

EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL
THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A SCHOOL-WIDE HOUSE SYSTEM:
A CASE STUDY

by

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School of Education, Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to explore the perceptions of school climate as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system for staff and students. The theories guiding this study were Maslow's theory of motivation and the theory of self-determination. The central research question for the study considers ways in which stakeholders, faculty, and staff implement a house system with the goal of creating a positive school climate. The intrinsic case study was situated at a middle school in southwest Virginia that had fully implemented a school-wide house system, and the sample consisted of five 8th graders, four staff members, and one administrator. The data collection incorporated an examination of physical artifacts, as well as individual interviews and journal prompts. An established survey given at the site was examined, but no quantitative analysis of the survey was done. The analysis of the data included transcription, and the development of patterns, themes, and codes. Data analysis also included observations, generous reading, summaries, and analytical memos. Cross-examination of themes and codes was also used, and logic models were used to help portray collected data. Finally, data was synthesized, and trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethics were considered. Five themes emerged from data analysis including holistic learning experiences, optimal learning environment, effective implementation of educational initiatives, cultivating a supportive community, and strategic alignment for sustainable progress. The data analysis and thematic findings suggest the implementation of a house system may increase positive perceptions of school climate.

Keywords: school climate, implementation, belonging, connectedness, house system, perceptions

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Dedication

To my husband,

Throughout this journey, you have been an unwavering source of strength, encouragement, and support. Your steadfast presence and love allowed me to chase a dream and accomplish a lifelong goal. During the difficult days, it was your resilience that kept me moving forward. This dissertation stands as a testament to the profound influence your presence has on my life. Thank you for being my best friend, my confidant, and my greatest supporter.

To my precious son,

You are the reason for everything your father and I do, and this dissertation is the celebration of not only a personal achievement but the inspiration you provide. Your endless hugs and your laughter motivated me to continue on this journey, and your patience allowed me to complete this process. You are my biggest supporter and the light of my life. Thank you for allowing me to miss a few moments as I accomplished a dream.

To my parents,

From the very beginning, you taught me the values of education and hard work. This dissertation is a reflection of the foundation you provided—a foundation built on love, sacrifice, and unyielding support. Your guidance and wisdom were instrumental in my decision to step into this academic endeavor. I am profoundly grateful for all you have done and the sacrifices you made that placed me in a position to take this step. Thank you for your love and endless support.

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List of Abbreviations

Center for Disease Control (CDC)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

National School Climate Council (NSCC)

Ron Clark Academy (RCA)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

School climate is the avenue through which all things can be accomplished; without it, the opposite is true (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012). The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to explore and describe the perceptions of staff and students regarding school climate as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system program. The research explored the problem where school stakeholders need to establish a positive school climate to promote student success, but they often struggle to decide which practices and programs to implement in order to positively influence school climate. This chapter seeks to define the historical, social, and theoretical contexts of the study, situating the research around the history of house systems, the importance of school climate, and the foundational theories connected to both house systems and school climate. Beyond contexts, the study's significance was analyzed in theoretical, empirical, and practical assertions, helping to expand on the potential contributions of the study. Finally, this chapter reveals the questions guiding the research and the definitions pertinent to the understanding of the overall study; this chapter will end with a summary.

Background

House systems are educational structures that have a rich heritage (Dierenfield, 1975). Historically, they have been used to support students and influence student success measures (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; RCA, 2021). Within the historical context of a school-wide house system lies the social context of school climate. School climate is grounded in research as a determining factor of student connection to the school environment and success rates within the educational structures (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Hultin et al., 2021; Saint et al., 2021). The theoretical context is important as it helps establish the study's background and

the foundational research that drove it. Maslow's (1954) theory of motivation and the theory of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985) provided the theoretical context of this intrinsic case study. Understanding the historical, social, and theoretical contexts is important to determine how the research has developed over time, the direction of current research, and the future implications of the proposed research.

Historical Context

The historical implications of implementing a school-wide house system were important to this study because they helped to frame an understanding of the implemented system used as the focus of the research. The house system created by J. K. Rowling (1999) in the *Harry Potter* series is well known. However, Dierenfield (1975) explained that house systems as they are used within educational systems are simply a continuation of ancient traditions. House systems have medieval roots that date back to the time when students would have to reside in homes near schoolhouses, as schoolhouses were limited; schools would, in turn, control these houses and assign housemasters (Dierenfield, 1975). When schools became public institutions, the house system was folded into the organizational structure of the school. Today, this same idea of houses within a school structure is commonly seen in many schools in England (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021) and is also seen in schools around the globe (Dulwich College, 2021; RCA, 2021). Even with the historical progression of house systems in schools, Dierenfield (1975) and Dulwich College (2021) explained the same original idea of the provision of pastoral care through the house system has been maintained today. Pastoral care is an ancient, traditional, cultural, and holistic approach to students that offers emotional, social, and spiritual support alongside academics (Dierenfield, 1975). Beyond the provision of pastoral care, house systems are utilized by school systems today to encourage a positive connection to the school

environment and to foster a sense of belonging, supporting relationships, and academic and personal growth (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; Gandy, 2019; RCA, 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022).

Social Context

Hultin et al. (2021) argued that school climate is important because it establishes the foundation for positive relationships between students and teachers and is the basis for interactions with educational activities; when a positive school climate is achieved, students' overall school experience is more favorable. It is well established in research that school climate is an important social context connected to students' well-being as well as the overall experience for both staff and students (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Ansley et al., 2019; Back et al., 2016; Huang et al., 2015; Saint et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020). There is an increasing interest in school climate as it helps promote supportive systems through which the education, welfare, and safety of staff and students is a priority (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Debnam, Milam, Bottiani et al., 2021). Beyond this increasing interest, there is education-based legislation in place connected to school climate. The legislation explains states must incorporate elements into their school systems and structures related to the schools' quality and success, specifically calling for the implementation of measures as indicators that have the potential to influence school climate (ESSA, 2015).

ESSA (2015) determined schools must have accountability measures in place to determine success rates of implemented systems. In concordance with the ESSA (2015), many states collect data related to school climate, the state of Virginia being one of those states (Kostyo et al., 2018). Still, Kostyo et al. (2018) determined data collection is often quantitative, disregarding the lived experiences of staff and students influenced by the implemented practices

of school climate in both discussion and data analysis. Research concerning perceptions of school climate and implementation practices is important because more research is needed to understand how school structures and climate may influence the lived experiences of staff and students (Hultin et al., 2021; Saint et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is important for school personnel to understand the depth of school climate and the ways in which school climate can be factored into the decisions made by leadership and stakeholders around school improvement policies and fidelity of implementation processes (Debnam, Edwards, Maeng et al., 2021; Wang, 2019). For these reasons, research related to school climate and perceptions of school climate may be of interest to stakeholders, state-level and district-level school leaders, educational policy makers, and school-based members of educational communities.

Theoretical Context

An understanding of current research and key findings is important for the development of the theoretical context for this study. The current research on school climate reveals that school climate is an important factor for many student outcomes; this research is largely based on investigations related to student outcomes and indicators (Coelho et al., 2020; Dorio et al., 2020; La Salle et al., 2021; Manzano-Sanchez et al., 2021). Key findings of current literature reveal a positive school climate is connected to positive student experiences inside and outside of school and perceived school climate does influence participation and behaviors in relation to the school environment as well as positive trajectories for personal and academic indicators (Coelho et al., 2020; Dorio et al., 2020). Current investigations also focus on the potential support provided through school climate (La Salle et al., 2021; Romero & O'Malley, 2020). Research has found that environmental support within the school building related to school climate is important for positive psychological experiences within the school (Romero & O'Malley, 2020).

Beyond student and school-based experiences, school climate is currently connected to school improvement measures and legislation related to school improvement; this is because school climate is often connected to academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes (La Salle et al., 2021).

While there is current literature on school climate, this study extends the current literature as it specifically studied the implementation of a house system and the influence on perceptions of school climate as they relate to the implementation of a house system. There is a paucity of research on house systems used within education and the potential link between house systems and school climate. Still, literature does support the use of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) as a theoretical framework for the study of school climate (Dickhäuser et al., 2021; Manzano-Sanchez et al., 2021). Manzano-Sanchez et al. (2021) suggested school climate can be used as a predictor for social and psychological indicators including things like life expectancy, employment, cognitive abilities, and relationships; these predictors, in turn, encourage motivation, connecting school climate with the theory of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Dickhäuser et al. (2021) discovered that school climate can influence motivation as seen by the way in which perceptions of school climate correlated with teachers' motivation and goal orientations. This study explored the current literature on school climate. It also extends the current literature and research on house systems and perceptions of school climate and the connection these constructs have to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Problem Statement

The problem is school stakeholders need to establish a positive school climate to promote student success, but they often struggle to decide which practices and programs to implement in order to positively influence school climate. It is important for school faculty to work towards a

positive school climate because research suggests a positive climate directly impacts several student outcomes (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2021); it can impact motivation, achievement, well-being, social health, emotional health, and overall health (National School Climate Council [NSCC], 2021). This study sought to better understand the school-wide implementation effort associated with a school-wide house system and the way implementation influenced perceptions of school climate. The program of study was the house system at the research site, modeled after the house system created by Ron Clark in Atlanta, Georgia (The Ron Clark Academy, 2021). The intrinsic case study took place at Blue Mountain Middle School in Virginia and focused on student, staff, and administrative perceptions of school climate as it related to the implementation of the school's house system. Blue Mountain Middle School was a pseudonym given to the actual site where the research took place.

Research suggests that understanding school climate and implementing practices that support a positive school climate are important and directly influence student outcomes (Daily et al., 2020; Kupchik et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2021). Kupchik et al. (2022) determined eleven elements of school climate to consider when implementing practices related to positive school climates: teacher relations, student relations, rule clarity, rule fairness, safety, engagement, school-wide bullying, positive behavior techniques, punitive behavior techniques, social-emotional learning, and student-level bullying. Hatzichristou et al. (2018) suggested it can be difficult to determine proper implementation systems and programs that support students through a positive school climate. Still, the authors determined the importance of school climate on students' resiliency levels and as a moderator between negative societal influences and the potential impact those negative societal influences have on students' school experiences. Other research suggests that school climate correlates directly with school behaviors, and positive

correlation has been found between school climate and many student success measures (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Daily et al., 2020; Kupchik et al., 2022). Because school climate does correlate with student success in a variety of ways, deciding which practices to implement in order to positively influence school climate is a problem that should be further explored (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2021).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to explore and describe the perceptions of school climate for staff and students at Blue Mountain Middle School, a middle school that implemented a school-wide house system. At the time of the study, school climate was generally defined as the overall school experience, the interpersonal relationships, the educational practices, and the organizational structures within a school building; it referred to the ways in which these things reflect the quality and character of school life (NSCC, 2021).

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was grounded in theoretical, empirical and practical perspectives. The theoretical significance was connected to Maslow's (1954) theory of motivation and theory of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The empirical significance helps connect this research to other research and addressed the ways in which this intrinsic case study added to the current literature. Finally, the practical significance of this intrinsic case study helps to suggest the usability of the research and findings from this study.

Theoretical Significance

Maslow's (1954) theory of motivation is still a leading theory in educational studies; research suggests the theory of motivation is still relevant and applicable in understanding factors related to students' experiences and success factors (Abulf, 2017; Ansorger, 2021; Fisher

& Crawford, 2020; Jacobs, 2020). This is also true for the theory of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Maslow's (1954) theory of motivation explains that needs motivate behavior, and the satisfaction of needs-fulfillment is related to potential growth. Deci and Ryan (1985) found that intrinsic and extrinsic factors have an influence on motivation; fostering the development of positive intrinsic motivation and supporting extrinsic factors lead to greater well-being and engagement. Current research on educational topics is grounded in the theory of self-determination (Grossman & Wilde, 2020; Yee & Smith, 2022). This intrinsic case study aimed to contribute to the current body of research concerning the application of motivation theories including Maslow's (1954) theory of motivation and Deci and Ryan's (1985) theory of self-determination, in enhancing our understanding of intrinsic motivation, student support, needs fulfillment, implementation practices, and school climate within the context of a school-wide house system (Acevedo, 2018; Cohen, 2014; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Preble & Gordon, 2011; RCA, 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022).

Empirical Significance

Empirically, research supports the need for understanding school climate and the importance of school climate (Farina, 2019; Fefer & Gordon, 2020; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2021; Thapa et al., 2013). There is also research-based evidence that school-wide implementation efforts influence the school-based experience for staff and students (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Cary et al., 2020; Koppelman, 2020). Farina (2019) found that a positive school climate resulted in less bullying, and Fefer and Gordon (2020) determined that a positive school climate is associated with less discipline issues, better emotional management, and relationship building. A positive school climate is also linked to a more collaborative setting and a setting that is more inclusive of marginalized student groups (Cary et al., 2020; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2021). Finally,

Thapa et al. (2013) found that school climate matters because it connects with safety, relationships, teaching, and learning. This study supported the research by specifically investigating staff and student perceptions as they relate to school climate and the implementation of a school-wide house system. While house systems exist around the globe (Dulwich College, 2021; RCA, 2021), this study adds to the existing research because evidence related to the implementation of a school-wide house system and procedural information related to the overall house system history and development was not well reported. Finally, this intrinsic case study provides readers the opportunity to better understand the specific relational and professional practices implemented through a house system and how that implementation influences staff and student perceptions on school climate.

Practical Significance

On a practical level, this research showcases the timeline of implementation efforts related to the implementation of a school-wide house system. As the relational and professional practices surrounding the house-system were explored, the research expands on the lived experiences of the staff and students involved with the house system at the middle school level as they considered the connection the implementation has to the school's overall climate. Research clearly defends the need for a positive school climate within school systems as the benefits are both social and psychological, relating to all areas of student success (Cohen, 2014; Daily et al., 2019; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Mitchell et al., 2010; Preble & Gordon, 2011; Reaves et al., 2018; Zysberg & Schwabsky, 2021). The study contributes to how school leaders and stakeholders implement systems connected to school climate. It helps to address the problem where school stakeholders need to establish a positive school climate to promote student success and might help them decide which practices and programs to implement in order to positively influence

school climate. As a result of the study, school personnel can better understand the importance of investigating staff and student perceptions. Finally, the study's results yield a clearer depiction of how implementation efforts are perceived as a result of specific physical practices within a school building.

Research Questions

As Yin (2018) explained, there are specific components of a case study (the questions of the study, the study's propositions, the case, data analysis and linking to propositions, and the study's interpretations), and each of these components pairs with the proposed topic of implementation systems and perceptions of school climate as they relate to a house system. The questions developed for this study led to a potential connection between the ways in which those involved with the proposed educational setting interpret the school's climate as a result of the implementation of the house system.

The questions developed for this case study helped to explore and describe the perceptions of school climate for staff and students as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system program at the middle school chosen for this study. More specifically, the questions helped to explore and understand the school climate at the site, the influence the implementation of a house system may have on the school climate, and how the implemented practices are potentially responsible for the influence on school climate. The proposed theories supported the third and final question (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Maslow, 1954), as the theories and final question served to support the understanding of the meanings, processes, experiences, and/or behaviors that relate to the development and implementation of a house system and overall school climate. The third and final question was also specifically written in a manner to

convey no connection in the wording and remain objective and open, guided by the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Central Research Question

In what ways do stakeholders, faculty, and staff implement a house system with the goal of creating a positive school climate?

Sub-Question One

In what ways does the implementation of a house system at the middle school level influence administrator, student, and staff member perceptions of school climate?

Sub-Question Two

What instructional, behavioral, and/or motivational practices are implemented through the creation of a house system?

Definitions

1. *Belonging* – Belonging is a factor determined by students’ perceptions of acceptance, respect, and support within the educational community (Berryman & Eley, 2019).
2. *Connectedness* – Connectedness is the degree to which students are able to develop a healthy connection to peers and adults within the school building including the degree to which they feel cared for and supported (CDC, 2022).
3. *House system* – A house system is a school-wide sorting system through which staff and students are sorted into groups; each group has a common name, house color, and house character trait and overall interest (Dulwich College, 2021; RCA, 2021).
4. *School climate* – School climate is comprised of the overall school experience, the interpersonal relationships, the educational practices, and the organizational structures

within a school building; it refers to the ways in which these things reflect the quality and character of school life (NSCC, 2021).

5. *Stakeholders* – Stakeholders are those individuals connected to the school community including students, staff, administrators, district leaders, parents, families, community members, business members, elected officials, and state representatives considering the degree to which they are invested in and engaged with the school community and concerned with the school’s overall success (Tran et al., 2019).

Summary

This intrinsic case study sought to examine the problem connected to stakeholders and their perceived abilities to establish a positive school climate. The purpose of the study was to explore and describe the perceptions of school climate for staff and students as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system program. Understanding the background of the study is important because house systems have historically been connected to supporting students (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; RCA, 2021). School climate is also grounded in supporting students and student success as is Maslow’s (1954) theory of motivation and theory of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These historical, social, and empirical contexts were important to framing the relevant literature, the theoretical concepts that created the foundation for the study, and the potential the study had to contribute to the educational community. The context connected to the study and research were also important as they helped to determine the significance of the study. The significance of the study is theoretical, empirical, and practical. Theoretically, the study added to existing literature connected to the relevance of Maslow’s (1954) theory of motivation and the theory of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985) to current educational practices. Empirically, research suggests that school climate is an

important and relevant topic to educational research (Farina, 2019; Fefer & Gordon, 2020; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2021; Thapa et al., 2013). Practically, this study contributes to future understandings and implementation efforts surrounding school climate and house systems. These understandings being guided by the research questions as they may guide future research findings. The questions in the study asked how a positive school climate is created, how the implementation of a house system might influence staff and student perceptions of school climate, and what relational and professional practices are implemented through the creation of a house system and how those specific practices influence staff and student perceptions of school climate. Understanding relevant literature and the contexts and significance of the study is important to the purpose of the research and the problem related to the study, as well as the overall understanding of the entire study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore the issue of climate within schools as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system. More specifically, the topics of connectedness and belongingness were explored as factors affecting school climate due to the implementation of a school-wide house system. This chapter presents a review of the current literature relating to this topic of study. In the first section, the theories pertinent to school climate, connectedness, and belongingness are discussed: theory of motivation and self-determination theory. This is followed by a synthesis of recent literature on school climate, connectedness and belongingness, and the implementation of school-wide systems. Within the synthesis of literature, Progressivism, Constructivism, and Gestalt psychology are explained and connected to the idea of a child-centered education, as this type of education is critical to the foundation of a school-wide house system. Finally, literature surrounding the founding of house systems, their development, and their purpose is addressed. Successful implementation of school-wide practices, services, and strategies is a focus of this final section as well. In the end, a gap in literature is identified, presenting the need for the current study.

Theoretical Framework

This literature review examined how the implementation of a school house system relates to perceptions of school climate at the middle school level. The constructs investigated in this study regarding school climate are belonging, connectedness, student motivation, student achievement, and student outcomes. The theories related to these constructs are theory of motivation (Maslow, 1954) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Theory of motivation explains that behavior is determined and directly linked to needs; as needs are met

along the hierarchy, the capacity for motivation and success grows (Acevedo, 2018; Maslow, 1954). Maslow's (1954) needs of love, belonging, and esteem align with the constructs studied in relation to a school-wide house system of belonging and connectedness as they further cohere to success and motivation. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) is also connected to student success and motivation as it explains intrinsic motivation that allows individuals to make progress and reach success (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gagne & Deci, 2005). By pairing Maslow's (1954) theory of motivation with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), researchers can begin to question what practices and processes may be implemented school-wide to create a positive school climate that fosters student success and encourages positive outcomes.

Theory of Motivation

Student motivation as a measure of academic success and well-being is an integral part of framing a school climate that fosters student success and well-being (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Zysberg & Schwabsky, 2021). A deeper understanding of student motivation comes from Maslow's (1954) theory of motivation. As a theorist, Maslow believed that one's biology, culture, and situation determine behavior (Healy, 2016). Maslow's (1954) theory of motivation details five needs developed in a hierarchical manner: physiological, safety and security, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. The needs follow a progression that allows for the fulfillment of higher needs once lower needs are satisfied first (Acevedo, 2018; Maslow, 1954; Taormina & Gao, 2013). As they relate to motivation, individuals contain the ability and desire (motivation) to move along the hierarchy as needs are met, eventually reaching the highest level of self-actualization (Acevedo, 2018; Maslow, 1954) and allowing for deeper connection, higher levels of social and civic involvement, and healthier relationships that are more productive (Hoffman, 2020).

Within the development of a house system lies the desire to fulfill some of the lower level and initial needs within the hierarchy established by Maslow (1954), especially those needs of love, belonging and esteem (Dierenfield, 1975; McBride & Gieselmann, 2018; Willis & Bryant, 2022). According to Taormina and Gao (2013), the satisfaction of a need leads to a more successful and satisfying life with the gradual and positive attainment of each level. Motivation is an essential element necessary for the success of students in today's schools (Cohen, 2014; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Mitchell et al., 2010; Preble & Gordon, 2011; Reaves et al., 2018; Zysberg & Schwabsky, 2021), and research shows that there is a complete connection between achievement and motivation (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Maslow's (1954) theory guided and informed the research because it is plausible to determine that if the house system helps to establish and fulfill the needs of a student at the lower-level of love, belonging, and esteem as they apply to the student's academic setting, experience, and career, then students may be able to (influenced by inherent motivation) move forward with a more successful experience and career within the school setting. The theory of motivation (Maslow, 1954) was helpful in guiding the understanding of sub-question two as it related to the physical practices put in place that support students and potentially influence inherent motivation.

Theory of Self-Determination

Just as students can be motivated to reach high levels of success and fulfillment, they may also be able to experience the intrinsic motivation that is linked to the determination necessary to reach success. Self-determination theory emphasizes the idea that people are inherently motivated to learn and grow (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020). According to self-determination theory, individuals are motivated and determined as the result of intrinsic motivators (autonomous) and not extrinsic motivators (controlled) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gagne

& Deci, 2005). Self-determination theory can be connected to Maslow's (1954) theory of motivation because within self-determination there lies the construct of need fulfillment within the objective of the achievement of internal motivation. Furthermore, Gagne and Deci (2005) explained that self-determination theory postulates that the intrinsic motivation that leads to self-determination cannot occur until basic psychological needs are met; needs fulfillment is directly linked to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Understanding the ways in which self-determination affects students' potential for motivation and determination is important because research shows that positive school climates absolutely influence student achievement, and achievement is link with motivation and determination (Cohen, 2014; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Mitchell et al., 2010; Preble & Gordon, 2011; Reaves et al., 2018; Zysberg & Schwabsky, 2021). As students feel the extrinsic rewards of the house system, develop the extrinsic reward of self-worth through connection and belonging and feel extrinsic motivators of goals and values, then they may inherently be intrinsically motivated to achieve higher levels of school-based (academic) achievement. Additionally, schools can develop and foster opportunities that encourage the development of intrinsic motivation in students, potentially increasing their capacities for future success and growth. Intrinsic motivation, psychological supports, engagement/fun, belonging, and connection are all at the heart of the implementation of the house system, meaning the development of a house system may also be beneficial to help foster the growth of intrinsic motivation within students (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; Gandy, 2019; The Ron Clark Academy [RCA], 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022) The theory of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985) helped to frame the study as it guided the research on perceptions of school climate

and the connections those perceptions may have to any practices put in place as a result of the implementation of a school-wide house systems.

Related Literature

Perceptions of school climate at the middle school level as they relate to the implementation of a school-wide house system can be explored by examining related literature on connected educational frameworks, philosophes, and psychologies. The literature on school climate details the constructs of belonging and connectedness. It is also important to consider the literature on school-wide house systems to understand both their history and current place within educational systems. Furthermore, the literature helps to determine how school-wide house systems are implemented, and why schools may choose to implement a school-wide house system. Finally, an investigation of the literature on school-wide implementation efforts helps to frame how and why schools begin change efforts. Literature related to philosophies of child-centered education, school climate, student success and well-being at the middle school level, school-wide house systems, and school-wide implementation efforts will be reviewed in this section.

