that teachers feel that most decisions are made by the building principal (65.7%, agree or strongly agree) and that 26.2% of participants feel that teachers are not asked frequently to participate in decisions.
Figure 2. Average Neutral Responses per Domain

**Theme #2: Student behavior increases school climate.** The second theme that can be gathered from the survey responses was the connection between student behavior and school climate. 71.5% of participants felt that most students were well-mannered and respectful, and 65.7% of participants felt that students in the school were well-behaved. In addition, 80% of participants believe that students are motivated to learn and that students are helpful and cooperative with teachers. These numbers indicate that despite the population of students that Yellow Lane serves, perceptions towards students and their behaviors can be positive and overall teachers’ views of school climate are not impacted negatively due to the students’ behaviors at this time.

**Discussion**

School climate has become of increased importance to school leaders and educators over the past three decades (Thapa et al., 2013). Chapter Two explored and examined the literature surrounding school climate, including theories and factors that encompass school climate within a building, which was vital to the study of improving school climate at a low income school in rural central Virginia. Through teacher interviews, a focus group, and survey data, the school
climate and factors that surround the school was informed and analyzed, which is supported by current research.

**Theoretical Literature**

The theoretical framework for this applied study was Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST) and the Authoritative School Climate (ASC) theory. The data analyzed in this chapter both confirm and support these theoretical theories. One theme that emerged in the interviews and focus group was the importance of building strong, positive relationships within the school. Teachers shared that this can be challenging due to the population of students that are served in a low income school. Students come from a variety of backgrounds and have a large range of outside influences that can all manifest themselves differently in a school setting.

A foundational component of EST, these experiences were echoed by teachers throughout the interviews. Participants shared the importance of working harder to create relationships with students because some may have negative perceptions of school due to parents or may have other struggles that are taking away from their ability to learn, such as lack of food or basic human needs. In order to understand school climate, research must understand and take into consideration the variety of environments that students and adults bring into a building (Burns et al., 2015). This research highlighted the importance of these factors when teachers were asked to describe the school climate within their building.

In addition to EST, Authoritative School Climate (ASC) was another theoretical basis for this research study. ASC is a model that has proven the importance and benefits of having a consistent and positive school climate for students and staff (Huang & Cornell, 2018; Huang et al., 2016). In this model, all students are held to high and clear expectations, which helps create a positive environment for the school, where students and staff feel cared for and supported.
Interview and focus group participants detailed the importance and positive benefits that having clear and high expectations for one another can have on their view of school climate. Participants in the focus group shared that when administrators hold everyone to high expectations and are clear and fair in the follow-through of those expectations, staff respects the administration more and feels more genuine about them. Furthermore, survey data showed positive results regarding collaboration and relationship building, an underlying component of ASC (Berg & Cornell, 2015; Heilbrun et al., 2018; Huang & Cornell, 2018).

**Empirical Literature**

Much of the empirical literature surrounding school climate highlighted the understanding that school climate is not a singular unit and is instead made up of multiple components (McGiboney, 2016; Thapa et al., 2013; VanLone et al., 2019; Voight & Nation, 2016; Wang & Degol, 2016). The data analyzed in this research study further echoed the importance of looking at school climate through multiple lenses. Survey data informed that while parts of the school climate are higher (collaboration and innovation), other sections might need to be the focus (decision-making), in order to have an overall higher rating of school climate. Previous research also demonstrated the impact that the type, size, and population of a school can have on teachers’ perspectives on school climate (Lee & Quek, 2018; Lezha, 2017; Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014; Wong, 2017). In this research study, themes confirmed the impact that physical appearance can have on the school climate. Participants spoke highly of the positive physical changes of the building over the past year and the impact of those changes on their perceptions of school climate, a component of school climate research that has been highly supported (Lee & Quek, 2018; Lezha, 2017; McGiboney, 2016; McLean et al, 2017; Rudasill et al., 2018; Sulak, 2018, Thapa et al., 2013).
This study extended prior research in that it supports the continued need for understanding teacher perspective of school climate within a building. Through analyzed data, it is evident that while many have similar ideas about what creates school climate, there are also varying ideas about what school climate actually is to the participants. Some of the participants described school climate as the environment and “overall feel” of the school, while some referred to it more as “what’s on the walls” and the “physical look” of the school. Previous research (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Anderson, 1982; Chirkina & Khavenson, 2018; Sulak, 2018; Wang & Degol, 2016), as well as this research study, focused on the importance of leaders understanding school climate in their buildings, both the controllable and uncontrollable factors, in order to help facilitate and create an environment that is positive for staff and students.