Child-Centered Education

An educational system and an academic environment that focus on the student and the child contrast the traditional, teacher-led practice of education; this is because the power is removed from the teacher, as they are no longer seen as an authority member but someone who supports and facilitates the growth of the whole child (Jacobs & Renandya, 2019; Mili, 2018; Trinidad, 2020). The progressive idea of child-centered education is steeped in the rich philosophical and theoretical frameworks of many prominent names in education: Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori, Dewey, Gandhi, Tagore, and Piaget (Mili, 2018). The philosophies of

progressivism, constructivism, and Gestalt psychology are also foundational elements to consider (Gordon et al., 2019; Smith, 2020). According to Mili (2018), it is within this educational framework that innate potential within each child is recognized, but educational pathways are not predetermined, rather they are constructed from the child's experiences and social contexts. Academic settings are tailored to students' needs and built on student interest and engagement. Beyond these things, a child-centered approach to education also considers psychological aspects (Mili, 2018).

As defined by Jacobs and Renandya (2019), there are ten elements that make up a child and student-centered approach to education. With a *student-centered education*, students and teachers learn together while students are also allocated time to learn alongside their peers. Teachers guide and facilitate students' potential for autonomous learning. Learning experiences are rich with meaningful understandings, and appropriate curricular integration is developed in a manner that allows links to be made between study, learning, and life, while opportunities for alternative assessments are available too. Diversity is also valued, appreciated, and integrated. Finally, the overall learning climate is one that values, supports, and appreciates all members, allowing risk taking and critical thinking. Groundbreaking and current research on diversity, inclusivity, and responsive methods argues for this integrated approach that values, appreciates, and honors all members of the school's community (Gay, 2018; Landson-Billings, 1994; Zvoch et al., 2021).

Research on child-centered education agrees that this style of education is beneficial for student growth and development (Eaton, 2020; Porath & Hagerman, 2021; Tomlinson, 2021; Tunagur et al., 2021). This is likely because educational structures that focus on the whole child, not just academic aspects, create opportunities that are meaningful, relevant, and interesting to

the child/student (Eaton, 2020). A child-centered education is welcoming, challenging, and supportive, placing students at the core of all decisions (Tomlinson, 2021). Klein and Ciotti (2022) determined that a child-centered system is one that understands that each student, individually, bring something unique to the school; understanding this allows the educational system to create intentional structures and practices that support students' growth toward becoming one who can use that uniqueness to contribute to the community. In essence, a child-centered education is also a community-centered education (Garcia et al., 2021; Klein & Ciotti, 2022; Tomlinson, 2021). A community that fosters a holistic and child-centered approach is one that incorporates social-emotional learning and opportunities for positive peer engagement (DeMink-Carthew & Netcoh, 2019; Tomlinson, 2021). Chappell (2022) determined that a child-centered education supports the development of trusting relationships, is inclusive of all student groups, and engages all stakeholders (Chappell, 2022); these elements are a cause for increased student connectedness (Porath & Hagerman, 2021). Creating a connected community and a shared purpose is a crucial element of child-centered education (Porath & Hagerman, 2021). A child-centered approach does not just teach students, it serves students, creating a system that students want to be a part of and a place where they can thrive (Schaaf & Jukes, 2022).

Considering these frameworks, constructs, and definitions, research suggests that a child-centered education supports the development of motivation and the ability of the child to achieve success (Jacobs & Renandya, 2019; Mili, 2018; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Trinidad, 2020; Tunagur et al., 2021; Wentzel, 1997). Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and theory of motivation (Maslow, 1954) reveal that motivation is a key factor in an individual's ability to make personal progress. Research proposes that a child-centered approach in which students perceive caring and involved adults positively influences students' effort, motivation, and

achievement (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Wentzel, 1997). The pairing of a child-centered environment with meaningful adult relationships also increases engagement (Trinidad, 2020). Finally, a student-centered education is built on the promotion of intrinsic motivation as a community is developed by the factors associated with a student and child centered approach that fosters the capacity to support and build intrinsic motivation (Jacobs & Renandya, 2019). A school-wide house system connects to a child-centered education and the academic environment that is created by focusing first on the child and second on achievement. Implementing a house system could foster the communal growth connected to child-centered education, while combining this progressive system of implementation with historical, philosophical, and psychological frameworks. Current research on child-centered education includes things such as guidelines (Eaton, 2020), research-based principles and practices associated with child-centered education (Tomlinson, 2021), quantitative research (Tunagur et al., 2021), and a case study that focuses on the connected learning framework (Tomlinson, 2021); there is a paucity of research that explores the lived experiences of those working with child-centered structures such as a house system. An intrinsic case study on a school wide house system was important as it helped to investigate the learning conditions fostered by this unique approach. Valuable insights about the educational details and outcomes associated with a house system were explored.

Progressivism

An educational philosophy connected to a child-centered teaching approach and to the development of child-centered environments is progressivism. Borrowing from European philosopher Rousseau, and combining ideals of John Dewey, Jane Adams, and William Kilpatrick, progressivism holds true that a child's needs and interests are of utmost importance (Smith, 2020). Progressivist ideals move away from traditional approaches to education (Jacobs

& Renandya, 2019; Kridel, 2020; Mili, 2018; Trinidad, 2020). Education is not just about pouring information into the minds of students because they bring more than a physical body into the school building; a student is comprised of body, mind, emotions, and spirit (Gordon et al., 2019). Therefore, the planning and implementation efforts at the classroom level and school-wide level must consider the needs and interests of students (Samuelsson et al., 2021). This philosophy can ultimately be linked with Maslow's (1954) theory of motivation and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) because, in both theories, needs fulfillment is an integral facet of success. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) is credited with a shift away from the historically popular research on motivation related to behaviorism and external and environmental factors (Ryan & Deci, 2019). Still, self-determination theory can be connected to Maslow's (1954) theory of motivation because within self-determination there lies the construct of need fulfillment within the objective of the achievement of internal motivation. As the need to be connected to others is fulfilled, and as the need to experience social success is understood, individuals are able to internalize the inherent values and processes in the world around (Gagne & Deci, 2005). The satisfaction of this need, and the internalization connected with that satisfaction becomes the intrinsic motivation and determination needed to be successful.

When considering progressivism as it relates to the implementation of a house system, it is important to detail that with progressivism the educational setting focuses on community and collaboration between staff and students; teachers facilitate experiences for students, and focus on their individual growth, not just their academic endeavors (Kridel, 2020; Samuelsson et al., 2021; Smith, 2020). The construction of social environments is also a key factor to progressive ideals (Smith, 2020). A house system is inherently built on community and fosters communal

growth (Dierenfield, 1975). Within houses, staff and students must maintain close collaboration as teachers and students work together to create experiences that will foster growth beyond the classroom walls and academic standards (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; Johnston, 2020). Gordon et al. (2019) reminded educators that students bring more than their brains into the school building each day, and the progressive idea of a house system encapsulates this idea as a child-centered approach that supports the development of the whole child. This intrinsic case study offers a deeper understanding of implementation efforts, their influence on the overall school community, and the ways in which the house system allows for engagement within the school community.

Constructivism

Smith (2020) explained the constructivism is also a philosophy that is not a subject-centered, but a child-centered teaching approach built on the beliefs of Bruner, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Kamii. With constructivism, students are at the center of the educational design as active participants within the academic setting. As students are the focus, constructivism allows for individualization of both educational content and educational experience, the teacher acting as the facilitator of this content and experience (Smith, 2020; Vygotsky, 1978). Constructivism is procedural; students make progress through each step of their social and educational journeys. During these social and educational journeys, students construct rules and mental understandings that help them navigate both academics and life (Gordon et al., 2019; Smith, 2020).

A school-wide house system connects to constructivism because students are the focus (McBride & Gieselmann, 2018). Over the years in the house system, students remain in their house, constructing rules and understandings connected with that house but also connected with the ability to achieve success within a shared academic environment (Bryant, 2021; Dierenfield,

1975; Dulwich College, 2021). Constructivism recognizes the journey of educational and social growth, and a house system does as well. Through a house system, the experience is individualized because each staff and student must create individual connections to the house (Dierenfield, 1975; Gandy, 2019; Willis & Bryant, 2022). Additionally, within the context of the house, staff and students must build on their sense of belonging and connection, their ability to collaborate, and leadership opportunities (Dierenfield, 1975; Johnston, 2020; Willis & Bryant, 2022). Constructivism allows students to begin where they are and make procedural and positive growth (Smith, 2020; Vygotsky, 1978). A house system could foster that procedural growth and potentially support the whole child along the growth journey. Using an intrinsic case study to explore a school wide house system holds the potential to offer insight to the ways in which a holistic approach to educational practices can help students construct a sense of self as they develop personally, socially, and emotionally during the course of their academic journeys.

Gestalt Psychology

Gestalt psychology is the work of Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Kohler (Pill & Hyndman, 2018). The leading principle behind Gestalt psychology is that there are meaningful and necessary parts that come together to create a whole (Gordon et al., 2019; King et al., 1994; Pill & Hyndman, 2018; Smith, 2020). Connecting to progressivism and constructivism, there are also elements of building on real-life contexts, authenticity, and personal agency (Pill & Hyndman, 2018; Smith, 2020). Gestalt psychology suggests that parts creating the whole are important, and the making meaning of the parts and defining the relationship of the parts is pertinent while working towards the establishment of a whole (King et al., 1994; Pill & Hyndman, 2018; Smith, 2020). While focusing on each part, you must still maintain a clear vision of the “big picture” (Gordon et al., 2019, p. 123). This school of thought

puts structures and meaningful parts together to create a, “world with a sensible coherent whole” (King et al., 1994, p. 2).

Gestalt psychology is related to the implementation of a school-wide house system because each separate house that staff and students are placed in is connected to the bigger elements within a school of climate, student success, and student well-being (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; RCA, 2021). Just as Gestalt psychology builds on real-life contexts, authenticity, and personal agency (Pill & Hyndman, 2018; Smith, 2020), so does a school-wide house system. Students are able to build on those contexts as they work to create a better school climate, becoming better citizens committed to the good of the whole. Still, while becoming more self-aware and more committed to the betterment of the climate of the school, the facets of the house system that foster that growth remain just as important (Dierenfield, 1975; RCA, 2021). There is meaning in each part of the house system and in what each individual brings to the house, just as there is Gestalt meaning in each part creating the whole (Gordon et al., 2019; King et al., 1994; Pill & Hyndman, 2018; Smith, 2020).

School Climate

Historically and within current models and frameworks, school climate has been inconsistently defined and misunderstood (Cohen, 2014; Preble & Gordon, 2011; Reaves et al., 2018; Thapa et al., 2013). Rudasill et al. (2018) explained that this, “definitional confusion prevents coherent understanding of school climate” (p. 36). The inability to define the construct relates to the complexity of elements that combine to create school climate (Freiberg, 1998). In line with this “definitional confusion” is the idea that varying school climates, likely due to incomplete understandings or misunderstandings, contribute to the vastly different experiences students have in school with regards to the overall climate (Preble & Gordon, 2011). Therefore,

it is important to examine the literature on school climate to compare definitions, frameworks, contexts, and understandings, thus contributing to a more complete definitive structure of what constitutes school climate.

It has been well established that school climate includes many things: school norms, goals and values held by the school system, relationships formed within the building, peer interactions, teaching and learning that takes place, leadership practices, and the organizational structures of a school building (Cohen et al., 2009; Daily et al., 2019; National School Climate Council [NSCC], 2007; Pickeral et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2023). School climate occurs at the school-level, classroom-level, and the individual-level (Mitchell et al., 2010). Hoy and Hannum (1997) defined school climate as the personality of school, including the school's internal characteristics and the way in which staff and students behave. Rudasill et al. (2018) added to the definition of school climate explaining that it includes perceptions of interactions within the school, development and strength of relationships created, the overall safety of the school, the values of the school community, and the beliefs of the students, staff, and stakeholders. School climate is not just these varying definitions; each person in the school contributes to school climate, as it requires an understood partnership between staff, students, and families (Cohen et al., 2009; NSCC, 2007). Barksdale et al. (2021) found that school climate is felt and experienced through the development of relationships, fostering a safe and caring environment, and a focus on positive outcomes, learning, and school-based experiences. Cohen (2014) determined that school climate included four dimensions: safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, and the institutional environment. Others have defined school climate as being comprised of and influenced by seven conditions: shared leadership, continuous improvement and shared decision-making, ability to create and sustain initiatives, supportive

staff, staff development, data-driven support, and community involvement (Pickeral et al., 2009). A combination of these definitions, understandings, conditions, and dimensions leads to a synthesis of factors determining school climate.

Beyond simply examining the literature connected to school climate and defining school climate, it is important to understand that there is a growing interest in developing a deeper understanding of school climate, creating policies to frame positive school climates, and determining efforts to establish positive school climates (Farina, 2019; Fefer & Gordon, 2020; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2021; Thapa et al., 2013). In fact, benchmarks have been developed with a series of indicators and sub-indicators to measure a school's ability to implement a positive school climate (Ciccione & Freiberg, 2021). Many states have also begun to understand that school systems need support beyond the academic standards, requiring the inclusion of school climate in state policies and school provisions (Piscatelli & Lee, 2011). An example of this can be seen through the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) (2022). The VDOE has added additional frameworks to the academic and standardized resources. School systems can now find surveys and measurements connected to school climate. The state provides modules, programs, and materials connected to the elements of safety, expectations, relationships, and engagement. Resources on Virginia Tiered Systems of Support (VTSS) and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) are also available. Finally, school systems can find varying supports at both the school and student level. This is just one example of a state ensuring a systematic approach to fostering the growth and support of the whole child and the entire educational community.

Research has proposed the importance of a positive school climate as it absolutely connects with student growth, student motivation, student achievement, and other student outcomes (Cohen, 2014; Daily et al., 2019; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Mitchell et al., 2010; Preble

& Gordon, 2011; Reaves et al., 2018; Zysberg & Schwabsky, 2021). Wang et al. (2023) explained that a positive school climate can influence psychosocial factors. Positive school climates also support the development of self-determination and autonomy (Kasen et al., 1990). The NSCC (2007, 2021) determined that positive school climates are necessary, and they ultimately contribute to not only the ability of students to succeed in life, but to students' overall health. A positive school climate occurs when students and staff genuinely want to be within the school walls and part of the school community (Hoy & Hannum, 1997). Students are also supported holistically; having their social, emotional, physical, safety, ethical, civic, and academic needs supported (Cicccone & Freiberg, 2021; NSCC, 2007, 2021; Thapa et al., 2013). When considering the theory of motivation (Maslow, 1954) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), school climate is an avenue through which motivation may be fostered, and this motivation is an essential element necessary for the success of students in today's schools and classrooms where personal, social, economic, and cultural contexts influence student effort and motivation (Cohen, 2014; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Mitchell et al., 2010; Preble & Gordon, 2011; Reaves et al., 2018; Zysberg & Schwabsky, 2021). Gordon et al. (2019) explained that schools are meant to foster the growth of the whole child, not just contribute to intellectual growth; this whole-child approach is what constitutes a positive school climate. As a school climate supports the whole child, it allows for the positive development of the child, the teaching and promotion of risk prevention and health, and academic achievement; these things combine to help increase graduation rates and support teacher retention (Thapa et al., 2013).

It is clear that school climate matters (NSCC, 2007, 2021; Preble & Gordon, 2011; Piscatelli & Lee, 2011; Thapa et al., 2013). Freiberg (1999) compared school climate to, "the air we breathe" (p. 1), describing it as, "the heart and soul of the school" (p. 11). Pickeral et al.

(2009) determined that school climate is one element that can have a profound impact on the educational experience. Climate is what contributes to a school experience that is engaging, exciting, and meaningful (Preble & Gordon, 2011), and a systemic approach to the inclusion of students, families, school personnel, and the community (Cohen, 2014). Research has revealed that school-level factors contribute most to perceptions of school climate (Madjar & Cohen-Malayev, 2016). Furthermore, these perceptions are not individual, rather they are aggregated to reveal summative perceptions of school climate (Rudasill et al., 2018). This suggests the school community as a whole can perceive the benefits from the creation of a positive school climate.

A school-wide house system is foundationally built on creating a positive school climate; house systems support social aspects, the development of relationships, and includes all school personnel, families, and the community (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; RCA, 2021). According to the NSCC (2007, 2021), positive school climates are centered on support and collaboration within systems that are successfully created and sustained. Within each house, students find support and collaboration (Johnston, 2020; Willis & Bryant, 2022). Houses provide a space where students can be vulnerable and authentic, fostering their social, emotional, physical, ethical, civic, and academic growth (Dulwich College, 2021; RCA, 2021). A positive school climate is also built on the idea that students can engage in the creation of processes and systems sustaining a school's climate (Piscatelli & Lee, 2011). House systems are absolutely sustained by shared leadership and shared decision-making (Dierenfield, 1975; Johnston, 2020). Each house member contributes to the success of the house just as each school member contributes to the successful school climate. Finally, a house system centers around two distinguishable characteristics that contribute to a positive school climate: belonging and connectedness (Dierenfield, 1975; RCA, 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022). The current research on

school climate is quantitative, research-based commentary, and lacks a connection to the implementation of a school-wide house system (Barksdale et al., 2021; Cohen et al., 2009; Cohen, 2014; Dulwich College, 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022). This is also true for current research on connectedness that includes quantitative methods and summaries of various quantitative findings (Catalano et al., 2004; Marsh et al., 2019; McNeely et al., 2002; Millings et al., 2012) and research on belonging that is largely quantitative and explanatory (Borman et al., 2019; Durand & Blackwell, 2022; Pendergast et al., 2018; Vang & Nishina, 2021). There is a paucity of research on the lived experiences and perspectives of those involved with house systems and the influence house systems may have on school climate, belonging, and connectedness.

Belonging

The NSCC (2007, 2021) explained that belonging is a key factor of a positive school climate; a school climate that fosters belonging allows for a safe and caring environment that is responsive, allowing attachments to form. School belonging is defined by Berryman and Eley (2019) as the, “way in which students feel accepted, respected, included and supported by the educational communities and settings in which they are involved” (p. 989). School belonging can also be defined by establishing students’ levels of acceptance, respect earned from others, inclusion, and students’ perception of being valued by others (Goodenow, 1993). Anderman (2003) described school belonging as a construct that shows a student’s place within the social setting of the school. The contexts of teacher connection, personal support, peer relationships, academic support, positive school climate, community, connections to stakeholders, positive classroom practices, and institutional affiliation all influence the capacity for students to feel as if they belong (Borman et al., 2019; Durand & Blackwell, 2022; Green et al., 2016; Greenwood &

Kelly, 2019; Kiefer et al., 2015; Maestas et al., 2007). Faculty members play an important role in the development of school belonging constructs because they are omnipresent as representatives of the school (Maestas et al., 2007), and research suggests that positive relationships with faculty members can influence students' overall perceptions of school climate (Borman et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2020). With belonging comes a cumulation of respectful staff-student interactions and the development of personal and healthy relationships on both peer and staff levels; this results in the ability of students to build productive life skills that can lead to successful future opportunities, even having the capacity to influence both future citizenship and future employment (Brown et al., 2020). Berryman and Eley (2019) explained that belonging is also becoming increasingly more important as diversity levels in schools are rising; diversity is becoming a major factor that influences belonging (Vang & Nishina, 2021).

School belonging cannot occur unless there is a change within the cultures, values, norms, policies, and practices within a school (Osterman, 2000), and it only occurs when curriculum and practice are married to relational and responsive pedagogy (Berryman & Eley, 2019; Pendergast et al., 2018). As a system, the school is a place where children should feel a sense of belonging (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). Belonging is also especially important at the middle school level where there are often declines in social and emotional well-being (Anderman, 2003; Borman et al., 2019; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Pendergast et al., 2018). Borman et al. (2019) explained that the middle school level presents a challenging time both socially and emotionally, and the trust and positive relationships built and fostered through school belonging have benefits that are recursive in nature, consistently fulfilling needs and supporting challenges faced during the sometimes-formidable middle level years. Research and literature confirm that school belonging has a positive impact on student outcomes including

academic and social outcomes, and student motivation (Borman et al., 2019; Durand & Blackwell, 2022; Green et al., 2016; Pittman & Richmond, 2007). School belonging is also associated with the intrinsic value and utility value of school, influencing the degree to which school is perceived as both enjoyable and useful (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). School belonging is a factor that is linked to a students' overall health and well-being, positively influencing psychological and physical well-being (Durand & Blackwell, 2022; Maestas et al., 2007; Vang & Nishina, 2021). Just as supporting and maintaining a sense of student belonging correlates positively to student outcomes, there is also a correlation between students that lack a sense of belonging and negative student outcomes; there are significant consequences when students lack school belonging (Pendergast et al., 2018).

Belonging is a construct that connects directly to the theoretical framework of this study because belonging is a need within Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs that much be reached in order for students to attain a level of success. Detailing the hierarchy of needs is important to understand the way in which belonging is connected to success rates. Taormina and Gao (2013) detail and define the constructs of each of Maslow's (1954) needs. A *need* can be defined as an essential item, entity, or thing that a person is lacking; this item, entity of thing is often essential and/or crucial to the existence and well-being of a person; the *need* is created due to the disequilibrium created not by the thing but by the lacking of the thing. A *physiological need* is a chemical and environmental need necessary for survival such as food, water, and adequate temperatures; a deficiency in this *need* leads to distress or death motivating a person to fulfill this need. *Safety and security needs* contain the need to escape environments, situations, threats, stimuli, and individuals that can cause harm or danger (concrete and abstract); these needs are built from the instinctual need to survive predators and can be fulfilled by places, people,

structures, and systems. The need of *belonging* is the desire/ability to have affectionate relationships and create emotional attachments (interpersonal bonds) in order to avoid negative feelings and consequences like anxiety, loneliness, rejection, and isolation. The *esteem need* details an individual's self-perception of respect for his/her own self and the degree to which an individual feels a personal sense of worth and value; it is also related to the same ideals as received from the evaluative perceptions of others. Finally, *self-actualization* is an individual's ability to see his/her own and unique potential and work to achieve his/her true identity. Without belonging, students cannot progress through the hierarchy of needs appropriately.

A school-wide house system is a place where everyone belongs (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; RCA, 2021). All school personnel belong to a house and students are placed within the safe and supportive care of the adult house leaders (Dulwich College, 2021). A house system helps sustain the systems approach that is necessary to develop and foster students' perceptions of belonging. Each construct necessary to support a students' sense of belonging can be found within the house and the shared experiences and relationships that come from belonging to a house: teacher connection, personal support, peer relationships, academic support, positive school culture, community, connections to stakeholders, positive classroom practices, and institutional affiliation all influence the capacity for students to feel as if they belong (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; Green et al., 2016; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019; Maestas et al., 2007). If schools are seeking to create school climates that are supportive of student belonging and desire to see the positive student outcomes that result from student belonging, it is plausible to suggest that a school-wide house system may support the development of students' positive perceptions of belonging and overall ability to feel as if they are attached to the school through elements of acceptance, respect, inclusion, and support.

Connectedness

Research explains that it is imperative for a student's overall well-being to feel a sense of belonging to the school and to feel that the school has the capacity to care for students (CDC, 2009; National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, & TB Prevention (U.S.) & Division for School Health, 2009; Marsh et al., 2019; McNeely et al., 2002). The crucial element of belonging is what helps students feel connected to the school, fostering a positive sense of connectedness. Research suggests that connectedness is a developmental need that can be met within schools (Maslow, 1954; McNeely et al., 2002). Meeting this need within the school-age timeline is important because a large percentage of youth engage in behaviors that are dangerous and present various health-risks (CDC, 2009). The CDC (2009) explained that it is students' feelings and perceptions of the overall school experience joined with both the academic environment and experiences had with caring adults and peers that create a sense of connectedness. Connectedness happens through strong and successful student-teacher relationships (Pekel et al., 2018; Tillery et al., 2013). These relationships include emotional attachment, equal investment, progressive complexity, and a shift toward autonomy; these relationships should also include elements of care, growth, support, and shared power (Pekel et al., 2018). A combination of student-teacher bonds, successful peer group formation, overall school enjoyment, and interactions with school groups and events contributes most to school connectedness (Catalano et al., 2004), and the best educators are those that support the development of these connections (Schaaf & Jukes, 2022). When students are able to make connections and sustain those healthy relationships, the result is an increased capacity to bond with the school, increased educational participation, increased social and emotional skill development, and enhanced motivation; these things, in turn, boost academic success (Catalano

et al., 2004; Rambaran et al., 2017). Students that are connected to school are better able to face and respond to life's difficult situations; connectedness creates a protective barrier for students navigating difficult journeys (Liu et al., 2021).

Connection is vitally important for students within the school context (Catalano et al., 2004; Koning et al., 2019; Libbey, 2004; Liu et al., 2021; Millings et al., 2012; Nyberg et al., 2019; Pate et al., 2017; Pekel et al., 2018; Resnick et al., 1997). Connection is also critical for a students' mental health, it influences self-esteem, and it supports peer-attachments; this is because it can moderate the negative effects of low self-esteem and low peer-attachment, and it can have an influence on students' levels of depression (Koning et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2021; Millings et al., 2012; Shochet et al., 2006). Connectedness as a positive and prosocial construct, similar to that of belonging, is also linked to many positive student outcomes (Catalano et al., 2004; Millings et al., 2012; Pekel et al., 2018). Catalano et al. (2004) and Pekel et al. (2018) determined that connectedness increases student motivation, student engagement, student achievement, and school bonding. When considering student outcomes, connectedness is also related to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020). This is because connectedness fosters the meeting of psychological needs, develops social capital through adult support (mentoring and action modeling), and creates relational bonds. These things help to create positive student outcomes (Tillery et al., 2013). McNeely et al. (2002) and Pekel et al. (2018) further determined that school connections help to decrease negative and health-risk behaviors. Connections may be the needed school factor that helps prohibit risky behaviors such as substance use, engaging in violence, or beginning sexual activity at an early age (McNeely et al., 2002).

Student Success and Well-Being at the Middle School Level

Many theories and philosophies connect to student success and well-being. School climate, belonging, and connectedness are also related to student success and well-being (Albert & Shindler, 2016; Aldridge & McChesney, 2018). The most common predictor of success and well-being between current literature and research is relationships (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Scales et al., 2019; Wentzel, 1997). In fact, in a quantitative study on school-based relationships and outcomes associated with those relationships, Hamre and Pianta (2001) documented relationships in early grades, even those established during kindergarten years, set students on a successful academic path up to and including grade 8. Relationships within the school context (teacher-student) predicted work-habits, academic motivations, grades, goal orientation, self-efficacy, disciplinary infractions, and overall health (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Scales et al., 2019; Vang & Nishina, 2021; Zysberg & Schwabsky, 2021).

Aldridge and McChesney (2018) contributed important contexts to the idea of student success and well-being as they explained the systems that influence a child's development. The first factor influencing development is the individual. The individual is surrounded by the microsystem made up of home, friends, and school. The microsystem is surrounded by the mesosystem, which is the interactions between the elements and groupings within the microsystem. Next is the exosystem, which includes parents' workplaces and the individual's neighborhood. Finally, there is the macrosystem made up of cultures, governments, and the economy (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Garbarino, 2014). As each system is further removed from the individual, it has less influence on the actual development of the individual. Schools fall within the microsystem of a child's development, meaning there is

the capacity for schools to have a tremendous impact on the overall development (success and well-being) of a child (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018). Within the overall development and success of the student lies needs and motivational fulfillment (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Maslow, 1954). These theoretical constructs are especially important for the success and well-being of the middle level learner because when these deficiency needs are unmet, there is an existence of chaos and fragmentation (Acevedo, 2018). On the other hand, when the needs are met, individuals experience a more successful existence (Acevedo, 2018; Maslow, 1954; Taormina & Gao, 2013).

It is interesting to note that the research and literature on relational importance for student success and well-being, and on the degree to which schools can positively influence development, highlights the necessity of these relationships at the middle school level (Anderman, 2003; Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Booker, 2018; Borman et al., 2019; Hoy & Hannum, 1997). Middle school is special in the constructs of middle level philosophies and organizational programming. Hoy and Hannum (1997) intentionally studied middle school and found that an increase in the health of a middle school (systems, practices, perceptions) has a positive impact on student outcomes; having a healthy school profile affects students' success rates and the degree to which students experience success and develop positive well-being. These factors are important to organizational systems at the middle school level, but they are also important to the middle level learner. Just as the middle school level is an important focus for research and understanding, so is the middle level learner (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

Bishop and Harrison (2021) defined why the middle level learner is unique. The authors explained that middle school students need an education that is responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging. Booker (2018) revealed that the middle level learner is

unique with unique needs as the middle level learner experiences a time of discovery and reflection. According to Bishop and Harrison (2021), middle level learners thrive in cooperative environments that are affirming and inclusive, environments that are safe and built on connections and relationships. The authors explained that the peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student connections and relationships contribute to this affirming and inclusive environment that simultaneously builds on the necessary constructs of belonging and connectedness. Middle level learners need to feel confident and comfortable when exploring and discussing different people groups and cultures; they also need access to materials inside the classroom walls they may not otherwise have access to outside of school. This content should also thoughtfully challenge bias, perceptions, attitudes, and prejudice as middle level learners are working to establish who they are, who they will be, and what they will believe in (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

School House System: How

Establishing a school-wide house system begins by determining the houses that will be created within the school (Bryant, 2021; Gandy, 2019; RCA, 2021). Literature on houses agrees that house names, shields/crests, colors, flags and other symbolic representations hold meaning that is often culturally or historically relevant (Bryant, 2021; Dulwich College, 2021; Gandy, 2019; RCA, 2021). Staff and students are first sorted into the houses (Bryant, 2021; Dulwich College, 2021; RCA, 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022). Sometimes this is done with purpose, other times it is a random sorting. Dierenfield (1975) explained that schools in England sort students purposefully to ensure that there is an appropriate mix of various student qualities within each house. Nevertheless, staff and students remain in the sorted house; the ability to change houses does not exist (Dulwich College, 2021; RCA, 2021). This sorting takes place vertically, to ensure that students across grade levels are placed in houses together; staff and school personnel are

also sorted into houses (Dierenfield, 1975). Including all personnel in the sorting and house placements is vitally important for the academic, social, and relational growth of staff and students (Bryant, 2021). Within the houses, there are many opportunities and group activities (Bryant, 2021). Throughout the year, students partake in the opportunities while also competing in other ways to earn house points (Bryant, 2021; Dierenfield, 1975; Gandy, 2019; RCA, 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022). House leaders, typically students, help to delegate these opportunities and to control house systems (Dierenfield, 1975; RCA, 2021). An important factor to note is that points are always earned, never taken away (Gandy, 2019; RCA, 2021). At the end of the year, a winning house, the house that has earned the most points throughout the year, is rewarded with a celebration (Gandy, 2019; RCA, 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022). Current research on house systems focuses on collegiate level structures or privately funded structures (Bryant, 2021; Gandy, 2019; RCA, 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022); it does not include the lived experiences of those placed within house systems, and it does not include voices from the public-school setting.

School House System: Why

Research connected to the reasons for implementing a house system includes guiding frameworks, meta-analytical reviews, collegiate structures, and survey-based quantitative studies (Korpershoek et al., 2020; Pekel et al., 2018; Willis & Bryant, 2022). While perspectives and lived experiences are missing from the research, it is still important to explore how the research develops a reason for the implementation of structures that may support belonging and connectedness. A sense of belonging and connectedness are important to the overall success of students; the two factors also positively influence student outcomes (Korpershoek et al., 2020; Pekel et al., 2018; Vang & Nishina, 2021). This is true for school climate as well (NSCC, 2007, 2021; Preble & Gordon, 2011; Piscatelli & Lee, 2011; Thapa et al., 2013). The purpose of the

implementation of a school-wide house system is to foster belonging and connection, to encourage student success, and to positively influence the school climate (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; Gandy, 2019; RCA, 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022). Dulwich College (2021) explained that house systems benefit student well-being through peer relationships, role models, and the maturation that comes from leadership. House systems create a space where students can be fully valued and appreciated (McBride & Gieselmann, 2018). This is because a community and family structure are created (Dulwich College, 2021). McBride and Gieselmann (2018) explained that school is about more than just teaching academics. According to Dierenfield (1975) house systems can help schools discover how to move beyond a singular academic focus. House systems also allow for the development of relationships, providing the opportunity for members of each house to connect deeply with others in the same house (Dierenfield, 1975). Gandy (2019) explained that houses provide an immediate identity. This sense of belonging creates pride and the capacity for individual growth, fostering the development of leadership skills, and encouraging collaboration and healthy competition (Dulwich College, 2021; Johnston, 2020). Research suggests that school-wide house systems can offer many positive things to educational institutions and school climates (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; Gandy, 2019; RCA, 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022). However, a house system requires specific elements of implementation (Bryant, 2021; Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; Gandy, 2019; RCA, 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022). Still, as Osterman (2000) stated, changing systems may be the only way to achieve the positive gains desired.

School-Wide Systems: Implementation

When deciding to change systems, reform practices, and implement new processes like a school-wide house system, schools have many things to consider. Reform requires a supportive

climate, leadership, time, and focus (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Exner-Cortens et al. (2020) determined that implementation efforts to create reform and change must center around three things: the setting, the provider, and the process. Keeping these things in mind, implementation efforts must also focus on the goals and the overall why of the chosen implementation (Curtis, 2020; DeMink-Carthew & Netcoh, 2019); there must be adequate efforts-to-goal alignment in order to drive the intentionality need for successful implementation (Curtis, 2020). DuFour and Eaker (2005) explained that change is a difficult process because change rarely goes smoothly; change is also easier to initiate than to sustain. Still, DuFour and Eaker (2005) found that exploring the capacity to change can be fostered within a learning environment. Furthermore, making changes and reforms is important because it is through the implementation of effective systems that more positive outcomes can occur (Durlak & Dupree, 2008). National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, & TB Prevention (U.S.) & Division for School Health (2009) related implemented systems to positive student outcomes; programs and strategies that are intentionally implemented in relation to school connectedness can have an outstanding influence on the health and education outcomes of students.

One thing to consider when deciding on the potential of school-wide house system implementation is the importance of leadership (Bakari et al., 2017; Gordon et al., 2019; McCarly et al., 2016; Peterson & Deal, 1998). Because leaders influence innovation, creativity, and capacity for change, the support of organizational leaders is absolutely necessary for organizational change to occur (Bakari et al., 2017). Another thing to consider is the support and training needed for successful implementation. Sanetti and Collier-Meek (2019) explained that system-level intervention requires intervention fidelity and implementation support strategies. Successful implementation also necessitates training for those involved with the fidelity of the

new systems (Bradshaw et al., 2009). Exner-Cortens et al. (2020) found that successful implementation efforts considered teacher attitudes, perceptions of climate, and training and development systems. Finally, implementation of a school-wide system requires adequate planning prior to implementation. School-wide initiatives require plans that incorporate teachers, administrators, students, and families (Rosenberg & Jackman, 2003); these plans must focus on both school-level and classroom-level implementation (Okonofua et al., 2016; Vollet et al., 2017). According to Anderson and Ritter (2017), creating a plan can be extremely beneficial to schools seeking to do better because plans put in place systems where staff and stakeholders have access to data and can collaborate and communicate on that data. Plans are effective when they include the entire school community through the alignment of resources, prioritization of suggestions and choices, and creation of new partnerships (Cary et al., 2020). Our schools need to be places of systems and school-wide initiatives that foster empathetic and equitable engagement (Koppelman, 2020). Implementation efforts should focus on community building, modeling and mentoring, positive relationships, and student-centered experiences (Booker et al., 2018). A school-wide house system has the potential to serve this purpose, deeply connecting students to others and developing the belonging that is necessary for success and well-being, further impacting the overall school climate in positive ways.

Summary

Schools have sought to understand the factors that influence school climate and culture for decades. Researchers seeking to establish what creates a school climate and culture that is beneficial to both staff and students have also explored these things. Stakeholders and administrators lean on established frameworks to determine what is needed in order to develop a positive school climate that promotes a successful and affirming culture. The theory of

motivation and self-determination theory both detail pathways to individual success and can be applied to the school setting as processes, relationships, and services are created to ensure student success. Progressivism, constructivism, and Gestalt psychology further connect to climate and culture as philosophies and psychology support the idea of a systemic child-centered education. These theoretical, philosophical, and psychology frameworks lay the groundwork for the successful implementation of strategies and services that lead to a positive school climate and culture, one that focuses on belonging and connection, and support students' success and well-being.

School climate and culture have been studied in-depth in terms of what constitutes a climate or culture and the impact of a school climate and culture on staff and students. Research focuses on school and staff perceptions of climate and culture. It also focuses on how school climate and culture can affect the mental health and wellbeing of students. Much of this research focuses on the adolescent or middle level learner. However, the research in specific practices that may positively influence a climate and culture is lacking. One practice absent from the research that influences school climate and culture is the implementation of a school-wide house system. House systems have been demonstrated to provide the connectedness and belongingness that are linked to a positive school climate and culture, especially when considering the middle level learner. By examining the history of school-wide house systems, how they are implemented, and why they are used, schools (stakeholders, administration, employees) can better understand the impact that the successful implementation of policies, strategies, and services within a school-wide house system can have on school climate and culture. By looking at the specific experience of one middle school's implementation of a school-wide house system, schools (stakeholders, administration, employees) can more fully understand the way in which a house system can be

implemented at the middle school level and the way in which that implementation can positively influence the perception of climate and culture for staff and students.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to explore and describe the perceptions of school climate for staff and students as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system program. This case study was completed at the middle school level at a middle school located in Virginia. At the time of the research, the perceptions of school climate were generally defined as the connection staff and students have to the school and the quality of their daily school life. A case study design fits this research for the way in which case studies help to investigate activities within a bounded system (Stake, 1985). This chapter details the participants (staff, students, and administrators) of the study as well as the procedural elements related to approval and permissions, data collection and analysis, and trustworthiness of the study. Approval and permissions that were obtained are included in this chapter. The social constructivist interpretive framework that guided the research and the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions will also be considered. Beyond those assumptions, trustworthiness will also be discussed. Each of these constructs was especially helpful to the determination of my positionality as a researcher and my involvement in the house system and the school as an educator and leader.

Research Design

Case study research is a valid and predominate option for educational research (Barth & Thomas, 2012; Yasir et al., 2019). As it is commonly used in education, case study research maintains a story-like component and structure that helps support the data sharing and analysis which includes elements like interviews, field notes, questionnaires, and field reports (Yasir et al., 2019). Yin (2018) explained that case studies include variables beyond data points and rely

on multiple sources of evidence. Stake (1985) determined that case studies are helpful when investigating activities within a specific set of circumstances. According to Creswell and Poth (2018) a case study involves real-life instances and researchers focus on things that are in progress, and Gerring (2004) included that case study research is usually written to understand contexts that are undefined, unknown, and/or unstudied. This undefined, unknown, and/or unstudied (Gerring, 2004) idea supports the study of house systems as there is currently a paucity in research on the subject. Each of these understandings support the appropriateness utilizing an intrinsic case study design (Stake, 1985) because the case itself is the focus of the study and research; the intrinsic case study will be used to explore perceptions of school climate at the middle school level through the implementation of a school-wide house system based on the house system created at the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia (The Ron Clark Academy [RCA], 2021).

As Yin (2018) explained, there are specific components of a case study (the questions of the study, the study's propositions, the case, data analysis and linking to propositions, and the study's interpretations), and each of these components pairs with the proposed topic of implementation systems and perceptions of school climate as they relate to a house system. The questions developed for this study helped describe and explore an educational setting and the school climate created as a result of a school wide house system. The case, being defined and bounded, included a specific setting at a middle school in Virginia that was partaking in the school-wide implementation of a house system at the time of the study, bounded by the setting, the time frame of implementation, and the group (staff/students) participating in the house system. Yin (2018) explained that data analysis and linking could include a mixed-methods approach when utilizing the case study framework. This makes a case study design appropriate

for this research because the mixed-methods approach included appropriate data collection sources for a case study: interviews, valid and reliable questionnaires, journal prompts, and physical artifacts.

Research Questions

It is important for school faculty to work towards a positive school climate because research suggests that a positive climate directly impacts several student outcomes; it can impact motivation, achievement, well-being, social health, emotional health, and overall health (National School Climate Council [NSCC], 2021). I sought to better understand school-wide implementation efforts, specifically those associated with a school-wide house system and the way that implementation influences perceptions of school climate. Maslow's (1954) theory of motivation and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) helped to establish a theoretical framework for this study. Other constructs to consider are belonging and connectedness. These two constructs are linked to students' perceptions of school climate (NSCC, 2021). The problem focuses on the question of how do stakeholders, faculty, and staff create a positive school climate, and what implementation efforts positively influence perceptions of school climate? I investigated the implementation efforts associated with a school-wide house system and the possible perceptions of school climate as a result of those implementation efforts through the research questions that were used to guide this study.

Central Research Question

In what ways do stakeholders, faculty, and staff implement a house system with the goal of creating a positive school climate?

Sub-Question One

In what ways does the implementation of a house system at the middle school level influence administrator, student, and staff member perceptions of school climate?

Sub-Question Two

What instructional, behavioral, and/or motivational practices are implemented through the creation of a house system?

Setting and Participants

The setting connected to this qualitative case study was Blue Mountain Middle School, a pseudonym given to the site school, located in southwest Virginia and a selection of the students and staff attending the middle school represent the participants. The middle school was chosen because it is a location that participated in the school-wide initiative of the implementation of a house system during the time of the study. The school adopted the house system from the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia (RCA, 2021). The houses adopted at this middle school are similar to house systems found around the globe (Dulwich College, 2021; RCA, 2021). This particular middle school was chosen because all members of the middle school participated in the house system during the time of the study; all staff members, teachers, administrators, and students were members of one of six houses.

Setting

The setting of this qualitative case study was a middle school in southwest Virginia. A middle school was chosen because the middle level learner is uniquely situated as the focus for research and understanding as it is a time of tremendous growth and development for students (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Middle school is also a unique time period for the development of relationships, and practices at the middle level have the potential to directly influence student

development (Anderman, 2003; Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Hoy & Hannum, 1997). Therefore, it was important to select a middle school for two reasons: the developmental age of the middle level student, and the participation in a school-wide initiative connected to the school's overall climate.

At the time of the study, the particular middle school used for this study consisted of three grade levels. The school had sixth grade, seventh grade, and eighth grade. Students in this school district attended four different elementary schools, and those four schools fed into this one middle school. The middle school had a unique administrative structure with three principals. One principal oversaw a single grade level of students, and the principal followed the group of students throughout the three years of middle school in order to establish and maintain relationships. Hamre and Pianta (2001) concluded that establishing and maintaining relationships is important to student success. Of the three principals, one was considered the head principal of the middle school and reported to administration at the district level.

Each grade level and each staff member, including the three grade level principals participated in one of the houses established at the middle school and adopted from The Ron Clark Academy (2021). The Academy has four original houses and recently added four sister houses to the original four for a total of eight houses. School systems that adopt the house system are free to choose the houses they bring into their own schools. Blue Mountain Middle School used a combination of six houses from the available eight. Six houses were chosen based on the number of students at the middle school. Research suggests that house systems are implemented to support and facilitate belonging, connection, student success, and a positive school climate (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; Gandy, 2019; RCA, 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022).

This case study sought to determine if the implementation of a house system might influence staff and student perceptions of school climate at the particular middle school in question.

Participants

According to the Virginia Department of Education (2022), the middle school in southwest Virginia had approximately 887 total students and 70 teachers at the time of the study. Sixth grade had 264 students, seventh grade had 331 students, and eighth grade had 292 students. Across the different grade levels, 404 students were female and 483 were male. Of this overall student population, 68.7% were White, 17% were Hispanic, 8% were African American, 4% identified as multiple races, and 2.4% were Asian. English language learners made up 8% of the overall population, students with a disability made up 16.1% of the population, and 42.7% of the population was economically disadvantaged. There were also students attending this school that were homeless. This data represents the overall participant pool for the setting of this case study at the time of the study.

From the overall participant pool at the middle school used for this case study, specific choices were made to best represent the house system used at the middle school. Participants in this study were the staff and students on the school's house leadership team at the time of the study. For each house, there were two staff leaders that supported the overall mission of the initiative and implementation of the school-wide system. Beyond the staff support, there was a school house leadership team made up of only 8th grade students. Each of the six houses was represented on the 8th grade house leadership team. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research to intentionally choose those individuals that may help to inform understandings of the research in question. Due to the nature of their involvement in the house system and their connection to the implementation of the overall house

system school-wide, the student house leaders and the 12 staff house leaders were considered as potential participants for this study and invited to participate. The ideal count for the nature of this study was to be five students, five staff members, and one administrator for a total of eleven total participants.

Research Positionality

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested certain interpretive frameworks and philosophical assumptions that might guide research and help determine a researcher's positionality. As a social-constructivist researcher, I am interested in exploring the lived experiences of individuals situated within the contexts of educational settings. In completing research within an educational setting, certain philosophical assumptions should be considered. These assumptions include ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. Beyond an interpretive framework and investigation of my personal philosophical assumptions, my role within the research as someone directly involved with the research study, data, site, and participants was considered.

Interpretive Framework

Understanding a personal interpretive framework is important because we all have certain assumptions, and it is these assumptions that guide the development of our frameworks and research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An interpretive framework that will guide my research is social constructivism. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe social constructivism as a framework that explores where people live and work, is shaped by interpretation, and allows individuals to describe their lived experiences. At the time of the study, I was an educator interested in exploring the school climate where I worked. I wanted to better understand the school climate of the middle school by exploring recent school-wide implementation efforts. Research suggests that school climate is incredibly important and directly influences many different student

outcomes such as motivation, achievement, well-being, social health, emotional health, and overall health (NSCC, 2021). Using a social constructivist framework to explore issues of school climate and school-wide implementation efforts was necessary as the lived experiences of the students and faculty and each of their individual experiences helped shape the understandings developed during interviews, journal writing, observations, and analysis.

Philosophical Assumptions

According to Creswell and Poth (2018) philosophical assumptions help the researcher determine the different and unique realities represented within the study and their potential influence over the developed themes in the study. They also help to support the development of the contexts of the research by allowing the researcher to be immersed within the research, recognizing the balance between the subjective and objective nature of the immersion-based connection. As the subjective and objective nature of the study was determined, any bias and values that existed were recognized and set aside in order to not have influence over the case study. The philosophical assumptions that I used to guide the intrinsic case study were ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions.

Ontological Assumption

It is important to understand one's positionality as a researcher. This is because our perspectives, beliefs, and frameworks shape the nature of our research. As explained by Creswell and Poth (2018), ontological assumptions deal with reality and the way in which reality is seen in a variety of ways. These different realities are seen by the researcher and by those being studied, and researchers must make sense of these different realities as themes are developed. By linking my framework of social constructivism with ontological beliefs, I investigated the varying realities through studying the lived experiences of those involved in the study. It was important

to understand that my reality as an educator and instructional coach within the studied middle school and as a participant with the implemented house system may differ from the realities of others partaking in the study. This was because I had an active role in the implementation of the house system and helped to create some of the systems in place connected to the school-wide house system. It was also important to understand that my belief in one reality and one truth may differ from the participants in the study. I believe that both reality and truth are found in God; He is the creator, He is omnipotent, He is absolute. I believe in His eternality, mercy, and grace, and perfect coherence is found only in Him. During the study, I understood that participants in the study could have differing viewpoints connected to truth and the reality they constructed through their own lived experiences. As a researcher, my goal was not to express my views or beliefs but to understand that participants could have differing viewpoints, beliefs, realities, and truths throughout the study, and these things could influence their perceptions and perspectives. While studying school climate with a focus on specific school-wide implementation efforts, I needed to ensure that there was time for participants to clearly detail the ways in which the implementation efforts impacted their lives at school (and beyond) and their personal and professional experiences with the implementation efforts. Each individual that worked during the implementation viewed the implementation efforts through a unique lens, and understanding the unique lens of each participant was crucial to the development of themes during the study.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption is also important for qualitative research. With this assumption, research becomes subjective as the researcher becomes closely involved within the field being researched. Experiencing the field of research being studied helps develop the context for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through a framework of social constructivism,

epistemological beliefs hold that reality can be, “co-constructed between the researcher and the researched” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 35). Still, I recognize that being the researcher set me apart from the participants; the participants in this study did not co-construct as researchers, but the knowledge, thoughts, beliefs, and insights they brought were valuable to the study. As the founder of the implementation effort being studied (a school-wide house system), and as a teacher and instructional coach at the middle school where the study took place, I was deeply immersed in the area and processes being studied, and I was connected to those being studied. I also studied school-wide house systems at the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia, deepening my connection to both the systems and individuals involved in creating the systems (RCA, 2021). Epistemological assumptions were important to this research because the experiences, interactions, and interpretations that I have differed from the participants. This was also true for the ways in which we engaged with the environment as it relates to the creation and implementation of the school wide house system. Still, my involvement with the house system and my interpretations were safeguarded through researcher journaling and member checking.