**Summary**

This chapter provided a detailed description of the data gathered for understanding the teacher perception of school climate in a low income school. The data was collected and analyzed in three corresponding sections: six one-on-one teacher interviews, one teacher focus group, and a quantitative survey administered to 35 certified teachers. Themes that emerged from the interviews and focus group included the need for positivity, importance of building relationships, impact of the physical building, and inconsistency. This data documented the importance of understanding school climate and shed light on the variety of factors that teachers use to determine their perception of school climate. Chapter Five will present a proposed solution to the problem of negative teacher perception of school climate at low income schools.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

This applied research study sought to inform the problem of negative school climate at low income schools. Previous research has connected school climate to a variety of factors around a school building (Bear et al., 2014; Lenzi et al., 2017; Meristo & Eisenschmidt; VanLone et al., 2019), but further research should focus on the impact of specific types of schools and populations on teachers and how they create their views of school climate. Therefore, this research study used qualitative and quantitative methods to study a low income school and determine how to improve the school climate. The gathered data was analyzed, and displayed similar themes from participants. This chapter will restate the problem and then propose a solution to the researcher’s central question. The remainder of the chapter will explain the resources and funds needed, as well as the roles and timeline for the solution.

Restatement of the Problem

The problem driven by this research study was that much of the research surrounding school climate documented the positive results of a positive school climate but failed to detail the factors surrounding school climate that are controllable and uncontrollable that teachers use to determine their perception of school climate. This research study focused on comprehensively measuring the school climate of a low income school through the teacher standpoint to gather and understand factors that impact school climate in an effort to provide leaders with areas to focus on within their schools. A multimethod approach was utilized to gather data including qualitative interviews and a focus group, as well as a quantitative survey. Together, these informed the problem of negative school climate and provided possible suggestions for how to increase the school climate through a proposed solution.
Proposed Solution to the Central Question

The central question of this research study was: “How can teacher perception of school climate be improved at Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school located in central Virginia?” After analysis of the data presented in Chapter Four, it is evident that the school climate has improved at Yellow Lane over the past five years, but it is also clear that there is still room for improvement. Therefore, the following solution has been proposed to help improve the teacher perception of school climate.

The data suggested that including teacher input could be a valuable resource to improving school climate at Yellow Lane. Results of the quantitative survey indicated that many teachers felt they were not included, or unable to completely agree that they were included, in building-level decisions. To improve school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary, the principal should consider supporting the creation of a Principal’s Advisory Council. This council would include teachers of varying experience levels and representatives across grade levels whose mission would be to create experiences and opportunities to increase teacher input and buy-in around the school. The first goal of this council should be to come to a consensus about the dimensions that impact school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary. Interview and focus group data support the notion that teachers across the building have varying ideas of the dimensions of school climate. While there is no universal standard on defining school climate (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Dan & Ye, 2020; Wang & Degol, 2016), it would be beneficial for the members of the council to define what school climate is at Yellow Lane in order to help improve it. This should allow for teachers and administration to have a clearer picture of school climate, which can improve aspects of teaching and learning for both staff and students (Cohen et al., 2009; Gray et al., 2017; McGiboney, 2016; White et al., 2014).
Another goal of this council should be to identify areas in which the teachers and administration can work together to make decisions when appropriate. Multiple researchers support the idea that including teacher input in school climate matters as well as instructional decisions will help increase school climate as it helps increase feelings of connectedness (Gray et al., 2017; In et al., 2019; Loukas et al., 2006; Malloy et al., 2014; McGiboney, 2016; Thapa et al., 2013). By including teachers in decisions, this should allow for more ownership over decision-making and initiatives throughout the school.