Axiological Assumption

A final assumption that is important to qualitative research is axiological. Through axiological assumptions, researchers understand that values and bias exist and will be inherently linked to the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that axiological assumptions allow researchers to be open and honest about the values and biases they carry, sharing them with participants, and using them alongside those of the participants to make sense of the study. As someone with a social constructivist framework, my axiological assumptions guided my connection to participants in the study, as I was able to honor the values they brought to the study while also sharing mine. Personally, I know that I view the implementation of a school-

wide house system positively, and that I am passionate about overall practices that influence school climate. I have seen the power in the implementation, and I have seen the ways in which it can impact belonging and connectedness, having a positive influence on school climate. However, I did not allow my positive lens to shift the focus off the viewpoints, opinions, interpretations, and lived experiences of those in the study. Axiological assumptions allowed me to position myself within the research without overshadowing the research, study, or information shared from participants.

Researcher's Role

With a qualitative case study, the research's role within the study is direct and explicit (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During the time period in which the case study took place, I was directly involved with the research and data collection, the observations and examinations of documents and artifacts, and the questions utilized through interviews and journal writing were personally created through my investment and interest in the practices occurring within the school and connected to the school culture. Karagiozis (2018) determined that it is important for the researcher to examine his/her role within the research by acknowledging situational subjectivity, expressing sensitivity to participants, and maintaining a vulnerable voice. Through an examination of my role as the researcher, I had a clear understanding of the personal connections I had to the house system and the climate at my place of employment during the time of the study. This understanding included my own perspectives, biases, values, and behaviors that could influence the research experiences and opportunities if not bracketed (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Understanding these things was important to my ability to make objective observations and communications as I mitigated research that included participants

with whom I had prior relationships and knowledge and a site at which I was employed when the research took place.

Karagiozis (2018) suggested that determining my role within the research would give me the ability to prove that I am competent and skilled in my ability to grasp truths and understandings shared through a data collection and analysis process that was not influenced by my own perspectives, biases, values, and behaviors as they related to the participants and site of this intrinsic case study. Beyond that, I understood that my voice was present in the research as I was directly connected to the community and climate of the middle school. At the time of the study, my connection to the community included being employed at the site of the study as a teacher; while I was a house system leader at the site, I did not hold a supervisory role over the participants. Still, my voice was present in an unauthoritative and unbiased manner; participants did not view me as an authority figure and felt no obligation to participate. This unauthoritative viewpoint was important as I did serve in an authoritative position over the staff participants and students as an instructional coach and educator; still, this study took place outside of the classroom and was beyond curricular expectations. The viewpoint was reflexive and self-reflective in order to adequately express my role within the research.

Procedures

Creswell and Poth (2018) provided helpful information on the procedural pathways for qualitative research. For this intrinsic case study, the first procedural element was seeking approval from the international review board (IRB); as this approval was sought, ethical standards were considered. The IRB approval letter is located in Appendix A. Beyond approval from the IRB, it was necessary to gain local approvals (consent and assent) from the middle school site and the administrative, staff, and student participants; this study involved both

parental consent and student assent. As approval was sought from the site and participants, permission to use materials and artifacts was also obtained.

Approval from the IRB, local approvals, and material-based permissions were all obtained prior to beginning the study. As the study began, participants were contacted, and they were given information concerning the nature of their participation in the study and the purpose of the study. At that time, they were also given information about the voluntary nature of the study. Consent and assent were obtained from the participants (adult staff and student minors partaking in the study). As the study's data collection began, participants were provided information about both the purpose and use of the data. Participants took part in interviews and journal writing; data from questionnaires and physical artifacts were also utilized in the study.

Data was transcribed, and analytical memos were utilized. Data was analyzed using descriptive and value-based coding and categorizing (Saldana, 2011). Themes that emerged were recorded, and interrelationships that developed between the data and the research questions helped to guide understandings. Triangulation was achieved, consisting of methodological and data triangulation as various data sources and analysis methods were used. Findings, understandings, perspectives, and any contrary information was reported. The reporting respected the privacy of the participants through the use of fictitious names; the actual site name and location were not shared. All data information will be stored for three years and then deleted.

Permissions

Permissions for this case study included IRB approval, site-based permissions, company permissions, and participant permissions. IRB approval was needed to begin the study. Once that was given, site-based permissions were obtained. Site-based permissions included obtaining permission at the district-level to complete the study at a school within the district and to use

information pertaining to demographic information at the school. District-level permissions were also needed to utilize the questionnaire data from the middle school. Site-based permissions from school administration were needed to conduct the research within the middle school and conduct data collection methods with the staff and students at the middle school. Permission to work with the staff and students were obtained through consent and assent information, letters, and signatures. Permission information will be included in Appendix B.

Recruitment Plan

The sampling used within this intrinsic case study was purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 1987). The participant pool for this case study consisted of five staff members that participated as leaders with the house system at the middle school during the time of the study and five students that participated actively with the house system as student house leaders during the time of the study. One of the three administrators was asked to participate in the case study as well. This made for a total of eleven participants in the case study. To recruit the eleven participants for this case study that made up the study's sample, each of the 36 student leaders and 12 staff leaders were considered. This is also true of the administrator. From that sample pool, the goal was to select five participants from the staff and student groups and one administrator. During the recruitment process, information about the study purpose, data collection, and research goals was shared, as well as information about the voluntary nature of the study. This process included informed consent; participants were given adequate study information, they had the opportunity to consider all options and ask questions, they had time to comprehend the nature of the study, and they were able to voluntarily agree or disagree to participate. Informed consent information can be found in Appendix C. This recruitment plan and purposeful sampling was necessary in this case study because the participants in the case

study needed to be directly involved with the house system implemented at the middle school; their direct involvement with the house system allowed for the rich descriptions and perceptions to be shared throughout the data collection process (interviews and journal prompts) (Merriam, 2002).

Data Collection Plan

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), it is important to determine the appropriate data sources, data collection procedures, and approach to data analysis. With a case study, many different forms of data collection are appropriate depending on the conditions of the case study; for case studies, data collection can be done in the following ways: interviews, observations, documents, journal prompts, and artifacts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Yin (2018) added that a case study could involve a mixed-methods approach, meaning that quantitative elements could be present within the study, but that the quantitative elements are presented within the study without the use of advanced statistics. For this study, the mixed-methods approach consisted of the inclusion of Likert style surveys. Mishra and Dey (2022) explained that data collection sources are important when considering the qualitative case study because it is from the data that themes and understanding emerges as a result of coding. The purpose of this particular qualitative case study was to explore and describe the perceptions of school climate for staff and students as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system program. Data sources that I used for this study included individual interviews, physical artifacts, journal prompts, and surveys.

Qualitative research has a unique analytical protocol. Weckesser and Denny (2022) determined that qualitative analysis is interpretive, includes a narrative approach, and is thematic. Qualitative analysis must also be transparent in order to develop trustworthiness in the

decisions made. Throughout the analytical process, coding and thematic understandings that begin as inductive analysis become deductive, and decisions on the findings are able to be made (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative analysis must also be responsive, exhaustive, exclusive, and sensitive. Locke et al. (2022) suggested that qualitative research should be iterative and progressive as researchers must directly engage with the data to generate and refine the focus of the study. The research and literature on qualitative analysis guided the analytical structures of this intrinsic case study because the analysis of this intrinsic case study included narrative elements that led to the suggestions of themes, maintained transparency to create trust in the process and findings, progress from inductive to deductive, and engage with the data in a responsive and exhaustive manner to focus on the study and overall questions related to the research.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

Creswell and Poth (2018) and Yin (2018) explained that interviews are a very important part of case study evidence, and the interviews conducted for this case study will be a predominate data source. According to Yin (2003), a case study is used to study particular, real-life, social issues in order to understand the how and the why of those issues, and individual interviews help invite the researcher into the experiences and perceptions felt within those particular, real-life, social issues. Interviews were necessary to help explore and describe the perceptions of school climate for staff and students as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system program. Specifically, interviews helped understand the individual perceptions of the school's climate as a result of the implementation of the house system and showcased the individual stories connected to the staff and students involved with the house system.

For this case study, interviews were conducted with the staff and students on the school's house leadership team. For each of the six houses represented at the school, the leadership team included the two staff leaders that support the overall mission of the initiative and implementation of the school-wide system; it also included the school's house leadership team made up of only 8th grade students. This house leadership structure was true for the site at the time of the study. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), purposeful sampling can be used in qualitative research. This helps to intentionally choose individuals that might potentially inform understandings of the research in question. Through purposeful sampling, the 36 student house leaders and the 12 staff house leaders were considered as potential participants for this study. School administration was also given a voice in this study. Interviews with staff members were conducted online using a platform that can conduct both video and audio recording services. Interviews with students were conducted in person using an online recording system. Interviews happened in person and were conducted at the school in a setting that was neutral to all participants involved with the research process and procedures. Interviews with staff were expected to take 30 minutes. Student interviews did not exceed 30 minutes. The average interview time for participants in the study fell between 15 minutes and 30 minutes.

Individual Interview Questions: Staff

The following questions were utilized for the individual interview questions with staff in order to support the understanding of the implementation of the house system and its potential influence on school climate:

1. Describe your current position at the middle school and the most enjoyable aspect of your current position.
2. How would you personally define a positive school climate? (CRQ)

3. What practices might occur at schools that have a positive and supportive school climate? (CRQ)
4. In recent years, what practices have occurred to address the school climate at your school? (CRQ)
5. Summarize the implementation of the house system at the middle school. (SQ1)
6. What professional development practices were provided over the course of the house system implementation? (SQ2)
7. Please describe your current connection to the middle school house system. (SQ1)
8. Describe how you personally have utilized the house system in your classroom and/or educational practices. (SQ2)
9. Describe the successful practices you believe are a result of the house system at the middle school. (SQ2)
10. Describe the challenges you believe are a result of the house system at the middle school. (SQ2)
11. In what ways do you believe the implementation of the house system influenced the practices at the middle school? (SQ1)
12. In what ways do you believe the implementation of the house system influenced relationships at the middle school? (SQ1)
13. In what ways do you believe the implementation of the house system influenced student belonging at the middle school? (SQ1)
14. In what ways do you believe the implementation of the house system influenced school climate at the middle school? (SQ1)

15. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with the house system at the middle school?

The questions created for the interview were established to focus on the central issue connected to the research and the purpose of the research: the purpose of this case study was to explore and describe the perceptions of school climate for staff and students as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system program. This set of questions was reviewed by experts in the field prior to conducting the official interview with the case study participants.

Individual Interview Questions: Student

The following questions were utilized for the individual interview questions with students in order to support the understanding of the implementation of the house system and its potential influence on school climate:

1. Describe how this year of middle school is going for you; what are some highs and lows of this year so far?
2. How would you personally define a positive school climate? (CRQ)
3. What do you think happens at schools that have a positive and supportive school climate? (CRQ)
4. In recent years, what things do you recognize that have occurred to address the school climate at your school? (CRQ)
5. Summarize the implementation of the house system at this middle school. (SQ1)
6. What kinds of things do you believe have happened at this school as a result of the house system being created? (SQ2)
7. Please describe your current connection to the middle school house system. (SQ1)

8. Describe how your teachers have used the house system in the classroom or with their teaching. (SQ2)
9. Describe the successful practices you have experienced as a result of the house system at the middle school. Are there any good things you can think of? (SQ2)
10. Describe the challenges you have experienced as a result of the house system at the middle school. Are there any bad things you can think of? (SQ2)
11. In what ways do you believe the implementation of the house system changed the way things are done at the middle school? (SQ1)
12. In what ways do you believe the implementation of the house system changed relationships at the middle school? (SQ1)
13. In what ways do you believe the implementation of the house system influenced student belonging at the middle school? (SQ1)
14. In what ways do you believe the implementation of the house system influenced school climate at the middle school? (SQ1)
15. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with the house system at the middle school?

The questions created for the student interview were established to focus on the central issue connected to the research and the purpose of the research: the purpose of this case study was to explore and describe the perceptions of school climate for staff and students as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system program. This set of questions was altered from the original staff set to be written in a more student-focused manner with more student-focused language. This set of questions was reviewed by experts in the field prior to conducting the official interview with the case study participants.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

The individual interviews were analyzed in order to support the development of themes related to the overall research purpose of determining the influence of the school-wide system on the school's climate. Interviews were first transcribed. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explained the importance of multiple sets of transcribed data that are analyzed both by hand and computerized to maintain the findings and developed ideas. While storing the transcriptions and materials on the computer is a helpful first step in the analysis process, Andrelichik (2016) determined that a text-based preparation of the data was best suited for qualitative research as is a generous reading of the data to gather insights and understandings. This means the data should be analyzed and marked by hand; this process was used in this case study as a means to review and reexamine the transcriptions repetitively to exhaust all understandings. Interview transcriptions were shared with participants for validation. Contextual and descriptive elements of the interviews were also provided as Dierckx de Casterlé et al. (2021) explained that these elements are necessary to support the understandings of the purpose of the research.

After an initial review of the interviews, coding was completed. Allsop et al. (2022) explained that coding occurs by deciding which words and phrases within the interview have meaning and help convey a meaningful message. Codes are given to specific words and phrases throughout the transcribed interviews. Saldana (2011) explained that coding can occur through word and phrase recognition that will help to develop clusters; clustering ideas helps lead to the creation of categories. For this case study, this process began with open coding; this allowed for a focus on words and phrases without yet determining meaning. The open coding was also completed using what Allsop et al. (2022) defined as the entire interview method, completing the open coding process over the entire interview before developing themes. The coding was also

descriptive and value-based (Saldana, 2011). The coding process was completed for each interview as the presence of identifiable codes is necessary to develop generalizable themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). After completing the coding of the entire interview, categories were established as they reoccurred across the data set. Categorizing the data helped to establish patterns that led to deeper understandings (LeCompte, 2000). This also led to the development of themes. What occurred through the analytical coding process was the development of interrelationships to make plausible abductions and preferable deductions concerning the overall research questions and how they related to the developed codes, categories, and themes.

Once the patterns and themes were developed, those patterns and themes were used to establish the structures that helped describe the program or problem being studied; the patterns and themes developed from the interviews in this case study were used to support the understandings of the lived experiences and perceptions of the staff and students at the middle school where the house system was implemented, and offered valuable information about the school's climate as a result of the implementation of the house system. While a software system like Nvivo could be used to support the development of codes within the transcribed interviews, the coding and theme development happened by hand.

Physical Artifacts Data Collection Approach

Creswell and Poth (2018) and Yin (2018) both described the use of physical artifacts as an option for case study research. This is because physical artifacts can help in the development of understanding components and perspectives related to the overall case study (Yin, 2018). When using physical artifacts as a source of evidence for a case study, the artifacts can be either collected or observed. In order to explore and describe the perceptions of school climate for staff and students as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system program,

several physical artifacts were observed and documented that connect to the house system implementation. These artifacts include policies, procedures, professional development programs, staff and student training, and documented timelines.

The physical artifacts used to explore and describe the perceptions of school climate for staff and students as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system program consisted of policies, procedures, professional development programs, staff and student trainings, and documented timelines. At the time of the study, the school system that implemented the house system utilized Google systems, and the necessary artifacts were housed within folders saved on the Google systems, so they were observed by reading through the various artifacts. There were specific policies and procedures connected to the house system and utilized school-wide that contributed to deeper understandings of the implementation. It was important to review these policies and procedures and include a summary of those policies and procedures within the data collection of the case study. Throughout the implementation of the house system at the middle school, there were opportunities for staff and students to participate in professional development and training in connection to school-wide house systems. The professional development and training tools were necessary to view in order to understand the original goals and missions of the school-wide systems and how those goals and missions were articulated to staff and students. Finally, because the house system has been implemented for more than a year at the middle school, there is a documented timeline of events and procedures that school follows. This timeline was beneficial because it contributed to research by developing a deeper understanding of the implementation; this understanding of implementation helped to frame the interview and journal responses around the timeline of implementation.

Physical Artifacts Data Analysis Plan

An analysis of the physical artifacts observed within this case study was conducted in a summative and evaluative manner. Physical artifacts were important for this study because their analysis contributed to the historical and descriptive understandings of the case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Andreotta et al. (2019) determined that physical artifacts can help support and verify hypotheses while adding relevance and descriptive information. As the artifacts were observed, analyzed, and summarized within the case study, they helped to provide information on the overall sense of the school's climate during the implementation year of the house system. They also helped support and map out an understanding of the entire implemented system in a factual and time sensitive manner that was not always given throughout the interview or journal prompt analysis. The physical artifacts were observed, analyzed, and summarized in order to help describe an understanding of the lived experiences found within the interviews and journal prompts; because the artifacts included dated materials and timelines, this happened in a summative and numerical manner as analytical connections were made. Saldana (2011) suggested using analytical memos during analysis. As the observations and recording of the physical artifacts occurred, analytical memos were used to help support the development of personal relationships with the artifacts, connections to the research questions, and the interrelationships between the physical artifacts and the codes, categories, and themes developed from the analysis of the interviews.

Journal Prompts Data Collection Approach

Jung et al. (2022) studied journal prompts and found that prompts have the capacity to direct and influence thinking and should be written to shape thinking and responses in a productive manner. Two specific ideas emerged from the authors' study on journal prompts: the prompt should intentionally focus on the verbiage and tense used (past tense usage enables

participants to focus on what they have personally done/experienced), and the prompt should be anchored to the participants ability to reflect on personal experiences in order for the collection of a deeper and more honest response. Beyond these findings, it is important to remain aware of participants' time, and structure the responses in a manner for authentic completion. For this reason, I used the following four journal prompts for the staff participants:

1. How do you personally feel your school is addressing school climate? Why do you feel this way?
2. Were you originally supportive of the school-wide house system? How has that support/lack of support evolved over the course of the system's implementation?
3. In your experience, what positive or negative influences has the house system had on the school's overall climate? Please use your personal experience to discuss the positive influences, negative influences, or both.
4. What are the most important relational and professional practices that have been implemented at your school as a result of the implementation of a school-wide house system, and how have those practices influenced school climate?

The journal prompts were be altered to support a more student-centered language in the following ways:

1. How do you personally feel about the climate of your school? Why do you feel this way?
2. How did you feel about the house system when it first started? How has that support/lack of support changed over two years with the house system?

3. In your experience, what positive or negative things has the house system done to the school's overall climate? Please use your personal experience to discuss what has been good, bad, or both.
4. What are the most important things that have happened at your school as a result of the implementation of a school-wide house system, and how have those things influenced school climate?

According to Yin (2003, 2018), case study research can be used to add understanding to real-life issues and social contexts. Case study research is commonly used in education, and journal prompts can help add to its story-like structure (Yasir et al., 2019). Beyond the interview questions, these journal prompts were used to help participants share parts of their stories, connection, and relationship to the house system that may not have been integral components to the interview. The interview acted as more of a conversation, but the journal prompts provided participants with the opportunity to be reflective and personally interact with the overall research questions, having time to thoughtfully construct a more detailed response. The journal prompt questions were intentionally designed focusing on verbiage, tense, and anchoring to participants' personal experiences as suggested by Jung et al. (2022). The journal prompts were given to participants in a shared Google doc template (an individualized Google doc was given to each participant to maintain confidentiality) in order to allow participants to type and record ideas on a document that automatically saved and was easy to share and access during the process of participant writing and researcher analysis.

Journal Prompts Data Analysis Plan

The journal prompt analysis was utilized in this case study to support the development of the lived experiences of the staff and students and to offer the participants opportunities to be

reflective of their personal experiences (Jung et al., 2022). Journal prompts can also support in telling the story of the development and implementation of the house system and the way in which it has potentially influenced the school's climate (Yasir et al., 2019). The journal prompts used within this qualitative study were typed responses, and the analysis was done by hand and stored across multiple systems as suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2015). The journal prompts given within this intrinsic case study were analyzed in a manner similar to the analysis of the interview questions, meaning they were analyzed to consider the development of themes.

A generous reading methodology was utilized to hand mark and code the journal prompts (Andrelchik, 2016); this helped to develop an exhaustive understanding of the lived experiences and shared ideas detailed within the journal prompts. Like the interview analysis, the generous reading was the foundation of the ability to consider the emergence of codes and turn those codes into themes. Once the codes and themes were established for the journal prompts, they were cross-examined with the codes and themes found within the interviews to support the development of relationships between the two data sets and determine the emergence of existing themes within the journal prompts and the possible emergence of new themes. Logic models were also used to show relationships between the findings within the interviews and journal prompts (Yin, 2018).

Survey Data Collection Approach

Qualitative studies can contain some quantitative data without the use of advanced statistics (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) explained that a mixed-methods approach was suitable when conducting case study research. Lund (2012) offered the idea that including quantitative elements within a qualitative study could lead to a more complete understanding, especially when considering descriptive analysis. This is because quantitative

elements often help to describe and explain causal aspects, as well as adding validity to inferences. A mixed-methods approach is appropriate for use with qualitative research when studying relationships and interactions as they occur within an educational/school setting (Froehlich et al., 2020). Still, when utilizing a mixed-methods approach, it is important to communicate the rationale of the approach to the reader. The rationale of utilizing a mixed-methods approach to explore and describe the perceptions of school climate for staff and students as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system program is that school-climate is a topic of study and consideration at the local and state levels, and the established reliable and valid surveys used at the site school during the time of the study were focused on topics directly related to the research questions (Panorama Education, n.d.; Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Service and Virginia Department of Education, 2021).

The specific surveys used for the purposes of exploring and describing the perceptions of school climate for staff and students as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system program were given to staff and students within our school building. At the time of the research, these were valid and reliable surveys that related to school climate and student and staff perceptions of school climate. Information taken from these instruments was included in the data analysis without the use of advanced statistics. One instrument is the Survey of Climate and Working Conditions (Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Service and Virginia Department of Education, 2021). This survey was given to staff and students to gain insight into feelings of connection, relationships, safety, and perceptions of learning environments. This survey was reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.7 at the respondent level and 0.8 at the school level at the time of the research (Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Service and Virginia Department of Education, 2021). Another instrument is the Panorama Education Survey of Social and

Emotional Learning (Panorama Education, n.d.). This survey is a student self-report survey that measures aspects of social and emotional health as it relates to learning. A key element from this survey was the questions on sense of belonging. This survey was reliable with Cronbach's alpha scores of .78 and .68 during the time of the research (Panorama Education, n.d.). Both of these instruments use Likert-style questions that were utilized alongside the qualitative data within this study. Access to the surveys and the specific questions and question types was given when permission to use the surveys and data was given by the IRB.

Survey Data Analysis Plan

Using what Yin (2018) described as a reliance on theoretical propositions, the information found within the questionnaires examined in this study was analyzed, condensed, and summarized to support the theoretical propositions and objectives of the study. Yin (2018) also suggested that data within a qualitative case study could be analyzed to build an explanation, and that these explanations could be used to develop causal sequences about processes. Because the data within a valid and reliable questionnaire may be more definite than personal perceptions shared within interviews and journals, it was necessary to include this quantitative piece to support the possible causal connection between perceptions of school climate and the implementation of the house system. At the time of the study, all staff and students were asked to complete the two questionnaires, and both questionnaires asked questions directly dealing with the school's overall climate and environment. More specifically, the questionnaire given during the year of implementation was altered to specifically ask about the school's house system. Having a generalized understanding in a school-wide data set, beyond the select interview group, helped contribute to a deeper understanding of the overall implementation. Descriptive statistics

concerning the frequencies and proportions of answers to the questions relating to the house system were reported.

Data Synthesis

The synthesis of the data related to this study included coded themes from the interviews and journal prompts, summative elements from the physical artifacts, and supporting information from the valid and reliable questionnaires. Yin (2018) offers a complete understanding of qualitative analysis and synthesis. The interview analysis utilized the ground up approach and the journal prompts relied on theoretical propositions; both utilized an analytical structure reliant on the development of themes. This means the interviews and journal prompt responses were investigated in a manner that considered the full response to determine more succinct understandings. Once this was completed, logic models were used to determine the connectedness of the information within the interviews and the journal prompts. Findings from the summative analysis of the artifacts were used to support descriptive and time series findings, helping to consider chronology and relationships between the themes found within the interviews and journal prompts and the implementation of the house system at the school. Finally, Yin (2018) explained that quantitative elements can be included to support the descriptive analysis of the study. The valid and reliable questionnaires were utilized to provide additional information about the relationships between the implementation of the house system and perceptions of school climate. This occurred through the study and reporting on the frequencies and proportions of student and staff answers to questions related to the implementation of the school wide house system. Synthesizing the pieces of qualitative data and adding an additional layer of quantitative support helped to offer valuable thematic-based information about the school's climate as a result of the implementation of the house system.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that trustworthiness in qualitative research could be attained by addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Including these elements within qualitative writing is similar to including information within quantitative data that confirms its validity and reliability. Trustworthiness also helps to confirm the rigor of the study (Connelly, 2016). Stahl and King (2020) suggested that qualitative research must also allow readers to learn from the rich experiences of the study; the ability to learn from the study requires trust in the processes used to build the experiences. To maintain trustworthiness, qualitative studies should also be transparent in the processes, procedures, and experiences shared (Adler, 2022; Stahl & King, 2020).

Creswell and Poth (2018) determined it is permissible to study one's personal site if multiple areas of validation and reliability are included within the study. This qualitative intrinsic case study took place at the middle school where I taught during the time of the study. This was a purposeful and necessary choice because of the use of the house system within the middle school (RCA, 2021) and the ability to study the influence of the house system on perceptions of school climate. Because of the personal connection to the site, the development of trustworthiness within the case was imperative. For this intrinsic case study, trustworthiness was developed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical considerations were also included to support the trustworthiness of the case.

Credibility

Connelly (2016) explained that credibility is used to build confidence in the procedures of qualitative research. It also helps strengthen the validity of the procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This is important in qualitative research because the procedures support the descriptive

experiences within the study (Cope, 2014). Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that credibility can be attained through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation.

Prolonged engagement is cyclical; it occurs when the researcher becomes deeply familiar with the site and subjects, uses diligent notetaking techniques, and becomes aware of internal and external influences (Stahl & King, 2020). These things are also true for persistent observations.

Triangulation supports credibility through the use of several sources in the development and noticing of patterns. Credibility can also be attained by following credible research methods and developing familiarity with the organization (Shenton, 2004).

In this case study, credibility was built through a continual review of the procedures and techniques used throughout the study. Methodological triangulation occurred through the use of multiple data collection points (interviews, document analysis, journal prompts, and surveys).

Triangulation was also used in this study through the use of varied sources of evidence (administrators, teachers, and students). Beyond that, the research consisted of prolonged engagement and persistent observation as I was situated within the site of the study during the time of the research allowing for the development of familiarity with both the site and participants.

Transferability

Qualitative research should include descriptions within the study that allow for those interested to judge the ability of the research to be transferred to their site; this is transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Connelly (2016) determined that the usefulness of a qualitative study lies in its ability to be transferred. Still, Stahl and King (2020) explained that qualitative research cannot be exactly replicated, but it can be used to expand understanding and allow readers to learn from the circumstances. This means the descriptions within the study must be very detailed

and include explicit information on the methods and data collection techniques used within the study. Through transferability, the meaning made within the study is transferable to other groups and settings outside of the bounded system within the study.

For this intrinsic case study, rich descriptive elements of the site, participants, procedures, methods, data sources, data collection techniques, and data analysis processes are included. These things help to support the transferability of the case. With this rich descriptive and detailed writing, the transferability of the case study to other sites or organizations is potentially strengthened.

Dependability

Through dependability, researchers are able to have professional peers and other researchers look through the study and approve of processes and decisions made throughout the research and findings (Cope, 2014; Stahl & King, 2020). Shenton (2004) suggested that dependability in research includes in-depth writing about the design and implementation, data collection, and the inquiry process leading to decision making. This rich and in-depth writing is necessary in order to have a successful peer review process.

For this case study, dependability was achieved through peer debriefing and a committee review of the design and implementation, data collection, and the inquiry process leading to decision making. The dissertation committee chair for this study, Dr. Amy Schechter, completed an inquiry-based audit. This intrinsic case study also included note taking, activity studying, and reliability and process logging that supported the peer debriefing and committee review as dependability is assessed by other professionals in the field (Connelly, 2016).

Confirmability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) determined that if a study has credibility, transferability, and dependability, then it has confirmability. Still, there are suggested pathways to achieve confirmability. Confirmability can be achieved through processes like triangulation and reflexivity. Nowell et al. (2017) explained that confirmability allows readers to understand the how and why of decisions made within the study. Additionally, confirmability is achieved when the preferences of the researcher are removed. This means confirmability occurs through objectivity (Adler, 2022).

This case study has confirmability because the preferences of the researcher were removed by the inclusion of an audit trail; readers have access to the step by step procedures taken throughout the entire case study process. Methodological and data triangulation were also used in this study as different methods were used to analyze the data and different data sources (interviews, journal prompts, physical artifacts, and questionnaires). Reflexivity was also utilized within the case study; this allowed the researcher to reflect on the social relationship with the site and participants and self-assess positionality throughout the research process (Adler, 2022). Reflexivity also helped the researcher maintain objectivity, exclude bias, and clear up any misunderstandings that may have occurred. This was also achieved by utilizing quoting and supporting the research with clear and data-based decisions (Cope, 2014).

Ethical Considerations

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), there are many ethical considerations that need to take place during qualitative research. Access and consent of the site and participants must be considered. Beyond that, certain measures need to be taken to ensure the ethical nature of the study including providing the participants the right to withdraw at any time, providing a clear

purpose of the study, explicitly detailing procedures, maintaining confidentiality, explaining potential risks, sharing potential benefits, and ensuring documents have shared signatures.

This case study considered ethics in several ways. I sought IRB approval; this was necessary to consider the people involved in the study, their welfare, and justice. Approval to complete the study at the research site was given by the school and district. I also ensured that privacy measures were taken and in place to protect the site and the individuals that took part in the study. This was especially important because the interviews, journal prompts, physical artifacts, and questionnaires included information from minors (students at the school/part of the house system). Consent was given from those asked to participate in the study, and assent from guardians was given as the study included minors. This consent and assent information, of course, included information on the voluntary nature of the study. It is important to include that at the time of the study, the site school has permission to use the material and house system information from the Ron Clark Academy (2021). These things were all completed before the study began and prior to data collection.

As the study and data collection took place, I had further ethical issues to consider. Specific information about the individuals was respected and was not be shared; pseudonyms were used. Interviews and journal writings took place on site in a least disruptive manner; some interviews needed to happen over Zoom or over the phone for recording purposes. Every precaution was taken to ensure the recording, safety, and security of the data/information collected; this was true for the interviews, journal prompts, observations of physical artifacts, and use of questionnaire data as well. In whatever form they took place, the interviews and journal writings were conducted in a respectful and trustworthy manner. Data from the interviews, physical artifacts, journal prompts, and questionnaires was reported fairly and honestly; this

includes reporting multiple perspectives. Any online information given or received of the participants or site was done so through secure and password protected documents and networks. This was true of all electronic materials (interview transcriptions and typed journals prompts) utilized within the data collection and analysis. Reports from the data sets were shared with both participants, stakeholders, and those reviewing the case study, and all data and information will be securely stored for three years. After that time, the information will be deleted.

Summary

In order to explore the perceptions of school climate at the middle school level as a result of the implementation of a school-wide house system, an intrinsic case study was the most appropriate research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1985). This intrinsic case study took place at Blue Mountain Middle School, a middle school that had implemented a house system at the time of the study; the staff and students at the middle school served as the participant pool, and the study drew a sample of eleven participants. A social constructivist framework was used while working with the site and students and investigating perceptions of school climate. This framework was supported by ontological, epistemological, and axiological philosophical assumptions. The framework and philosophical assumptions recognized within the research supported the development of my role within the research, data collection, analysis, and my connection to the site and participants. The intrinsic case study followed suggestions and protocols from the IRB, Creswell and Poth (2018), Maxwell (2005), and Patton (1987) for permission and recruitment guidelines supporting the ethical nature of working at educational sites and with minors and for detailing recruitment used with purposeful sampling. The data collected for this study included individual interviews, physical artifacts, journal prompts, and surveys. Each set of data was analyzed to support the creation of codes, categories, and themes;

triangulation also occurred. Finally, trustworthiness was developed in the intrinsic case study through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to explore and describe the perceptions of school climate for staff and students at Blue Mountain Middle School, a middle school that had implemented a school-wide house system at the time of the study. Data collection for the intrinsic case study included staff and student interviews and journal prompts, artifacts and documentation records related to the implementation of the house system at the middle school, and the review of records from previously given school wide surveys. The study included 11 participants; one administrator, five teachers, and five students. This chapter provides participant descriptions for each of the 11 individuals who participated in the study and presents the collected data in the form of thematic narrative explanations. Finally, this chapter offers answers to the research questions associated with the intrinsic case study.

Participants

The participants in this study included a total of 11 individuals connected to both the school site and the school wide house system. Each individual was specifically chosen due to the nature of their connection to the house system and their experience with the house system during the years of implementation. During the data collection process, the participants willingly participated in interviews and completed journal prompts. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of each participant. The 11 participants included five staff members, five students, and one administrator. Of the staff members, four were Caucasian and one was African American; there were two males and three females. The administrator involved in the study was Caucasian and female. Of the student participants, three were Caucasian, one was Indian, and one was

African American. Three of the student participants were female and two were male. Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants in terms of race, gender, and title.

Charles

Charles is an educator of 30 years whose highest level of education is a bachelor's degree. As an educator, Charles has taught at the middle school and high school levels. He has taught a variety of different courses including several different levels of history and health and PE courses. Charles has served as both an educator and an instructional coach. At the time of the study, Charles served as a house leader for one of the houses, and he was on the core development team. Charles has been to the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia. When asked about the most enjoyable aspects of teaching, Charles said, "It's those relationships that you build with students that is the most important; that's what keeps me going."

Jessica

Jessica is an educator of 19 years whose highest level of education is a bachelor's degree. During her 19 years as an educator, Jessica has taught a variety of math courses ranging from preparatory mathematics courses to International Baccalaureate courses. Jessica has taught both middle school and high including grades 8 through 12. At the time of the study, Jessica had active involvement with the house system at the school as a house leader, was engaged with the house system from the beginning of its implementation, and served as a staff house leader for her house. She has attended the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia, for professional development related to the house system. Jessica also had a small group of students as her house family group. When asked about the most enjoyable components of teaching, she said, "The most enjoyable aspect would be working with the students who enjoy learning and want to excel academically."

Lewis

Lewis is an educator of 18 years whose highest level of education is a bachelor's degree. During his 18 years as an educator, Lewis has taught an advanced geography course to middle school students. Lewis has taught in one grade level for the entirety of his career. At the time of the study, Lewis was actively involved with the house system from the beginning of its implementation and maintained a high level of engagement with the system. He had a small group of students as his house family group. When asked about his favorite part of teaching, Lewis responded, "My favorite is getting to know the kids and having fun with the kids."

Shelly

Shelly is an educator of 13 years whose highest level of education is a master's degree. Shelly has diverse teaching experiences working across three different locations and teaching both middle school language arts and special education. Shelly attended the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia, for professional development related to the house system. At the time of the study, she had been actively involved with the house system since its implementation serving as a house leader for her house; she also had a small group of students for her house family group. When discussing the most enjoyable aspects of teaching, Shelly explained, "The most enjoyable aspect is getting to watch them grow and really build that relationship."

Sadie

Sadie is a special education teacher with four years of experience. She has experience that ranges from kindergarten to 8th grade and has worked in both general education and adapted curriculum classrooms. Her highest level of education is a master's degree. During the study, Sadie participated with the house system by helping to plan activities, support pep rallies, and

meeting with her own small group of students during family group meetings. When asked about the most enjoyable parts of her job, Sadie said, “The most enjoyable part is definitely the kids!”

Alexis

Alexis is an educator and leader with over 15 years of experience. Alexis began her career working as a 4-H youth development director. For ten years, she taught in the classroom, teaching English classes across middle and high school grades. Following teaching, she served as an instructional coach. At the time of the study, Alexis worked as an administrator at Blue Mountain Middle School. She was in one of the six houses at the middle school, and worked to help facilitate school wide events and monitor staff and students during those events. When asked about the most enjoyable aspects of her job, she responded, “The most enjoyable aspect of my position is the relationship building with the students and teachers.”

Katie

Katie is an 8th grade female student at Blue Mountain Middle School. Katie has been at the middle school since 6th grade. At the time of the study, she was actively involved academically and socially in the school. She served on the student council association and as a house leader. Katie was a part of the school district before and after the implementation of a house system, and was involved in the house system for three years. During her interview, she shared that she enjoys leadership activities and the social connections she has made during her time at the middle school. When asked about this year of middle school, she stated, “It’s definitely going really good. I have the right group of friends, and I found the right people. Everything is pretty good.”

Caroline

Caroline is an 8th grade female student at Blue Mountain Middle School. Caroline has been at the middle school since 7th grade, transferring in from a different school. At the time of the study, Caroline was an academically minded student who was also engaged in athletic endeavors. While Caroline transferred into the middle school, she was still an active participant in school happenings. Caroline served on the student council and was a house leader. She actively promoted house activities by leading the school announcements, and her school spirit was evident. When asked about the school year, Caroline said, “I feel like I found my group of friends, and they were really inviting and really caring.”

Jayden

Jayden is an 8th grade male student at Blue Mountain Middle School. Jayden has been at the middle school since 6th grade, and he has been actively involved in the school system through academics and athletics; he participates in multiple sports. Jayden was a part of the school district before and after the implementation of a house system. At the time of the study, he did not serve as a house leader or on leadership committees. Like all students in the middle school, he was involved in the house system because he was sorted into a house starting in 6th grade, he was part of a house family group, and he was able to participate in all school wide house activities. When asked about this year of middle school, Jayden said, “I think middle school is going good so far.”

Brandon

Brandon is an 8th grade male student at Blue Mountain Middle School. Brandon is involved in the academic and social structures of the school. He is also an athlete. At the time of the study, Brandon was also a school leader serving on the student council and as a house leader.

He helped plan and lead the house activities each month. Brandon has was a part of the school district before and after the implementation of a house system. When discussing this school year, Brandon explained, “It is going good. I see a lot of friends, and it’s a lot more fun than the other grades.”

Amber

Amber is an 8th grade female student at Blue Mountain Middle School. Amber is actively involved academically and socially within the school structures. Amber was a part of the school district before and after the implementation of a house system and was involved in the house system for three years. Amber served in leadership roles through the student council and house leadership team. During her interview, she discussed high levels of enjoyment related to leadership. When discussing this year of middle school, Amber said, “My school year has been good so far,” and she explained that she enjoys, “the community of students.”

Table 1

Participants

Name	Race	Gender	Title
Charles	African American	male	Instructional Coach
Jessica	Caucasian	female	Teacher
Lewis	Caucasian	male	Teacher
Shelly	Caucasian	female	Teacher
Sadie	Caucasian	female	Teacher
Alexis	Caucasian	female	Administrator
Katie	Indian	female	Student
Caroline	Caucasian	female	Student

Jayden	African American	male	Student
Brandon	Caucasian	male	Student
Amber	Caucasian	female	Student

Results

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to explore and describe the perceptions of school climate for staff and students at Blue Mountain Middle School, a middle school that had implemented a school-wide house system at the time of the study. Stakeholder, administrative, and staff realizations that school climate needed to be addressed as well as school climate surveys and post-pandemic planning and decision making resulted in the implementation of a school wide house system at Blue Mountain Middle School. The implementation included all members of the community in the middle school. This investigation of the perceptions of school climate used an intrinsic case study methodology to study the ways in which the implementation of a school wide house system might influence perceptions of school climate. Data collection included staff and student interviews, journal prompts, artifacts, and a review of school wide survey data. The analysis of the data included transcription and the development of patterns, themes, and codes. A sample transcription can be found in appendix D. Data analysis also included observations, generous reading, summaries, and analytical memos. A sample of the memos can be found in appendix E. Five themes emerged from the data analysis. From those five themes, nine sub-themes also emerged. Table 2 reveals the themes and sub-themes associated with this study.

Table 2*Themes & Sub-Themes*

Theme	Sub-Themes
1. Holistic Learning Experiences (SQ2)	1a. Active Engagement in School-based Activities (SQ2) 1b. A Blended Approach to Instructional Strategies (SQ2)
2. Optimal Learning Environment (CRQ)	2a. Supporting Students with Student-Centered Structures (CRQ)
3. Effective Implementation of Educational Initiatives (CRQ)	3a. Offering Effective Support and Communication (CRQ) 3b. Leadership Alignment with Guidelines and Growth (CRQ)
4. Cultivating a Supportive Community (SQ1)	4a. Authentic Relationships and Connections (SQ1) 4b. Trust and Inclusive Practices (SQ1)

5. Strategic Alignment for Sustainable
Progress (CRQ)

5a. Accountability and Stakeholder
Engagement (CRQ)

5b. Goal-oriented Optimism (SQ2)

Holistic Learning Experiences

This study sought to discover perceptions of school climate as influenced by the implementation of a school wide house system. A theme that emerged from the data collection was “holistic learning experiences.” Over the interview and journal prompt process, it was clear that staff participants viewed the house system as a means to provide a holistic learning experience for students. Holistic learning experiences focus on a variety of things including academic pursuits, active participation in social-emotional learning, engaging activities, fostering excitement, and creating a ripple effect that extends beyond the classroom walls. The prevalence of the codes related to this theme was obvious as they occurred 344 times over the staff and student journal responses and interviews. Participants described experiences that allowed for well-rounded activities that enhance engagement in school programs contributing to positive school spirit and high levels of excitement due to the embedded enthusiasm around house initiatives. The addition of social emotional learning appeared to contribute to the holistic experiences by allowing staff members the opportunity to intentionally support students’ self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and interpersonal skill development. These opportunities were described as, “powerful,” by the school’s administrator during the interview process. Beyond that, it became clear that this “holistic learning environment” created a cascade effect of positive outcomes.

Staff and student journals and interview prompts describe the holistic nature of the house system approach suggesting that the school can support students in a variety of ways through the different activities and programs. The positive programming explained in relation to the house system is meant to nurture the development of the whole child. Alexis noted, “The houses are also a vehicle to deliver whole-child positive learning experiences.” Other staff members agreed. Jessica and Shelly both shared stories of students being nurtured and supported beyond the walls of the classroom. Shelly detailed that schools cannot only focus on academics, stating that it is important we, “don’t forget they’re kids.” Charles also explained, “It’s a chance for them to enjoy their house, to interact with their peers, and gives them a chance to get to see a different version of their classmates, and if they grow closer to their teachers and their classmates, guess what? They’re going to be better in the classroom when it’s time for curriculum material to be covered.” The thematic analysis across the three data collection methods suggested that a “holistic learning environment” was a focus of the implementation of the house system. Studying artifacts related to the house system development at Blue Mountain Middle School showed that the development team considered how the house system could be blended into the academic, social, and emotional well-being of students, intentionally planning ways that the house system could be embedded across all areas of the school and school initiatives to support students. The Panorama Survey (Panorama Education, n.d.) given during the year of implementation revealed that students had high levels of excitement and a positive perception of the house system implementation in relation to the overall experiences and activities provided through the implementation; the survey revealed that 90% of students reported a positive experience with the house system at Blue Mountain Middle School.

Active Engagement in School-based Activities

An initial sub-theme that emerged from the theme of “holistic learning environment” was “active engagement in school-based activities.” This sub-theme was created by clustering the codes of engagement, activities, school spirit, participation, and excitement which appeared across all sources of data. The codes appeared 289 times across the staff and student interviews and journals. Interviews and journals completed by staff provided shared agreement that there is enjoyment and engagement connected specifically to the competition and the friendly rivalry created through the house system as well as the pep rallies. When describing the levels of engagement in the activities that the house system provides, Charles said, “There are kids that normally didn’t want to come to school; they find an excuse not to come to school. Now, they have an excuse to come to school. I might not do great in class, but I still feel like I belong.” Student interviews and journals also revealed high levels of excitement and engagement with the house system. Students explained that the house spirit days and house pep rallies allowed for active engagement and enjoyment at school each month specifically describing a “fun energy” and a recognition that staff members at the school were working to allow for increased engagement. Katie described the pep rally experience during her interview: “Seeing everyone just scream at the top of their lungs and dress up from head to toe with all of the face paint, just all of that positive energy; it’s just so fun to see.” During the interviews, students unanimously agreed that there is a high level of excitement and engagement on house system activity days. A clear consensus in both the staff and the student journals and interviews was built on a desire for more activities as the recognition of engagement levels connected to the activities was evident.

The inverse of this sub-theme is also true in relation to offered activities, engagement, and excitement; staff and students recognized that when opportunities for engagement decrease,

levels of excitement and participation decrease. Staff members felt that levels of engagement and the provision of activities were impacted by state requirements and accreditation and the prevalence of testing in today's school systems. Students explained that as they mature and move from 6th grade to 8th grade, there are decreased levels of engagement and participation, specifically stating how the inconsistencies in teacher buy-in influence student participation. Both staff and students stated evidence related to the idea that levels of excitement and engagement vary from 6th grade to 8th grade.

Artifacts related to the implementation efforts and initiatives of the house system at Blue Mountain Middle School explain the different school-based activities that students and staff can choose to participate in. The house system offers students and staff monthly activities including family small group meetings, pep rallies, spirit days, community giving competitions, and various opportunities to earn house points. These are planned to be consistently offered each month and all members of the school community and connected stakeholders can participate. The Panorama Survey (Panorama Education, n.d.) given the year of implementation specifically asked students what they enjoyed about the house system, and the majority of students described the different school-based activities including pep rallies, competitions, and school spirit days.

A Blended Approach to Instructional Strategies

A second sub-theme that emerged from the theme of "holistic learning environments" is "a blended approach to instructional strategies." This sub-theme was developed from the codes of academics, social emotional learning, and cascade/ripple effect. While these codes were not as prevalent as others related to "holistic learning environment," showing up just 58 times across staff and student interviews and journals, the discussion of the codes in the interviews and journals was still robust. Staff explained the blended approach by describing how the social

emotional lessons are incorporated into the house system, revealing that the house system is a means to fold skill development into educational practices. The staff members interviewed had positive perceptions about the inclusion of social emotional learning. Alexis said, “I think the implementation of SEL lessons into the house system makes it even more impactful.” While students did not discuss the SEL components to the same degree as teachers, there was a consensus in recognition of the different SEL components being taught through the house system that apply to students’ daily lives.

When discussing academics and instructional strategies as they relate to the implementation of the house system, staff and students both discussed how easily the house system connects with the normal day-to-day of the classroom. Several teachers provided anecdotes about including the house system through points-earning competitions as a motivating tool for students. Those staff members who discussed using the house points within their classroom shared a consensus that it increased involvement with school assignments. Students also shared this consensus in relation to teachers using house points connected to classroom assignments and activities. Students unanimously felt that adding the points-earning competitions to the classroom added enjoyment to the school day and made the school day more fun. Students also shared collectively that the addition of the house points added a necessary break from the typically “boring” assignments. When discussing how teachers utilize the house system to increase academic engagement, Caroline explained, “I think it’s been really good for the school; just having a break for the students. It’s a lot to just go to school every single day so repetitively.”