The third goal of the council should be to create areas and times dedicated to building and reinforcing relationships and positivity throughout the school. Throughout the data analysis, it became very evident that building relationships and maintaining positivity was an integral part of the school climate at Yellow Lane for teachers. It was noted that relationships were made throughout the school with students and adults, but not necessarily adults with other adults. The theme of building positive relationships throughout the school emerged and can be solved through the addition of time into the schedule for social-emotional health and areas that encourage this behavior. Increased positive relationships within a building can lead to increased results in achievement and job efficacy (Collie et al., 2012; Lenzi et al., 2017; Malinen & Savolainen, 2016; Quin, 2017; Thapa et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2019). The council should determine ways to encourage collaboration across grade levels with the inclusion of buddy classrooms. In order to do this, a dedicated time needs to be built into the master schedule to encourage collaboration, relationship building, and positivity. Possible solutions could be alternating lunch shifts so that students of different classes and grade levels could eat together or switching recess times to allow for unstructured time between grade levels. Another key aspect of the council should be to find ways to encourage staff relationship-building, both
inside and outside of school. Increased levels of staff positive relationships can lead to positive school climate impacts (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Dutta & Sahney, 2016; La Salle, 2018; Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018). One possible suggestion would include recess and/or lunch coverage for staff members so that they are able to have an additional time to work together. It is vital to the success of this council that options are not determined solely by administration as that takes away the teacher choice in decision-making aspects of the council. The council would present to fellow colleagues their findings or decisions so that all teachers and staff members feel supported and part of the school climate.

**Resources Needed**

The two main resources needed for this project are time and willing teachers. Teachers’ days are already packed full, and several interview participants highlighted the fact that current administration has given them back some time by alleviating requirements for after-school activities. However, this council has the potential to improve school climate, so members of the committee should be dedicated to providing the additional time necessary for a successful council. Furthermore, the administration would have to recruit willing teachers to serve on this council. In addition to the principal and assistant principal, there should be two representatives from the primary grades (PK-2), two representatives from upper elementary (3-5), and two representatives from specialty teams (interventionists, resource teachers, special education teachers) to allow for a diverse group of teachers. The group should be no more than six individuals at a time and individuals in the group should serve one year on the council to allow other members to participate in the group in future years. In order to recruit willing participants, the principal will have to be flexible with the time needed to meet as well as allow for changes in the schedule for additional time for relationship-building or whole school activities. Potential
barriers could include lack of interest in participating in the council and time constraints needed in the schedule for other academic areas.

**Funds Needed**

Initially, there will be very little funds needed for the solution as money is not a requirement to start the Principal’s Advisory Council. However, the council may come up with ideas that would require funds for either the students or the staff members. Funds would not be required for ideas such as recess and lunch coverage, but time would be needed from administrators for coverage. Ideas with buddy classrooms may also require funds if resources are needed to complete projects to improve the school together. Funds would need to come from existing budget lines. However, the division is very supportive of new initiatives and ideas to help improve school climate overall; therefore, the funds should not be an issue as long as the ideas created by the council are reasonable. Potential barriers include lack of funding from the school, which then may require additional support, such as funds from the Parent Teacher Association or outside fundraising.