When discussing the cascade effect in journals and interviews, staff members agreed that the house system can provide academic motivation and positive performance in and out of the

classroom. Staff members connected the house system to both academics and behaviors. Charles said, “It’s like a ripple effect. The children feel like they belong, and they feel like they’re appreciated and that they’re heard. Then, they’re going to do well in class. They’re going to work hard for you, which also helps alleviate and limit behaviors.” Shelly shared agreement with this recognizing, “We focus so much on [the students] succeeding academically,” but, “being involved in something that doesn’t pertain to academics, I think, is a huge part that helps make the climate positive.” Shelly shared many different stories about utilizing the house system in her classroom and seeing the positive results. Alexis, the administrator in the study saw the positive effects on utilizing the house system stating, “I would see teachers use it to gamify learning or incentivize competitions, learning competitions. That was super effective.” Student interviews and journals also connected to the idea of a cascade effect in relation to the house system. Students described the increased excitement surrounding house activities at school makes school more fun and, in turn, increases levels of productivity. Jayden reported that the house system, “helps you be kind or do your work and helps you overall.” Amber felt that the blended approach she witnessed from the house system, “made learning more fun.” She even commented on the cascade effect explaining, “I think that kids have learned how to work together; they’ve learned how to work together and be with each other even if they don’t know them which can transfer into their school work and later in life with colleagues and stuff like that.”

Artifacts focusing on the design of the house system for Blue Mountain Middle School describe that a blended approach was intentional. The development team for the house system worked to create systems that would fold into the structures of the school by creating activities for engagement both inside and outside of the classroom; this includes designing opportunities for earning house points and the delivery of social emotional learning lessons. The staff

administrator interviewed as part of the study referenced this intentionality stating, “We are implementing social emotional lessons this year to address school climate survey results.” The Department of Justice School Climate Survey (Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Service and Virginia Department of Education, 2021) given during the implementation of the house system revealed positive results in relation to social emotional learning. The questions related to social emotional learning asked about emotions, conflict resolution, decision making, and personal reaction. Each of the questions revealed a positive majority.

Optimal Learning Environment

As students and staff detailed the practices related to the house system and its influence on the school’s climate, a theme that emerged was “optimal learning environments.” This theme was created using the codes of climate, child-centered learning, and student-centered learning. These codes were present across all three sources of data collection and were recognized 78 times during staff and student interviews and journal prompts. Staff members agreed that the child-centered environment fostered by the house system intentionally prioritizes the needs, interests, and development of individual students and has systems in place to foster relationship building between staff and students.

This study focused on school climate as a result of the house system, and staff and students both commented on the effects of the house system on the overall climate. Staff members unanimously agreed that the house system positively related to the school’s climate due to high levels of happiness and enjoyment connected to the overall system, system activities, and relationships. Throughout the journals and the interviews completed with staff members, the house system was consistently equated with a positive climate. Charles detailed the implementation and influence of the house system in the following way: “The pandemic laser

focused schools doing something to address school climate. For us to bring in the house system is one of the best decisions I think the school made.” Another staff member, Sadie, said, “The house system, I think it is the root of everything, all of the climate for the kids and for the adults.” The administrator, Alexis, said, “Positive influences are what I see. Kids do have a place-a family-an identity while they are at school. The school has more of a family feeling.”

Students also discussed positive perceptions of school climate. In the journals and interviews, students describe conflict avoidance and bullying prevention as important components to a positive school climate, noting that a utopian school climate where everyone gets along was likely not possible. Still, students agreed that staff members at Blue Mountain Middle School worked carefully to create a positive school climate for students and affirmed the connection between the house system and the school’s positive school climate. Katie said, “I think the best thing we can do for the school climate is definitely keep the house system because it’s a really good thing and has a bright future.” Jayden voiced, “The house system has helped climate positively.” Finally, Caroline reported, “Lots of good things happen because of the house system.”

Supporting Students with Student-Centered Structures

“Supporting students with student-centered structures” is a sub-theme that developed from the theme of “optimal learning environment.” Students did not explicitly comment on student-centered practices, but the staff members consistently connected the house system to student-centered practices and described it as a means to prioritize students’ needs and make decisions that focus on the student. Staff members agreed that the house system was created for students. When discussing the house system, Alexis, the administrator interviewed for the study, said, “It’s worth it because if you’re doing what’s best for kids, not what’s best for teachers, and

this [the house system] forces teachers to be student-focused and do something social/emotional for kids; that's huge." Alexis also described the importance of maintaining student-centered structures: "Kids are your North Star. You're all pushing to improve their lives." A staff member, Charles, echoed this same idea in his interview, "Everything we do within these four walls needs to be in the best interest of the child." Another staff member, Shelly, said, "If kids aren't taken care of, then it doesn't matter what we do in the class." Staff members unanimously reported that the house system appeared to be a student-centered structure.

Artifacts and documents from Blue Mountain Middle School confirmed that creating student-centered structures was intentional. The houses chosen from the eight houses offered by the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia were chosen to specifically honor the student body at the middle school. The development team discussed that the house system was meant to help students "SEE" a better future, helping them "learn to search for solution, elevating their lived experiences, and helping them to evolve into the best person they can be." Data from the Panorama survey (Panorama Education, n.d.) given to students asked whether or not school was a, "good place for students like me." Students' response to this question was overwhelmingly positive.

Effective Implementation of Educational Initiatives

Support, communication, leadership, guidelines, professional development, and tool were the codes used to create the theme of "effective implementation of educational initiatives." These codes were prevalent across the data collection sources showing up a total of 179 times across the staff and student journal responses and interviews. Data analysis revealed that staff and students agreed that effective implementation of educational initiatives occurs when the various components encompassed within the initiative are guided by clear communication, utilize

supportive structures, house supportive staff and faculty members as well as effective and engaged administration. It was noted that the overall success of educational initiatives is also influenced by well-defined guidelines and continuous and meaningful professional development. Staff and students alike agreed that the house system initiative can be utilized as a tool to influence both academic and nonacademic success, viewing this as an effective implementation strategy.

Offering Effective Support and Communication

A sub-theme related to effective implementation is “offering effective support and communication.” Support, communication, and tool were the codes used to create this sub-theme; these codes were present 92 times across the staff and student interviews. Staff members consistently discussed the need for administrative support and monitoring of the house system and the activities related to the house system. Charles stated, “Administration has fully supported the effort to get the house system off the ground. As a result, each year, we have more and more faculty and staff getting on board.” Several staff members agreed with this level of support connected to the implementation. Some staff members, however, shared that administrators must continue to clearly support the structures put in place by the house system. When discussing what the house system still needs, Lewis said, “If there is anything else, it’s a little bit more encouragement [from administration]-not frightening but encouraging. What can you do? What can we do? How can we help?” Sadie also discussed administrative support. Her voice helped explain the influence of administration support:

The first year of the house system was extremely strong and received lots of teacher and administrative support, however the following year was difficult as it lost support from

administration. I believe that this year is better and moving back in a much more positive direction.

Beyond the support needed for successful implementation, the support offered by the implementation was also discussed by both staff and students. Staff and students confirmed that the house system provides students with a support system and supportive networks over the course of three years at the middle school. Charles explained that the house system provides, “somebody in this building that they can talk to that makes their day better that they feel comfortable with.” Charles also shared an anecdote about a student who was missing a house shirt on spirit day, and his house members came together to find clothing he could wear to earn points that day. While explaining the situation during the interview, Charles discussed the support students get from one another; “You feel like the house has your back. It’s one thing to wear house colors, right? It’s another thing to know that the people in your house are there to help and support you.” Alexis agreed with this support and discussed that the networks of support were provided in a way that students understand, “Kids can understand the idea of families and communities and teams and competition. That’s been a positive change in my years of my experience in this building.” Other teachers discussed the deep level of support given through the implementation of a house system. Shelly described the house system’s support in simple terms, “you protect your friends; that’s your family.”

Like levels of support, communication was discussed in different formats. The primary concern for staff throughout the journals and interviews was clear channels of communication and what the house system communicated to students, stakeholders, and the community. Staff members consistently discussed that clear levels of communication relate to perceptions of positive school climate. Staff members also agreed that implementing the house system

communicates what the school values. When discussing what the house system communicates, Alexis shared, “Practices communicate to families and teachers that SOL content and skills are important, but fostering a sense of belonging and identity are also important.” Communication was also discussed as a result of the connections made through the house system. Both staff and students concurred that the house systems gave them opportunities to connect and communicate with one another; staff members shared that the house system allowed teachers opportunities to model appropriate communication skills, and students shared excitement and engagement around the idea of being paired with adults and being able to communicate together in a variety of ways.

Finally, as it connects to “offering effective support and communication,” the house system was consistently discussed by both staff and students as a tool; the instrumental use of the house system initiative to strategically achieve educational outcomes, promote character development and social responsibility, and increase relationships and connections school wide was discussed in both staff and student interviews and journals. Staff members shared that the house system was a powerful resource and tool for the school that could be used to deliver SEL lessons, create student-centered experiences, connect with kids, offer relationship building opportunities student-to-student and student-to-teacher, create and maintain relationships, support behavior and self-accountability, teach problem solving and giving, and to enforce school wide guidelines. Alexis, the administrator, commented on the house system as a tool; “The houses aren’t just a place to have fun, although that is an important part of the system, but the houses are a vehicle to deliver whole-child positive learning experiences.” When sharing how the house system was a tool for relationship building, Sadie said, “If it’s always in the forefront of your mind that I want to build relationships, and I have a vehicle to help me do it, then it just makes you a better teacher.”

Students also shared that the house system could be a powerful tool connecting the house system to learned kindness and inclusivity and also recognizing that the house system is a tool that teachers use to incentivize learning. When sharing how the house system offers support and is used as a tool for student development, Amber said, “The house system has helped 6th graders ease into a new school, and it has helped people learn to work together no matter the circumstances.” Students also shared the house system provides opportunities and resources for students who do not have them outside of the school building. This idea was present in the artifacts studied from the school’s implementation documents. The middle school regularly holds giving competitions for house points; the items collected support families within the school community by collecting food, clothing, and toiletry items the students and their families may need.

Leadership Alignment with Guidelines and Growth

A second sub-theme connected to the overall theme of “effective implementation of educational initiatives” was “leadership alignment with guidelines and growth.” This sub-theme manifested from the codes of leadership, guidelines, and professional development which occurred across staff and student interviews and journal prompts a total of 87 times. Throughout the interviews and journal prompts, staff members discussed the approachability of leadership, leadership responsiveness, and support from administration. All staff members agreed that it was the responsibility of leadership to deliver and support initiatives and directly connected buy-in, climate, and participation to leadership. Staff members all unanimously agreed that leadership must encourage both engagement and participation. Shelly said, “I think some of it is the drive from the people in charge leading and being the example; if you’re going to talk the talk, you’ve got to walk the walk.” Lewis also discussed leadership and the needed encouragement stating, “I

would say we do need more from administration-come on guys, we're doing the houses, dress up, do this, get involved more; more encouragement from administration, encouraging the kids and encouraging the teachers." Students also discussed leadership, but they did not connect the house system with administrative leadership. Instead, students focused on the leadership opportunities connected to the house system, discussing that the leadership opportunities for students (leading groups, leading pep rally games, student council) increased support for the house system.

Guidelines are part of "leadership alignment with guidelines and growth" as evidenced by staff and student interviews and journal prompts that confirmed the importance of behavioral expectations and enforcement of rules. Both groups also connected this idea with the house system by explaining how it was an avenue through which appropriate behaviors and interactions could be modeled and enforced. Staff members confirmed that the house system allowed for a focus on behavior and was a means for behavior reinforcement. This reinforcement of guidelines appeared to cause a perceived decrease in negative behaviors; the clear and consistent guidelines were also connected to school climate. When discussing the house system's ability to support behavior reinforcement, Sadie said, "House points can be given for good citizenship, good student practices, good classwork, or good effort." Student interviews and journals showed shared agreement that given and supported boundaries are needed and wanted by the school community. There was a consistent explanation of areas where guidelines could be used to better the overall experience for students including bullying, cussing, and fighting. Students unanimously agreed it was the school's responsibility to teach kids, to reinforce behaviors, and to provide punishments. When discussing what the school should do in relation to guidelines, Brandon said, "There needs to be more punishments," and stated, "Kids should be able to learn

how they need to learn for a good school.” Reviewing surveys (Panorama Education, n.d.; Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Service and Virginia Department of Education, 2021) given to students revealed that the vast majority of students perceived the rules (guidelines) at the school to be fair. The surveys also offered positive student responses to questions connected to restoration, acknowledgment of positive behaviors, and the ways in which negative behaviors are addressed. Sample reports from the Panorama Education (n.d.) and Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Service and Virginia Department of Education (2021) surveys can be found in appendix F.

Professional development was a final code used to create the sub-theme of “leadership alignment with guidelines and growth.” This code was created by focusing on staff and student ideas connected to accountability for staff, the effectiveness, alignment, impact, and relevance of professional development, and overall support surrounding implementation efforts. When asked about specific professional development practices connected to the house system, staff members shared about groups being sent to the Ron Clark Academy, professional development provided at the site, school wide meetings help to instruct on houses system practices and policies, the creation of support materials, and a school-based team put in place to support professional development as needed. The administrator interviewed for the study said:

There are teacher leaders who have taken advantage of the opportunity to go to Ron Clark for the past couple of years. I imagine that is a helpful component when you’re thinking about best practices of the house system to go to the source. Watching teachers do some PD within the building, that’s super important because the more teachers are communicated with the more likely they’re going to do what you’re asking them to do with fidelity.

Other staff members echoed this idea of a prevalence of professional development opportunities.

Sadie said:

There were opportunities for staff to go to Georgia to see the Ron Clark program in person. We have faculty meetings in which things are, the house system, we bring things up that we might be slacking on; here's a reminder on how to give points, here's what you should be giving points for, here's how many points you should be giving for these specific things, making sure that you're implementing it correctly.

Artifacts and documentation from Blue Mountain Middle School described the professional development practices designed to support the house system structure. Videos and introductory materials were provided to both staff and students. As staff and students were sorted into their houses, they were given several opportunities to learn more about their houses and about the overall house system. Students recognized these opportunities in their journals and interviews. Students also shared a recognition of the importance of professional development for teachers. Brandon said, "Teachers can take a class during the school year to learn what they need to learn. I think teachers need to sometimes learn good things to do for the school."

Cultivating a Supportive Community

As staff and students discussed trust, inclusivity, belonging, connection, and relationships over the journal prompts and interview process, the theme of "cultivating a supportive community" emerged. The codes encompassed in this theme of trust, inclusivity, belonging, connection, and relationships were present a total of 264 times. Staff and students agreed that cultivating a supportive community requires a focus on the foundations of positive human interaction including building trust within the school and between the staff and students. This trust is built through a promotion of inclusive practices, nurturing connections and relationships,

and the ways in which individuals experience a sense of belonging within that supportive community setting. There was also shared agreement that a supportive community setting allows for essential components such as positive social interactions, meaningful connections and relationships, and a sense of belonging.

During the staff and student interviews and journals, staff and students shared equally positive thoughts relating to the house system and the ways in which it offers support to the school community. When discussing how the house system has positively contributed to the school climate and community, Amber said, “I think you have to consider that 6th graders come into the school feeling intimidated about being in a new school, especially with upperclassmen; that can be worrisome. The house system helps these new students ease into the new school in a much less stressful or scary way.” Amber also mentioned, “I think it has grouped the school not by grade, but by houses where you can meet new people, get closer with some of the teachers, and come together as a school.” Teachers also discussed the positive contributions to the school’s overall community. Charles stated, “We’re the one place where a student knows they can go five days a week, and they’re going to have that sense of belonging and family that they’ve longed for. They might not get it at home, but they’ll get it here.”

Artifacts and documentation studied from the school revealed that “cultivating a supportive community” was one of the strongest purposes connected to implementing the house system. Documentation from the school had the specific reasons and intentions for the design of the program:

After a school wide book study, our staff decided we did not want to return to status-quo post-COVID. Our leadership team decided that houses could be the answer we were all looking for. We did our research and booked a trip to Atlanta for RCS House Con 2021.

After the conference, we were ready to, ‘transform our school environment, create a sense of belonging for students and families, ignite a passion for learning, provide meaningful support, encourage academic excellence, foster authentic relationships, and ensure a climate and culture where all students and staff thrive’ (RCA, 2021). The team that went to Georgia went home, spent the summer planning, and kicked off the school year as six houses, one family.

Documentation from the house implementation also discussed the ways in which the house might transform the school’s community and cultivate layers of support. The development team was specifically interested in, “strengthening [the] school community vertically grade 6-8.” The team also included how the community might be strengthened through the possible relationships the house system might be able to foster including, “student-student, staff-student, and staff-staff.” Results from surveys (Panorama Education, n.d.; Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Service and Virginia Department of Education, 2021) given at the site during the years of implementation reported that students felt positively about the relationships at the school with both peers and faculty members.

Authentic Relationships and Connections

The sub-theme of “authentic relationships and connections” was created from the codes of connection, relationships, and belonging. These three codes showed up a total of 231 times. Staff and students agreed that belonging was an important component to the house system at Blue Mountain Middle School. In interviews and journals, both groups explained that the house system did well to foster a sense of belonging and offer peer support networks. When asked about the house system in relation to belonging, staff explained that the house system provided students with a sense of identity, a place, and a family; staff and students saw this happening

consistently over the course of the three years at the middle school. Additionally, staff members felt this sense of belonging extended to all faculty and staff within the building. They shared stories of the pep rallies, house activities, and different events. Staff members felt the house helped students and was very welcoming, and belonging seemed to not only be important but to be directly tied to the initiatives of the house system. During an interview, Lewis stated:

The most important thing to come out of the house system is that all belong, and that it gives [students] a sense of belonging to a community. When a student feels wanted and that belonging to a group, this changes the student's concept of school; it becomes 'I belong here,' not just, 'I go to this school.'

Jessica, another staff member, agreed with this idea: "The house system has helped students who may be in the shadows or not have a specific peer group where they have a sense of belonging; these students have a place to belong. I think the house system has helped most kids feel like they belong to something if they weren't already in a club or a sports team or something." The idea of belonging being connected to the house system was shared among each of the staff members and the administrator interviewed.

Students shared similar ideas to the faculty who completed the journal prompts and interviews in terms of how the house system might influence belonging at Blue Mountain Middle School. Students agreed that the house system provided a place to belong and that belonging made school more fun. Students shared that the pep rallies and family group meetings were a place to belong. They saw the house system as a way to make sure no one is alone because everyone can find someone to play with or something to talk to; students felt there would always be someone in the same house to go to or be with and echoed the sense of feeling like one family. During the interview, Amber discussed this sense of belonging: "I think the kids get to

realize that they are a part of something if they don't participate in any sports or clubs, or they don't have the resources to do that." Caroline agreed that the house system provided belonging by stating, "If you don't have anybody, and you find someone in the same house and find something in common, you now have a place to go in school and feel like you belong; even in a big school, everyone has a place to go." Caroline also explained how kids may feel when considering belonging: "I have a place, I recognize that person. I can sit with them, and we're in the same house. Our saying is six houses, one family. It really gives you a place to go."

Similar to belonging, connection was an important and prominent code for the theme of "cultivating a supportive community." When staff and students discussed connection, they mentioned the connections made between students and teachers as well as amongst the students; connections were also discussed in relation to the availability of approachable adults. The interviews and journals from the prompts revealed that staff members and students felt the house system allowed for smaller connections within the larger systems of the school by having the overall houses broken up into family groups. There was a shared realization that every student in the building has a connection with one adult, and the house system provides close connections with at least 8-10 adults. Students agreed that the house system provided them a connection with teachers that felt authentic while being meaningful and lasting. Staff discussed the importance of these connections as they allow opportunities for consistent check-ins with a trusted adult and students maintain the same trusted adult as they move through the middle school grade levels. Jessica said, "Connections have been formed between faculty and students that would not have been formed without the house system."

Data analysis revealed that connections are made across grade levels and flow into all aspects of the school and are maintained outside of the house system and house system activities.

Several participants in the study commented on the connections made across the different grade levels and how the house system helped to strengthen vertical connections and bonds. Jessica commented:

I think some connections have been formed between faculty and staff members with students who maybe would not have been formed without the house system. Just because you really only interacted with students who you had in your classroom before. And now there's cross grade, cross curriculum, you're mixing with other kids. And I think the relationship aspect has influenced the overall climate of the school because of that.

Staff participants seemed to echo this belief in interviews and journal responses. Sadie explained, “Teachers across all grade levels are familiar with students in other grade levels. This has helped immensely with behavior and self-accountability.” Lewis was in agreement explaining the value in vertical connections:

I think it helps with relationships in the middle school amongst us teachers. And I do believe the kids will see that as well because when they're with their little groups, they've got brand new sixth graders and brand new seventh and eighth graders who are new to school coming in on the team. I think that [vertical connection] benefits them.

Charles discussed how the house system builds vertical connections stating, “[we] do something that connects all, in our case, the middle school; all three grade levels, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade.” With these connections, he called the house system a “lifeline.”

Relationships were a final and important component to “cultivating a supportive community.” Adult staff confirmed that the house system helped to create and foster relationships. Enjoyment in building relationships and bonding with students was shared in both journals and interviews. Staff members unanimously agreed that the house system activities and

structures provide opportunities for those involved to build relationships and maintain relationships. Staff members frequently discussed relationships throughout the interview process. Sadie mentioned, “The house system has influenced the way that we want to and hope to create and maintain relationships with kids.” Charles agreed, stating, “The house system strongly encourages relationship building, not just between the faculty members, but amongst students from sixth, seventh, and eighth grade.” Staff members also discussed the positive nature of the relationship building as it relates to the house system. Jessica said, “The relationship aspect has influenced the overall climate of the school,” and Shelly said, “I have gotten to know kids in my house that I never would have crossed paths with before.”

Students also frequently discussed relationships during the interview process and in the journal responses. Students unanimously agreed that the house system allowed them to meet new people, make new friends, and also interact with a variety of teachers. During the interview, all students had stories and explanations of a positive change in relationships due to the house system; they mentioned how the house system specifically allowed for opportunities to meet new people and there was shared enjoyment in making new friends and meeting new people. When sharing his experience with the house system and how the house system relates to relationship building, Jayden said, “It has changed relationships by meeting new people and having your friends and meeting other people with different personalities.” Amber also discussed making new friends through the activities and connections provided through the house system; “You might never think you would be friends with someone until you are forced to be in a setting together, to work together, and to get something done.” All students discussed relationship building in relation to the house system in a positive manner.

Reviewing artifacts connected to the strategic implementation of the house system at Blue Mountain Middle school revealed that relationships were a key consideration. The house development team carefully considered how to place staff members into each house so that content areas, administration, support staff, counselors, and a variety of demographics would be represented across the houses. This was done with the intention of ensuring that all students in the school might find ways to connect with the different staff members in their house. The students, however, were not sorted in this fashion; sorting is meant to seem authentic, meaningful, and surprising, as if the house chooses the student, not the other way around. Still, the house development team wanted to try and ensure positive connections and relationships when pairing students with a trusted adult for the small, family group meetings. For that reason, students were able to vote amongst the staff leaders in their house, ensuring they would be paired with one of their choices in trusted adults. All participants in the study responded with positivity and enjoyment when discussing the relationships created as a result of the school wide house system.

Trust and Inclusive Practices

Trust and inclusion were the codes used to create the sub-theme of “trust and inclusive practices.” These codes were present across both staff and student journals and interviews, though they were not as present as connections and relationships. Even with less presence, staff and students still made connections between the house system and how it relates to trust and inclusivity. Staff members shared agreement in the importance of trust in administration as systems are implemented school wide, while students shared agreement in the importance of students having a trusted adult. For staff and students alike, there seemed to be a unanimous agreement that the house system allows for trust in relationships to be built over the course of

several years because the trusted adult and the family group of students paired with the trusted adult does not change from year to year. Because of this trust, discussions in the staff and student interview mentioned that Blue Mountain Middle School is a safe place to be a kid, a safe place to share ideas, and a safe place to voice opinions.