**Roles and Responsibilities**

In order to assist with the improvement of school climate at Yellow Lane Elementary, it is recommended that the principal support the creation of an advisory council made up of teachers from the school. The role of the Principal’s Advisory Council will be to develop a consistent definition of school climate and the dimensions that impact school climate at Yellow Lane. The council’s role will also be to determine, in conjunction with school administration, areas of the school’s curriculum and operations that are able to be decisions that can be made as a group, versus singularly. It will also be the responsibility of the council to provide the staff with any necessary updates and keep them informed of school climate improvement efforts.
Each council member will be responsible for speaking with their departments prior to and after any meeting since they are representing a certain group of the school. At the initial meeting, the council should also assign any specific roles that are deemed necessary (i.e. secretary, timekeeper). If any projects or improvements come out of the council, it will be the responsibility of the council members to delegate and disseminate that project to the appropriate parties.

**Timeline**

The creation and initial stages of the Principal’s Advisory Council would occur over a five month timeframe; however, the council should be ongoing once created (see Appendix H). First, the principal would need to share with the staff information about the council and its purpose. The groups would select the representatives for the council and share with the principal. Once the council is formed, the first meeting should be held, and responsibilities should be established. After the initial meeting, the council members should continuously keep other staff members updated regarding the decisions and discussions of the council in an effort to increase feelings of teachers being an active member of the building-level decision-making process. After several months, the council will present the findings to the entire staff and begin working on any projects that can be conducted throughout the building.

**Solution Implications**

School climate is a vital component of any school and should be analyzed by administrators in order to have a better understanding of their school. Implications of the advisory council could be both positive and negative. Positive implications include the rise in a common understanding of school climate, as well as a rise in the overall school climate. The resources and funds needed for this solution are very limited; therefore, this is a low-risk
opportunity for the school to potentially improve its climate. The roles and responsibilities of the council allow for more teacher leadership opportunities throughout the building.

Potential negative implications include the addition of time and resources for both the administration and the teachers. While the needed resources should be limited, it will also add another meeting for the teachers who are participating. Therefore, teachers should only be on the council if they are willing and able to dedicate the time in order for it to be effective. Another potential negative implication is the potential political aspect that the council could bring into the school. If implemented well, the council could be very beneficial to the school climate. However, if the suggestions of the council are not taken into consideration the council could become ineffective and in turn have a negative impact on the climate. People could feel that their time and opinions in the council are not valued or appreciated. Possible pitfalls also include the time that is taken away from something else in the schedule in order to add in a dedicated relationship-building time to the daily or weekly schedule. Depending on the initiatives that the council develops, money could be a limitation, or at least a barrier that will need to be overcome. However, the potential positives of this solution outweigh the negatives both at the administrative, teacher, and school level.

**Evaluation Plan**

School climate can have an extremely positive impact on schools when analyzed and monitored by school leaders (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Chirkina & Khavenson, 2018; Dutta & Sahney, 2015; Lee & Quek, 2018; Malinen & Savolainen, 2016; McGiboney, 2016; Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014; von der Embse et al., 2016). Informal conversations with the members of the council would be helpful to determine the effectiveness as the council gets started. To evaluate the long-term effectiveness of the Principal’s Advisory Council, the principal should
administer the Revised School Level Environment Questionnaire to certified teachers a year after the initial survey. This would allow the school leaders to see any growth in the five domains of school climate as outlined by Johnson et al. (2007). The data should be analyzed using the parameters this study, which included frequency of answers for each question. A comparison should be made between the responses from this study and the new responses to see if there was growth in one direction or the other depending on the question.

Limitations of this study include the small sample size of both the participants of the interviews and focus group, as well as the survey. A delimitation of this study was the use of only one school for this research. While this was purposeful due to the nature of applied research, it limits the scope at which the results can be applied. Future research should focus on continuing research on low income schools and the challenges they may pose to the teachers and students. School climate research needs to have a continued focus on the impact that teachers have on school climate and how their perceptions impact the school and students. Low income schools may present with a different set of challenges that require teachers to look at things from a different viewpoint. Additionally, research should look back at studies, similar to this one, in which school climate was measured, and reevaluate to see if the school climate has improved as a result of initiatives or interventions.

**Summary**

School climate has grown in importance and understanding over the recent decades. This multimethod applied research study analyzed the central question of how teacher perception of school climate can be improved at a Yellow Lane Elementary School, a low income school in central Virginia. This study utilized both qualitative and quantitative research methods to inform the problem and understand themes related to the dimension of school climate at Yellow Lane.
Teacher interviews and a focus group revealed common themes among perceptions, and a survey further informed the problem. A solution was proposed to help increase teacher input and build stronger relationships throughout the building to allow for school climate to improve. This solution allowed for valuable teacher leadership and support throughout the building. Through this research study and proposed solution, Yellow Lane has the opportunity to help improve school climate and allow for more positive relationships between teachers, students, and administrators.
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doi:10.3390/ijerph121012505
December 10, 2019

Bethany Straub
Doctoral Student
Liberty University

Dear Bethany Straub:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Improving Perceptions of School Climate in Low Income Schools: An Applied Study, I have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at [redacted] Elementary at [redacted] County Public Schools.

Sincerely,

[redacted]
Division Superintendent
[redacted] County Public Schools
December 9, 2019

Bethany Straub
Doctoral Student
Liberty University

Dear Bethany Straub:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Improving Perceptions of School Climate in Low Income Schools: An Applied Study, I have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at [Redacted] Elementary at [Redacted] County Public Schools.

Sincerely,

[Redacted]
Principal
[Redacted] Elementary School
APPENDIX C

IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 6, 2020

Bethany Straub
IRB Exemption 4196.030620: Improving Perceptions of School Climate in Low Income Schools: An Applied Study

Dear Bethany Straub,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHCP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

[Name]
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971
APPENDIX D

Interview Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 3/6/2020 to -- Protocol # 4196.030620

CONSENT FORM

Improving Teacher Perceptions of School Climate in Low Income Schools: An Applied Study
Bethany Straub
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on teacher perceptions of school climate in low income schools. You were selected as a possible participant, because you are 18 years of age or older, employed as a certified teacher at [Redacted] Elementary School, and have taught for three or more years at the school. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Bethany Straub, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to find ways to help improve teacher perceptions of school climate in low income schools, using teacher input through the use of survey data, interviews, and a focus group.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do following:
1. Participate in a recorded interview. The interview will take approximately about one hour of your time. The interview will be audio recorded by the researcher.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Possible benefits to society include the additional research regarding the importance and impact of school climate, as well as potential solutions to negative school climate that could be used by school leaders.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.

☐ Participants who participate in the interviews will be assigned a pseudonym so that their identity will remain anonymous to others. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations.

- Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Conflicts of Interest Disclosure: The researcher serves as an administrator at ______________. Participation in the interviews will be confidential to the participants and the researcher. Pseudonyms will be used so that participants’ identities remain confidential. Participation will not impact your employment in any manner. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate in this study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or ______________. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Bethany Straub. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at ______________ or ______________. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty chair, Dr. James Swezey, at ______________.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

______________________________       ________________________
Signature of Participant                      Date

______________________________       ________________________
Signature of Investigator                      Date
APPENDIX E

Focus Group Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 3/6/2020 to --
Protocol# 4196:030620

CONSENT FORM
Improving Teacher Perceptions of School Climate in Low Income Schools: An Applied Study
Bethany Straub
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on teacher perceptions of school climate in low income schools. You were selected as a possible participant because you are 18 years of age or older, employed as a certified teacher at Elementary School, and have taught for three or more years at the school. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Bethany Straub, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to find ways to help improve teacher perceptions of school climate in low income schools, using teacher input through the use of survey data, interviews, and a focus group.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Participate in a focus group. The focus group will take approximately one hour of your time. The focus group will be audio recorded by the researcher.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Possible benefits to society include the additional research regarding the importance and impact of school climate, as well as potential solutions to negative school climate that could be used by school leaders.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.