Inclusivity was also discussed by both staff and students as they unanimously agreed the house system was a social integration tool that was used across the grade levels; as a system, staff and students felt the house system was good for inclusivity of individuals and also easy to include in classroom, curriculum, school policies, and school practices. For staff members, the important ideas connected to inclusivity that were developed during the interviews and journals were how different grades and groups were included together and the ways in which cliques and close friendship groups were not considered to insure inclusivity of all types of students within the smaller family groups. Staff members could clearly describe how the house system created a culture of inclusivity across grade levels and across different curriculum areas for all students in the building. Students agreed with this, sharing enjoyment in the connections and interactions they were able to have across the different grade levels and sharing a recognition that everyone has the opportunity to be included. While discussing the inclusive practices of the house system during the interview, Amber said, "I think it has grouped the school not by grade, but by houses where you can meet new people, get closer with some of the teachers, and come together as a school." For both staff and students, the house system was perceived as an inviting and caring structure; the intentional inclusivity was perceived as a means to allow for friendships (both staff and student) to be made across the school and grade levels.

Strategic Alignment for Sustainable Progress

The final theme created from this study is “strategic alignment for sustainable progress.” This theme emerged from the codes of initiatives, implementation, growth, goals, accountability, fidelity, optimism, and buy-in. These codes were present a total of 165 times during the student interviews and journals. As the theme of “strategic alignment for sustainable progress” emerged, staff and students suggested that the school is committed to accountability and fidelity in relation to implemented systems while maintaining an optimistic outlook and recognizing staff and student buy-in. Alexis noted that there are, “climate surveys for parents, staff, and students,” and that the school does, “progress monitor,” in order to, “make sure that we are using the programs with fidelity.” It was perceived that these things worked to ensure the effectiveness of the comprehensive implementation of the school’s house system. In the interviews and journals, staff and students recognized the coordinated efforts to align various accountability and fidelity measures that foster both growth in the system and widespread buy-in.

Accountability and Stakeholder Engagement

A sub-theme that emerged from the codes of accountability, fidelity, buy-in, and implementation was “accountability and stakeholder engagement.” Accountability, fidelity, and buy-in of the implemented system were something that staff and students both discussed in their journals and during the interview process. Staff members at Blue Mountain Middle School recognized that the school was actively engaged in utilizing survey data and feedback to inform their practices and to maintain fidelity of the implemented house system. There was a shared perception that the house system development team was dedicated to shaping a strategic plan through continuous progress monitoring, holding students accountable, and consistently reviewing practices and systems in meetings. The administrator interviewed said, “I appreciate

how the leaders of the program accept feedback and modify the program accordingly over the past few years.” Even with this positive recognition of accountability and fidelity practices from staff members, students expressed inconsistencies and the impact these inconsistencies had on their potential engagement and understanding of the house system and practices related to the house system. The most commonly discussed inconsistency for students was teacher buy-in; staff members echoed this same inconsistency.

Staff and students unanimously agreed that buy-in was an issue that impeded the success of the house system implementation and practices. While discussing the challenges of the house system, Alexis said, “The only negative thing I see is something that is natural to schools and systems; it is challenging to get 100% buy-in from staff.” Buy-in was discussed as a perceived benefit for some staff and students, allowing for more positive interactions with the house system and house system activities, but it was also discussed as a challenge, concern, and a negative influence that impacts the sustainability of both the house system and relationships created from the system. During the interviews, staff members acknowledged the challenges in achieving 100% buy-in. Charles said, “The number one challenge is buy-in. The reality is you’re never going to get 100% of the people to ever agree on anything 100% of the time.” Staff members cited varying levels of commitment and disruptions in scheduling to be a set-back to earning staff buy-in while recognizing the influence of negative buy-in and the ways in which challenges from year to year can influence overall buy-in. Staff members agreed that positive buy-in yielded positive results, particularly in building relationships. They agreed that adapting initiatives to meet teachers’ needs increases buy-in and highlighted the role of staff vulnerability in the buy-in process, influenced by traditional views of the teacher-student relationship. The students interviewed for this study shared similar ideas related to buy-in. Students observed varying levels

of enthusiasm from their teachers, and explained how that varying enthusiasm influenced their engagement, or that of their peers, in house system experiences. They noted a direct engagement between teacher buy-in and teacher engagement to student buy-in and student engagement.

Shelly noticed this in her interview, “I think we’re stuck in that, I think some faculty are stuck in that old mentality ‘I’m the teacher, we’re not going to have fun, we’re not going to do anything.’ I think it gets built up, and I think some people, the kids, can tell when teachers are in it and when teachers are not in it.”

Goal-oriented Optimism

A sub-theme that stemmed from the sustainability of the house system and its connection to buy-in and engagement was “goal-oriented optimism.” This sub-theme was developed from the codes of initiatives, growth, and goals, being present 57 times throughout both staff and student interviews. During the interviews, staff members recognized the modifications made to the house system and the ongoing effort to refine house system practices to better meet the needs of both staff and students. While some staff members spoke to negative choices related to the house system and their influence on the buy-in, there seemed to be a shared optimism relating to the positive trajectory of the house system at Blue Mountain Middle School. Alexis said:

Last year, so the second year, we tried to, I believe, just adopt too many practices and stick it under the umbrella of the house system. When I say we, I mean administration. I think that that kind of led to a lot of teacher burnout as far as having another thing. The house system itself as far as kids belonging to a home and having a sense of belonging and having a system in which your behaviors can be positively reinforced that was still good. Then this year, we’ve kind of taken a step back from that and found a happy medium. It’s trial and error.

Staff members unanimously discussed the ways in which corrections or modifications have been made in response to any negative influences connected to the house system's implementation, reflecting a growth mindset, a focus on the overall goals of the house system, and a desire to make choices that will positively influence buy-in. During their interviews, students shared agreement with positive changes over the years of the house system implementation, and also noted the adjustments made over time to improve the overall school experience.

Research Question Responses

This qualitative case study focused on one central research question and two sub-questions. The three questions were developed to show a potential connection between how the implementation of a school wide house system might influence the school climate at Blue Mountain Middle School. The questions were created to help investigate the school climate at the site, to examine practices associated with implementing a house system, and to explore the influence of the implementation of a school wide house system. The central research question in the study asked how a positive school climate is created by stakeholders, faculty, and staff. The first sub-question asked how the implementation of a house system might influence staff and student perceptions of school climate. The second sub-question asked about the relational and professional practices that are implemented through the creation of a house system and how those specific practices influence staff and student perceptions of school climate. Each of the five themes that emerged from the different data collection methods was connected to one of the three questions established for this case study.

Central Research Question

The central research question for the study asked: In what ways do stakeholders, faculty, and staff implement a house system with the goal of creating a positive school climate? The

themes of “optimal learning environment,” “effective implementation of educational initiatives,” and “strategic alignment for sustainable progress” support the central research question. These themes emerged from staff and student interviews, staff and student journals, artifacts and documentation from the site, and previously given surveys. Several sub-themes also connect with the central research question. The sub-themes of (2a) “supporting students with student-centered structures,” (3a) “offering effective support and communication,” (3b) “leadership alignment with guidelines and growth,” and (5a) “accountability and stakeholder engagement,” help to answer the central research question.

The central research question focuses on the overall processes considered and established during the implementation of the house system, and how staff and students might intentionally take certain steps because they are focused on creating a positive school climate. Staff members unanimously agreed that the house system helped support the goal of a positive climate. This is because they were able to specifically note how the house system was implemented in order to create a student-centered environment for students and provide various levels of support within the school community. With a house system, staff members recognized that the needs, interest, and development of all students was a priority of implementation efforts. When implementing a school wide house system, staff members shared that the implementation team focused on relationship building, a variety of engaging activities, and time for small group meetings with a trusted adult. Because of these implemented efforts and structures, students and staff connected the house system to a positive school climate. When discussing how the house system influences the school’s climate, Jessica said, “Blue Mountain Middle School is addressing the school climate by setting very clear expectations for students and faculty. In addition, the school is

working towards a culture of inclusiveness by using the house system to help every student feel like they belong.”

When implementing a school wide house system, staff noted that it required high levels of support and clear communication from leadership in the building. Staff and students agreed that the house system needs to be implemented in a way that connects the system to the overall guidelines of the school, and it must support the school’s behavioral expectations and overall mission. Staff members unanimously noted that the high level of administrative support and the connection to the school’s guidelines must be continuous. Staff members communicated that when the levels of support or communication were low, implementation of the house system and practices aligned with the school system were a challenge. Beyond the support that is required to successfully implement a school wide system, staff and students equally suggested that implementing a school wide house system creates multiple levels of support connecting the goal of creating a positive school climate to the various ways the house system is used as a tool to meet that goal. Sadie noted, “I believe that house system can be an extremely powerful tool and resource for our school”

Interviews from both staff and students discussed the implementation of a house system and suggested that stakeholders, faculty, and staff utilize the house system as a tool to support successful educational practices, encourage character development, build social responsibility, and develop meaningful relationships and connections. Staff members agreed that the house system was implemented as a powerful tool and resource for social emotional learning, student-centered practices, relationship building, behavior reinforcement, problem solving skills, and communication strategies. Lewis discussed how he used the house system as a tool in his small group house family meetings, especially to work on relationship building and communication.

When describing the meetings and communication strategies, he said, “It helps them in the real world because they have to develop relationships.” Lewis also shared an anecdote about how he utilizes his family group time to teach life skills and lessons:

I think one of the things lacking in education is the ability to just have a conversation with someone. How many times do you have to tell someone if you're talking to me, look me in the eye-do this/do that? I think in a house group they're more relaxed, and you can do more things like that. One of the lessons from the cards last year was about having a conversation. I demonstrated to them-I had one of the students, she and I conversed, and I said-look, we're looking each other in the eye, we're doing this, we're doing that. We're paying attention not speaking over each other. I think [the house system] helps.

Students also shared that the house system implementation supported efforts to encourage kindness and inclusion, while also being used as a tool to provide for students in the school community in a variety of ways. Charles discussed this inclusion from a student perspective explaining how the school system has altered practices through the house system by intentionally focusing on inclusive practices:

You remember back in the day, sixth graders sat with sixth grade, seventh graders with seventh grade, eighth grade with eighth graders. It was a pep rally, but everyone is segregated based on grade level. Now, you go to the pep rally, you sit with your house. Now, you've got sixth, seventh, and eighth graders for each house in a section of the bleachers, and they're cheering for each other. They're high-fiving. They're super excited. Once again, you're building that connection that they need. When you take time to allow children to connect and do things that's fun, it sort of goes outside the curriculum, building your school climate.

When discussing the ways in which stakeholders, faculty, and staff execute the implementation of a house system, the influence of leadership was commonly discussed across staff and student interviews. During interviews, staff members unanimously discussed leadership and the role that leadership plays in successful implementation. Staff shared that leadership responsiveness, support from leadership, leadership encouragement to participate and buy-in were crucial to successful implementation. Beyond that, staff felt that overall successful implementation was the responsibility of leadership. Staff members felt that clear guidelines from leadership were necessary for the house system to be successful. Lewis noted that the house system could not be successful unless leadership noticeably and consistently, “encouraged the students and encouraged the teachers,” to participate in the variety of different practices established by the house system.

Staff members agreed that the house system implementation was connected to the goal of creating a positive school climate, but they discussed the importance of accountability and fidelity measures to ensure alignment with overall school goals. During interviews and journal prompts, the administrator and staff members noted that measures of effectiveness should be continuously considered year-to-year as an accountability system and a means to consider the sustainability of practices related to the implementation of the house system. Staff members also discussed a recognition of the school utilizing measurement tools in decision making; it was clear that during house system implementation Blue Mountain Middle School worked to create a strategic plan based on consistent review of accountability measurements. Charles explained the strategic implementation plan that was meant to slowly add the different layers of the house system to influence participation:

The first year we did it, it was pretty much, let's have a few teachers serve as house leaders, let's make sure we get the kids divided up. Then, it was sort of let's try to implement this into a pep rally. We're not forcing it, but we're trying to slowly implement this. And for teachers, that was to give house points. This first year was more of an introduction. Last year, we got a little more involved with it. We took the advisory group idea and we just added the house piece. This year, it's been more of a conscious effort to embed the house system in day-to-day activities. We might have a pep rally one week, and then the very next week or two weeks later, it's an individual house event and each house goes to a different place or spot in the building. There's a relationship piece to it. There's a chance for kids to connect with each other.

Administration echoes the importance of strategic planning. Alexis explained that the house system was growing more effective due to "intentional plans" and to making the house system implementation part of "the school strategic plan."

Even with a consistent review and a strategic planning, staff and students both saw buy-in as a challenge to implementing a house system. Staff and students unanimously mentioned inconsistencies in buy-in on both the staff and student side. The discussion during the interview process centered on the idea that when participants bought into the house system, it yielded positive results. Sadie explained, "I think there's always going to be people who won't buy into school initiatives and that are negative about them. There's nothing you can do about that. You get out of it what you put into it. I think that it has, I personally think that it has influenced [school climate] positively, but I've put some things into it." A lack of buy-in challenged the potential of the house system to meet the goal of a positive school climate. Students connected buy-in to implementation efforts suggesting that student perceptions of teacher buy-in were

directly connected to the overall student experience as it relates to the implementation of the school wide house system.

Sub-Question One

The first sub-question for the study asked: In what ways does the implementation of a house system at the middle school level influence administrator, student, and staff member perceptions of school climate? The theme most connected to this question is “cultivating a supportive community.” The sub-themes that help to answer the first sub-question are (4a) “authentic relationships and connections,” and (4b) “trust and inclusive practices.” The theme and two sub-themes that helped to answer sub-question one were present across student interviews, staff and student journals, artifacts and documentation from the site, and previously given school wide surveys.

During staff and student journals and interviews, staff and students agreed that the house system had a positive influence on the school’s climate. There was a unanimous sense that the house system contributed positively to the school’s climate because of the ways it could cultivate a supportive environment for staff and students that provided opportunities to build authentic relationships and focuses on practices that facilitate shared trust and promote inclusivity. Participants in the study conveyed that the house system forces faculty to work on building trust and belonging while being inclusive. Inclusivity was an important element in the participant responses; there was shared agreement that the house system gave everyone a place and having a place was a benefit. Sadie said, “A sense of belonging for faculty and student members has been created and teachers across grade levels are familiar with students in other grade levels. This has helped immensely with behavior and accountability.”

The most positively perceived component of the house system from both staff and students was relationship building. All participants recognized the positive connection between the house system, student identity, and providing a place and school family for students. There was shared agreement that belonging is achieved from the implementation of the house system, and the belonging extends across the school's structures. Staff concluded that all students were able to have a place within the house system; the house system does not promote athletes, academics, or cliques. Staff and students agreed that everyone belongs to the house system; no one is left out. When explaining this belonging, staff and students explained how the house system connected students to the school, the overall house group, the small family house group, and how every student was connected with one trusted adult. Because the house system design allowed for unique pathways to developing relationships both in and out of the classroom, it was connected to positive perceptions of school climate. There was unanimous, positive perceptions of the connection between the implementation of the house system and belonging and the authentic and continuous connections maintained over the three years students attend the middle school.

As staff and students discussed the contributions of the house system on the overall school's structures and climate, trust and inclusivity were commonly mentioned over a variety of different capacities. Staff members shared a trust in the process of implementation and a required trust in leadership to properly implement an influential school wide system. Participants in the study agreed that having a trusting adult and building trusting relationships was a prominent influential aspect of the school wide house system. Like trust, inclusivity was an important and influential component shown across the different data collection methods. Just as the school climate affects everyone in the building, so does the inclusivity of the house system. Staff and students agreed that the house system was inclusive of all staff and students, included and implemented across all

grade levels. According to documentation and artifacts from the site school, the cross-curricular and vertical inclusivity was an intentional design to address the school climate for all staff, faculty, and students.

Sub-Question Two

Sub-question two for this case study was: What instructional, behavioral, and/or motivational practices are implemented through the creation of a house system? The sub-question was answered through the theme of “holistic learning experiences.” Sub-themes relating most to sub-question three were (1a) “active engagement in school-based activities,” (1b) “a blended approach to instructional strategies,” and (5b) “goal-oriented optimism.” Student interviews, staff and student journals, artifacts and documentation from the site, and previously given school wide surveys presented the theme and sub-themes associated with sub-question two.

Participants in the case study agreed that the implementation of the house system allowed for a holistic school experience that, in turn, positively contributed to the school’s overall climate. Both staff and students described opportunities for well-rounded participation with the school because of the house system, discussing the ways in which the house system could be blending with the school’s overall goals by creating positive instructional, motivational, and behavioral practices. A practice that was seen across all areas of data collection and data analysis was the incorporation of social emotional learning through the house system. Participants positively reflected on social emotional learning lessons and activities as they are a component of the monthly house meetings at the site, and all staff and students participate in these social emotional learning opportunities. In her interview, Alexis felt that, “meeting monthly with the house team and families to implement social-emotional learning activities is powerful.” When asked about the practices that occur at schools that have a positive and supportive school climate,

Alexis responded immediately, stating, “You’ll see an intentional focus on social-emotional learning, and you are educating the whole child. Clearly, there’s a focus on content, but you’re also focusing on the humans in your building.”

Participants also discussed skill development that is inherent to the implementation of a house system, recounting evidence that the house system has helped to build communication and other interpersonal skills, while also teaching students how to connect with new people and work together. Because the house system can be so easily incorporated into the classroom through house point competitions and earning, staff members also reflected on the positive instructional connection the house system has to the day-to-day practices at the school. Students agreed that this educational connection increased the excitement and enjoyment connected to classroom assignments and activities, motivating students toward increased levels of participation and success. Charles discussed this use of the house system to afford opportunities for increased engagement: “As students go about their day, the school does everything in its power to have time set aside for children to engage with each other, not just sit in the classroom. They have an adult lecture, and they’re doing schoolwork, but there’s time set aside for them to engage with each other. They get to do something that connects all, in our case, middle school, all three grade levels, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade.”

Finally, the house system was connected to behavioral practices at the school because it was discussed as a tool that supports the behavioral expectations at the site. Students are taught the school’s guidelines and behavioral expectations over the course of the school year, and the house system is used to reinforce those behavioral expectations and to reward students for following the school’s guidelines and expectations. Documentation for Blue Mountain Middle School explained that students were rewarded house points for following the school’s behavioral

expectations throughout the school day; this practice occurs throughout the school day and throughout all areas of the school building. Brandon mentioned the house system being used for different reasons in two different classes. One teacher, “used the house system by making it an incentive,” and another would give house points if the students, “were good, or did something good.” Staff and students recognized the benefits of these behavioral practices.

The motivational aspects of the house system were unanimously perceived as positive practices that directly resulted from the implementation of the house system. All participants shared enjoyment concerning the variety of activities (house spirit days, pep rallies, family group meetings, gamified learning in the classroom, community giving, and friendly competition) and viewed these as a motivational factor to the school days. Staff members viewed the activities as a motivator to student participation and attendance, and students viewed the variety of activities as a motivator to engagement and a means to work through the regular day-to-day happenings of middle school while having something to look forward to each month.

When noting the different instructional, motivational, and behavioral practices connected to the implementation of the house system, participants discussed that there are ongoing modifications to the house system to ensure the established house system practices align with the school’s goals and continue to positively influence the school’s climate. Reviewing documentation from the site revealed that the house system has been adapted each year to reflect the wants and needs of stakeholders, staff, and students. One important practice that was included in the school’s documentation and discussed in the interviews was family groups. During the second year of implementation, the school attempted weekly family group meetings; one adult house leader was paired with 10-12 students to meet weekly as an advisory group. The intention was to build belonging, connections, trust, and support. However, this was viewed as a

burden by the staff, and interviews showed low levels of enjoyment for students. Therefore, the leadership development did away with these meetings during the third year of implementation. The students maintained their trusted, adult house leader, but met with them only during the once a house month activity to both check-in and connect while also being able to participate in an activity together. Participants in the study recognized the intentional shifts made in the practices implemented through the house system and shared appreciation for these shifts alongside an optimism connected to a positive future for the house system at Blue Mountain Middle School. Brandon expressed a positive experience with the shifts made over the years of implementation:

When it started, not a lot of teachers really did it. I only know a few teachers who actually did stuff with house points. Later, once we did family groups that was fun. It kind of got annoying because the teachers wanted to do their own things sometimes, but they just had to go by the lesson stuff that was set out. This year, now that we only meet once a month, I think that's good. It also doesn't disrupt learning too much.

Summary

This chapter describes the outcomes of the data analysis completed during this intrinsic case study connected to perceptions of school climate as a result of the implementation of a school wide house system. Using the staff and student interviews, journal prompts, school artifacts and documentation, and school wide survey data, the chapter examines the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis. The five themes that emerged from data analysis include holistic learning experiences, optimal learning environment, effective implementation of educational initiatives, cultivating a supportive community, and strategic alignment for sustainable progress. From these themes, a total of nine sub-themes were included in the discussion of the data. Quotations from the interviews and surveys were used in

conjunction with relevant artifacts and timelines documenting the implementation and practices associated with the school wide house system. Previously given school wide survey data was also used to help explore student perceptions. Each of these data pieces serve as a comprehensive exploration of the perceptions of school climate at Blue Mountain Middle School as a result of the implementation of a school wide house system.

Staff and student interviews and journal prompts were primarily used to establish understandings from this intrinsic case study and those understandings were supported by the artifacts and surveys. The data collection and analysis methods revealed that implementing a school wide house system can contribute to positive perceptions of school climate. Data analysis suggested this contribution to positive perceptions was the result of the house system's role in providing opportunities for relationship building, fostering belonging and inclusivity, incorporating social-emotional learning, and reinforcing behavioral expectations and school guidelines. Additionally, the variety of activities that are implemented through a school wide house system were discussed with high levels of engagement and enjoyment. Finally, the growth-mindset associated with the system, the intentional accountability and fidelity checks, and the ongoing modifications of the school's house system implementation highlight the adaptability of the system to align with school goals and showcase an optimistic outlook for the future of the house system at Blue Mountain Middle School.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to explore and describe the perceptions of school climate for staff and students at Blue Mountain Middle School, a middle school that implemented a school-wide house system. Through interviews and journals, an examination of physical artifacts, and a descriptive analysis of survey data, the lived experiences of staff and students at Blue Mountain Middle School were explored. The study contributes to the existing literature on school climate and house system implementation while also revealing findings that have implications for future educational systems and research. This chapter includes an interpretation of the study's findings situated within a discussion of the findings. It also includes implications for policy and practice to recommend how this study may contribute to future policy- or practice-based educational decisions. Theoretical and empirical implications are also included. Finally, this chapter includes the limitations and delimitations of the study as well as recommendations for future research.

Discussion

This study suggests that the implementation of a school wide house system can positively contribute to perceptions of school climate. This is because a house system supports students in and out of the classroom through the provision of place, purpose, and pastoral care. These elements being fostered by the relationships and connections made within the house system. The theory of motivation (Maslow, 1954) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) contribute to the understanding of a positive school climate as a result of school wide house system implementation. This is because the theories suggest that when needs and motivation factors are fulfilled, success rates increase. A school wide house system has the potential to both

fulfill needs and fulfill intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors. The study's data analysis revealed five themes and nine sub-themes. The themes and sub-themes highlight a supportive school environment for both staff and students and expose the processes and practices required for the successful implementation of a school wide house system. The analysis and creation of themes and sub-themes contributed to the study's findings and implications by providing explicit pathways through which house system implementation can lead to positive perceptions of school climate.

Summary of Thematic Findings

This qualitative case study was designed to discover perceptions of school climate as influenced by the implementation of a school wide house system at a middle school. Data collection included interview and journal prompts from 11 participants as well as artifacts and documentation from the school and descriptive statistics from surveys previously given at the middle school addressing school climate. The data analysis revealed several themes connected to school climate and implementation of school wide systems. Overall, five themes emerged from the data analysis including (1) holistic learning environment, (2) optimal learning environment, (3) effective implementation of educational initiatives, (4) cultivating a supportive community, (5) strategic alignment for sustainable progress. The five major themes of the study work together to highlight the importance of creating a school environment that not only supports the development of the whole child but also supports the implementation of systems that provide an outlet through which the task of supporting the whole child within a school setting can be accomplished. Staff and students who participated in the study revealed that implementing a school wide house system supported the efforts to offer a school community to which everyone

could feel a sense of connection and belonging and through which levels of academic, social, emotional, and behavioral support can be provided.