- Participants who participate in the focus group will be assigned a pseudonym so that their identity will remain anonymous to others. I will conduct the focus group in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations.
- The focus group will be audio recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- While I can assure that confidentiality will be maintained during the focus group from the researcher, I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Conflicts of Interest Disclosure: The researcher serves as an administrator at [redacted] Public Schools. Participation in the focus group will be confidential to the participants and the researcher. Pseudonyms will be used so that participants' identities remain confidential. Participation will not impact your employment in any manner. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate in this study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or [redacted] Public Schools. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the focus group portion of the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Bethany Straub. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [redacted] or [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. James Swezey, at [redacted].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at brc@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant ___________________________ Date ________

Signature of Investigator ___________________________ Date ________
APPENDIX F

Survey Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 3/6/2020 to -- Protocol# 4196.030620

CONSENT FORM
Improving Teacher Perceptions of School Climate in Low Income Schools: An Applied Study
Bethany Straub
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on teacher perceptions of school climate in low income schools. You were selected as a possible participant because you are 18 years of age or older, employed as a certified teacher at [Redacted], Elementary School, and have taught for three or more years at the school. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Bethany Straub, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to find ways to help improve teacher perceptions of school climate in low income schools, using teacher input through the use of survey data, interviews, and a focus group.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following:
1. Participate in an anonymous survey online. The survey will be administered through Google Forms and take approximately 15 minutes of your time.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Possible benefits to society include the additional research regarding the importance and impact of school climate, as well as potential solutions to negative school climate that could be used by school leaders.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

☐ Participants in the survey will be anonymous.
☐ Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations.

Conflicts of Interest Disclosure: The researcher serves as an administrator at [Redacted] Public Schools. To limit potential conflicts, the survey will be anonymous, so the researcher will not know who participated. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship
will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate in this study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Public Schools. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to completing and submitting your survey without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please exit the survey and close your internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Bethany Straub. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [redacted] or [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty chair, Dr. James Swezey, at [redacted].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.
APPENDIX G

Quantitative Instrument

Revised School Level Environment Questionnaire (R-SLEQ) (Johnson, Stevens, and Zvoch, 2007).

**Instructions:** The following statements are to be considered in the context of the school in which you work and your actual working environment. Think about how well the statements describe your school environment. Indicate your answer by giving check marks in the most appropriate response.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  Teachers design instructional programs together</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2  Most students are -well-mannered and respectful to the school staff.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3  Instructional equipment is not consistently accessible.</td>
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<td>4  Teachers are frequently asked to participate in decisions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5  New and different ideas are always being tried out.</td>
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<td>6  There is good communication among teachers.</td>
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<td>7  Most students are helpful and cooperative with teachers.</td>
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<td>8  The school library has sufficient resources and materials.</td>
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<td>9  Decisions about the school are made by the principal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 New courses or curriculum materials are seldom implemented.</td>
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<td>11 I have regular opportunities to work with other teachers.</td>
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<td>12 Students in this school are well behaved.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Video equipment, tapes and films are readily available.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I have very little to say in the running of the school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>We are willing to new teaching approaches in my school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I seldom discuss the needs of individual students with other teachers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Most students are motivated to learn.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The supply of equipment and resources is not adequate.</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Teachers in this school are innovative.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Classroom instruction is rarely coordinated across teachers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Good teamwork is not emphasized enough at my school.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX H

Timeline of Implementation of Principal’s Advisory Council

- August 2020 – Principal sends out information regarding creation of Principal Advisory Council, discusses purpose of council at monthly faculty meeting
- September 2020 – Principal secures committee members
- September 2020 – Initial meeting is held, and responsibilities are established/assigned
- October 2020 – Second meeting is held where definition of school climate is solidified
- November 2020 – Third meeting is held where objective is to begin brainstorming decisions that can be made and ways to improve relationship building throughout the school; taken back to team members so additional feedback can be gathered
- December 2020 – Share out findings among group to finalize changes that can be made
- January 2021 – Committee members are responsible for presenting findings to staff members
- April 2021 – Survey staff using questionnaire to compare changes from previously connected data