The sub-themes that developed as a result of data analysis are (1a) active engagement in school-based activities, (1b) a blended approach to instructional strategies, (2a) supporting students with student-centered structures, (3a) offering effective support and communication, (3b) leadership alignments with guidelines and growth, (4a) authentic relationships and connections, (4b) trust and inclusive practices, (5a) accountability and stakeholder engagement, and (5b) goal-oriented optimism. The study's sub-themes expose the intricacies of implemented systems and the important processes and structures required to successfully implement a school wide system. The sub-themes also explain how a school wide house system can positively influence a school's overall climate when successfully implemented and supported by staff and students within the school.

Interpretation of Findings

This case study explored a school wide house system and how the implemented system influenced school climate. Examining perceptions of school climate is important because school climate is crucial to the school experience (NSCC, 2007, 2021; Preble & Gordon, 2011; Piscatelli & Lee, 2011; Thapa et al., 2013). The implementation of a house system was chosen for this study because house systems have been connected with efforts to achieve a positive school climate (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; RCA, 2021). House systems also have the potential to provide and foster unique systems of support that may contribute to perceptions of school climate (Dulwich College, 2021; Johnston, 2020; Piscatelli & Lee, 2011; RCA, 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022). This intrinsic case study on perceptions of school climate as a result of the implementation of a school wide house system led to several findings.

The findings in this study reveal that a house system can contribute positively to perceptions of school climate. One interpretation of the findings is that a house system contributes positively to school climate by providing a place for all members of the school community. A house system provides a place through belonging, connectedness, and meaningful and lasting relationships. A second interpretation of the findings is that the house system allows for positive perceptions of school climate through the provision of purpose. A house system can provide a purpose through shared identity, enjoyment, and engagement within the implemented system. A third interpretation of the findings is that a house system provides pastoral care to students by acting as a student- and child-centered structure that supports the overall social, emotional, and personal development and well-being of students. A final interpretation of the findings is that house systems can be implemented with a focus on potential, positive progress. Using fidelity measures, progress monitoring, and surveys, the studied house system was able to evolve and change over time to best fit the needs of staff and students at the studied site.

Provision of Place

Providing a positive school climate is something stakeholders consider when designing and deciding on the mission and purpose of a school. When making decisions about school climate, stakeholders must also consider the ways in which relationships will be formed as relationship building contributes positively to both school climate and several student success factors (Catalano et al., 2004; Rambaran et al., 2017). Chappell (2022) discussed the importance of providing members of the school community the ability and the opportunity to develop trusting relationships that include and engage all stakeholders. This case study sought to better understand perceptions of school climate as a result of implementing a school wide house system at a middle school, a system that was built into the school's structures to intentionally address

school climate and create relationships and connections within the school building. The findings of this study propose that implementing a school house system does positively influence school climate as a result of how the relationships and connections made through the house system provide a place for all staff and students within the school's community.

As participants in the study discussed school climate in interviews and journals, they shared agreement that the house system positively contributed to school climate, highlighting the ways in which the house system provided students a place though opportunities to connect with staff and students and to belong to the school's structures and systems. Research specifies that students are provided a place within a school when they are connected to teachers, peers, classroom practices, and the school climate while also feeling supported by those connections (Borman et al., 2019; Durand & Blackwell, 2022; Green et al., 2016; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019; Kiefer et al., 2015; Maestas et al., 2007). Still, the student-teacher relationship is paramount when considering levels of connectedness (Pekel et al., 2018; Tillery et al., 2013). The connection and the relationships created through the house system at Blue Mountain Middle School were deemed to be authentic and sustained throughout the course of the educational experience at the middle school; this is true for the staff-student and student-student relationships. Relationships were perceived as one of the most positive implementation factors associated with the house system because the relationships are maintained and sustained over students' entire three-year journey across the middle level grades; students meet with the fellow house members and trusted adult(s) repeatedly over their time at Blue Mountain Middle School and vertical connections and relationships are created through the inclusion of all three grade levels in house events and large and small group gatherings. Because relationships within school can influence work habits, motivation, grades, goals, discipline, and health, it is vitally important

that schools consider avenues through which positive relationships can be formed (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Scales et al., 2019; Vang & Nishina, 2021; Zysberg & Schwabsky, 2021). The study revealed that the provision of place within the school system through the implementation of a house system that assists with the creation of lasting and meaningful relationships had a positive influence on both school climate and student outcomes.

Beyond the connections and relationships made through the implementation of the house system at Blue Mountain Middle School, participants also discussed how the house system honors the diversity within the staff and student population by offering an inclusive system beyond the academic and athletic structures that propel only a segment of the student population thus further contributing to the provision of place. It has been well-established in research that schools should consider an approach to education that values, appreciates, and honors the diversity represented within the a school's community (Gay, 2018; Landson-Billings, 1994; Zvoch et al., 2021). This consideration is growing increasingly more important as diversity levels in schools continue to rise (Vang & Nishina, 2021). Blue Mountain Middle Schools has a diverse staff and student body. Like most school systems, the site offers rigorous academics and competitive athletics. Still, not all students find success in academics or through athletics. Through the implementation of a house system, all staff and students can find success within their house. The study revealed that all staff and students are included within one of the houses, and all students have the opportunity to be a contributing member of the house by participating and/or earning house points. This case study advocates for the implementation of a house system because of the unique way a house system can honor and include the entire student body and all members of the faculty and staff. Participants in the study unanimously discussed the positive implications of the implemented system as a structure that actively includes and values all

students within the school community in a meaningful way. Findings of the study suggest that a house system allows for the portrayal of the school as a place for everyone where meaningful and lasting connections can be established; these things contributed to positive perceptions of school climate.

Provision of Purpose

School climate is the contributing factor that leads to a school experience that is engaging, exciting, and meaningful (Preble & Gordon, 2011). With the implementation of a house system comes a shared school experience that encourages participation in activities and opportunities to share in a collective, competitive school wide experience (Bryant, 2021; Dierenfield, 1975; Gandy, 2019; RCA, 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022). Studying the house system at Blue Mountain Middle School revealed a transformative impact on the overall student experience and an increased engagement with the school. Staff and students agreed that the various house activities (community giving competitions, spirit days, classroom-based competitions, points earning, pep rallies, etc.) increased success and enjoyment rates within the classroom and within the school community by giving students a reason to come to school and engage with the community; the study revealed that the house system can provide a purpose.

The provision of purpose attached to the implementation of a school wide house system is also found within the collective identity found with belonging to a house. This collective identity is important to perceptions of school climate because everyone within the school contributes to the way in which the school climate is developed and perceived; a positive school climate requires a partnership and a shared vision amongst staff, students, and stakeholders (Cohen et al., 2009; NSCC, 2007). When schools work to implement systems that foster a collective identity within the school community, it can significantly contribute to students'

overall satisfaction and active participation in various aspects of school life. Throughout the interviews and within the journal writings, staff and students shared stories wanting to participate and engage with the various activities and opportunities connected to the implementation of a school wide house system. Anecdotes confirmed that there was shared enjoyment and engagement in participating in house activities, meeting with members of a house, and working alongside peers to earn house points, these things each contributing to positive perceptions of school climate. There was also an understanding that school was not just for academics. The study revealed that allowing time for activities separate from educational requirements seemed to increase engagement with content. Students at Blue Mountain Middle School participate in an academic curriculum, but the staff and students also recognize that the experience at Blue Mountain Middle School will be diverse, engaging, exciting, and inclusive beyond the walls of the classroom and the confines of the content, giving students a deeper purpose for attending school.

Finally, evidence from the study indicates the sustained connections and relationships made through the house system further a sense of purpose by providing a community with which students can engage, compete, and celebrate. Research has proven that having healthy and sustained relationships increases a student's ability to bond with the school, participate in school-based activities, and develop social-emotional skills; healthy and sustained relationships increase both motivation and academic success (Catalano et al., 2004; Rambaran et al., 2017). Because of the positive correlation between a sense of belonging and increased enjoyment and engagement among the staff and students in the study, it is appropriate to suggest that the implementation of a school wide house system fosters a necessary connection to the school and a sense of belong to

the environment and structures that will positively influence the school experience for students thereby positively influencing perceptions of school climate.

Provision of Pastoral Care

Many states have academic requirements and standards by which the school meets accreditation, schools are often faced with the choice to incorporate strict schedules that allow for the review of the standards and practice with high-stakes testing. These practices often negatively influence the school experience for students as the stress surrounding high-stakes testing is tangible for all members of the school community. While studying perceptions of school climate, it became clear that teachers feel stressed and overwhelmed as they consider how to balance state mandates with other implemented systems and requirements that accompany the job of teaching. Still, participants in the study seemed to understand the necessity in focusing not only on state standards but also on the overall development of the child through student-centered implementation efforts. Research suggests that when students are supported within a student- and child-focused system, they develop higher levels of motivation and success (Jacobs & Renandya, 2019; Mili, 2018; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Trinidad, 2020; Tunagur et al., 2021; Wentzel, 1997).

This focus on the overall development of the child within an educational structure is, in essence, the provision of pastoral care. Pastoral care as a function of educational systems has ancient roots; it is a traditional, cultural, and holistic approach that considers students' emotional, social, and spiritual well-being alongside academic endeavors (Dierenfield, 1975). Pastoral care is important to consider when developing system implementation plans because students bring their mind, body, emotions, and spirit to school each day; they are more than the studied subjects across the curriculum offered (Gordon et al., 2019). With pastoral care and a child-centered

focus, all members of the school community are supported, appreciated, and valued for the diversity they bring to the community (Dierenfield, 1975; Jacobs & Renandya, 2019). With a focus on providing pastoral care to students, the house system studied was able to achieve a system of child-centered structures that holistically support students within the school wall. Staff members unanimously discussed how the house systems specifically supports students beyond academics; all students are placed with a trusted adult, all students have regular check-ins with a trusted adult, and all students maintain those trusted adults over the course of their three-year career at the middle school. Students in the study agreed that these supportive structures were not only important but also contributed positively to their perceptions of school climate.

When school systems seek opportunities to support students, they often look to implement some form of social-emotional learning; in many states, including Virginia, this is a mandated effort (VDOE, 2022). If school systems want to foster a holistic, child-centered approach to education, it requires an effort to provide social-emotional learning to students (DeMink-Carthew & Netcoh, 2019; Tomlinson, 2021). Social-emotional learning is also considered to be an essential element to a positive school climate (Cicccone & Freiberg, 2021; Kupchik et al., 2022; La Salle et al., 2021; NSCC, 2007, 2021; Thapa et al., 2013). At the study site, the school wide house system was used as means to provide social emotional learning opportunities to students. This holistic approach to education recognizes that school systems are no longer just a vehicle to support students' academic journeys but are now a means to support the development of the whole child and work on things beyond the academic standards including regulation skills, empathy, and interpersonal skills. Staff members specifically noted using the house system to help students grow personally, socially, and emotionally; within the small group house meetings and through house activities, staff members instruct students on social-emotional

growth and skills using programs provided by leadership. This idea of using the house system as a tool to provide social-emotional learning is confirmed in additional research that suggests successful implementation of a house system may contribute positively to social and emotional growth (Dulwich College, 2021; RCA, 2021). Working on the whole child by systematically approaching social and emotional needs is a way in which Blue Mountain Middle School was able to provide pastoral care for students, contributing not just to their academic growth, but to their personal growth through the provision of social-emotional skill development.

Potential for Positive Progress

As schools begin the process of determining which implementation systems may best contribute to their school climate, they must understand that the decision comes with changes in both policy and practice. Osterman (2000) found that policies, practices, values, and culture all change with the implementation of systems that foster authentic belonging and connection; this is because a pedagogical shift is required when aligning traditional curriculum and practice with a focus on relationships (Berryman & Eley, 2019; Pendergast et al., 2018). The house system implemented at Blue Mountain Middle Schools was on the third year of implementation at the time of the study. Findings from the study show that staff members and students recognize a shift in pedagogy and a continual growth model over the years of implementation, revealing that the implementation of a school wide house system can afford school systems the potential for positive progress.

Staff interviews shared agreement that a factor contributing to the positive progress of implemented systems was leadership; in order for the house system to maintain success, staff recognized that leadership should advocate for the system, support the system, and work to influence engagement with the system. Additional research agrees that school reform efforts

require strong leadership in order to positively implement and sustain school-wide systems (Bakari et al., 2017; Gordon et al., 2019; McCarly et al., 2016; Peterson & Deal, 1998). With the house system in the study, leadership was supportive of the initiative, and leadership in the school building honored teacher leaders in helping to promote and support the initiative. Beyond that, leadership provided professional development to staff in order to continually support and grow the initiative while also honoring the overall vision of the staff as well as suggestions for improvement. Research confirms that this kind of approach can contribute positively to school climate and successful implementation; when there is shared decision making, an honoring of suggested ideas, sustained initiatives, continuous improvement models, and professional development provided to staff, the result is a more positive school climate (Cary et al., 2020; Pickeral et al., 2009). Staff and students that participated in the study unanimously agreed that the house system changed and evolved in positive ways over time, sharing an optimistic outlook about the future of the house system as a result of this continual growth and adaptation model, further revealing a potential for positive progress.

The continual growth and progress of the house system implemented at Blue Mountain Middle School was the result of progress-monitoring and surveying specifically assessing school climate at the school and for stakeholders associated with the school (Panorama Education, n.d.; Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Service and Virginia Department of Education, 2021). Assessing and addressing school climate is important because school climate includes a variety of components that are vital to the success and well-being of staff and students within the school structure; goals and values, relationships, schools norms and daily practices, teaching and learning practices, leadership, organizational structures, and peer interactions contribute to school climate (Cohen et al., 2009; Daily et al., 2019; NSCC, 2007; Pickeral et al., 2009; Thapa

et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2023). Staff members recognized the transformative benefits of surveying with a commitment to accountability and fidelity. The adult participants in the study (staff members and an administrator) acknowledged that utilizing feedback from surveys and suggestions from staff over the years of implementation resulted in higher levels of positive perceptions of both the implemented system and the school's overall climate.

Even with continual growth and positive progress, participants in the study perceived various levels of engagement and buy-in with the implemented house system. There was a shared recognition that not all individuals in the school building viewed the house system positively and not all individuals engaged with the house system positively. Dufour and Eaker (2005) shared that change can be difficult to initiate and sustain. Preble and Gordon (2011) considered that students' experiences are vastly different regarding perceptions of school climate. Implementing a school wide house system is an incredible change that challenges traditional and normal structures, systems, and hierarchies within a school building, across the curriculum, and amongst all grade levels. Through interviews and surveys, it became evident that the school had yet to achieve 100% buy-in from the staff and students at Blue Mountain Middle School. While staff and students felt that this level of buy-in was never truly achievable, buy-in was discussed as an inhibitor to the potential success of the school wide house system because staff enthusiasm related to the implemented system directly influenced student engagement. When students perceived high levels of staff enthusiasm, they themselves felt higher levels of motivation in regards to participation. Journals and interviews revealed a recognition that buy-in was a potential problem for overall success measures connected to the house system, but also agreed that the implementation of a school wide house system must work for the staff and student body in the building. This understanding led to the revelation that implemented systems

require continual work toward widespread buy-in, making the house system a tool through which potential positive progress can be achieved.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Through the use of staff and student interviews and journals, artifacts, and surveys, this study found that implementing a school wide house system can have a positive influence on school climate. As a result of data collection and analysis, the lived experiences explored and examined led to findings that have implications for both policy and practice. This study has implications for education-based policy because it may influence the policies and regulations related to how schools can address school climate using specific systems of implementation. Beyond influencing policy and regulations, the study confirms the need for proper fidelity measures and progress monitoring of implemented systems. The study also advocates for the funding necessary to implement school wide systems in order to include, engage, support, and honor entire staff and student populations. This study also has implications for practice that are suitable for all levels of school administration and school staff. The case study captures the specific choices and practices that align with school wide house system implementation efforts. Revealing how a house system is implemented and why a house system is implemented through lived experiences may offer an effective systematic approach suitable for other school systems, staff members, and student populations.

Implications for Policy

This study suggests that the implementation of a school wide house system may have a positive influence on school climate while possibly influencing other student success outcomes (motivation, engagement, academics, belonging, and connections). Education departments and those responsible for government-related educational mandates should consider how a mandated

implementation system may positively influence a school's overall climate for staff and students. Research agrees that school climate is a crucial component to consider as schools develop future planning and possible systems of implementation (NSCC, 2007, 2021; Preble & Gordon, 2011; Piscatelli & Lee, 2011; Thapa et al., 2013). While a house system is certainly not the only avenue through which school wide change can occur, educational leaders may choose to implement house systems, specifically examining the research related to Blue Mountain Middle School or the pinnacle, influential system implemented at the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia (RCA, 2021). This study suggests the importance of strategies connected to house systems including student support structures, social emotional education and growth, authentic relationship building and school wide connections, and opportunities for active engagement. If educational leaders do not wish to fully implement a school wide house system, they may choose a modified implementation incorporating elements found to be connected to student success outcomes (student support structures, social emotional education and growth, authentic relationship building and school wide connections, and opportunities for active engagement). The study suggests that a house system is an appropriate model to increase perceptions of school climate because it provides students with a place, a purpose, and pastoral care.

The findings from this study suggest a model for potential positive progress. During this study, a potential for positive progress was observed in connection with the implementation of a school wide house system. Participants in the study determined this was the result of progress monitoring and surveying; these things were used to make the best decisions for the population directly impacted by the implemented house system. As participants in the study described their experience with progress monitoring and surveying, they felt their voice was valued and important in the school community, also explaining that the school was a safe place to share

concerns and ideas. Through progress monitoring and surveying, leadership at the middle school used staff and student voice to determine the decisions made about the implemented system and the future direction of the implemented system. Because participants felt valued and honored throughout the implementation, they articulated a positive perception of school climate. This means policy makers should also consider how progress monitoring and surveying can be used to drive change especially because the change may affect all members of the school community and could, in turn, affect perceptions of school climate. Determining a way to incorporate and honor the voices of the school community may have a positive influence on the longevity of the implemented system and on overall perceptions of school climate.

Finally, the school in the study was financially responsible for funding the house system. The funding was needed for house shirts, materials to facilitate house meetings and activities, rewards to encourage participation and points earning, and to fund the app utilized by staff to award and display house points. This cost the school between \$5,000 and \$10,000 each year. While the school did participate in fundraising efforts and utilized the parent teacher association to support funding, the implemented house system was a costly endeavor each year. Because of the positive student outcomes and the way in which the implemented system supports connection and belonging, leadership at the middle school felt strongly that continuing to fund the house system was important. This study established the potential need for educational policy makers to decide how educational funding can be used to support implemented systems and influence school climate.

Implications for Practice

Staff and administration are uniquely situated in positions that may directly influence the daily practices and school climate within their schools. Current literature on house systems

suggests that successful implementation can increase perceptions of school climate since house systems foster supportive and collaborative structures, social and emotional growth, engaging school experiences, authentic relationships, and belonging and connection (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; Johnston, 2020; Piscatelli & Lee, 2011; RCA, 2021; Willis & Bryant, 2022). In this study, the intentional choices made by administration and staff through the implementation of a school wide house system were perceived to have an influence on both the school experience and climate. Following the house system implementation, the school's practices, daily norms, schedule, and curriculum changed. The implementation of the school wide house system also required different professional development and a social emotional curriculum that was utilized to teach students life skills and emotional regulation strategies. The study revealed a positive perception of school climate as a result of the practices related to the implementation of a school wide house system. Therefore, the study's findings may be useful to stakeholders, specifically administrators and staff who are in a position to determine which practices could shift perceptions of school climate while providing staff and students a place, a purpose, and pastoral care.

Several practice-based suggestions may be influential to a school's climate. Participants in the study felt a focus on relationships and authentic, sustained connections were incredibly important to implemented systems; staff, students, and the administrator in the study unanimously agreed the house system was the main source of positive relationship building throughout the school. These relationships were built in large group settings during house events and in smaller group settings during family group meeting times. Relationships were found to be integral to the connection and belonging felt by participants. Participants perceived the relationships built through the house system as a source offering the benefit of a trusted adult, a

safe space, consistent companionship, and a network of support offered over the course of three years at the middle school. Offering networks of support with a specific focus on social-emotional learning was also found to be important when considering strategic shifts in educational systems. The administrator found the inclusion of social emotional lessons within the activities and meetings to be essential to the implemented system. Finally, continual momentum through a positive progression model seemed to benefit the success of the implemented system. Throughout the three years of implementation, progress monitoring and surveying was used to assess and redirect the house system model and mission in order to work toward widespread buy-in and increased success rates measured by staff and student engagement with the system and levels of active participation with the system. This suggests that it may not be practical to implement a system with the goal of 100% buy-in from the staff and student population, but efforts to continually reform the system to fit the needs of the staff and students in the school will boost the overall productivity and perception of the implemented system and school climate.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

This case study utilized interviews, journal prompts, an examination of physical artifacts, and descriptive statistics to describe the lived experiences of individuals in a middle school where a house system had been utilized for three years at the time of the study. The intent of the study was to explore perceptions of school climate as influenced by the implementation of the house system, and the inquiry revealed the implementation of a house system is perceived to have a positive influence on school climate. The study and the study's results have both empirical and theoretical implications. Empirically, the study aligns with and extends the literature related to house system implementation efforts. More specifically, the study suggests the importance of and strengthens research on student- and child-centered approaches to

education, school climate, connectedness, belonging, and the general nature (how/why) of house system implementation. Theoretically, the study is built on the theory of motivation (Maslow, 1954) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The study utilized these theories to deepen an understanding of the factors related to student success and motivation; the house system was perceived as an implementation strategy that can positively influence both success and motivation for students.

Empirical Implications

The empirical research on school wide house systems is extended and strengthened by this case study; this is because there is a paucity of research on the lived experiences of the staff and students who experience the implementation of a school-wide house system. An important recognition of school wide house systems associated with this case study is the finding that implementing a school wide house system is a student- and child-centered approach. A student- and child-centered approach focuses on more than academics (Kridel, 2020; Samuelsson et al., 2021; Smith, 2020). When the approach is utilized, students' needs and interests are a focus of implementation strategies; research suggests this focus can increase engagement, motivation, and success (Jacobs & Renandya, 2019; Mili, 2018; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Trinidad, 2020; Tunagur et al., 2021; Wentzel, 1997). Finally, a student- and child-centered approach provides a focus on the overall community within the school and allows for social-emotional learning and growth (DeMink-Carthew & Netcoh, 2019; Garcia et al., 2021; Klein & Ciotti, 2022; Tomlinson, 2021). This study added to the empirical research on student- and child-centered structures by suggesting that house systems can offer a student- and child-centered approach to education. Participants in the study shared the house system as way to engage with the school beyond academics. Staff and students shared stories of engagement with a variety of activities connected

to the implementation of the house system that were separate from their academic endeavors at the middle school. At Blue Mountain Middle School, the house system provided the means to recognize students' needs and interests by focusing on creating a supportive and engaging community. Pep rallies, spirit days, individual house meetings, and family group meetings were utilized to honor the diverse student population and engage students in a variety of ways. The house system was also used as a tool through which social emotional learning was offered to students. Staff and students who participated in the study recognized levels of increased engagement, motivation, and success associated with the student- and child-centered approach of implementing a school wide house system.

While there is a paucity of research on the lived experiences of those staff and students involved in the implementation efforts of a school wide house system, the literature on defining and describing school climate is rich. Still, this study has the capacity to add to the literature on school climate as it provides a study that reveals how an implemented system may increase positive perceptions of school climate. School climate includes various factors such as relationships, peer interactions, teaching and learning, leadership, and organizational structures; it occurs at all levels (school, classroom, and individual), and includes the norms, goals, and values of the school (Cohen et al., 2009; Daily et al., 2019; NSCC, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2010; Pickeral et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2023). In this study, the factors connected to school climate were discussed and explored. Participants explained the house system allowed for opportunities to build relationships and supported peer interactions. The house system was perceived as a tool that could be folded into teaching and learning practices and the organizational structures of the school. The implemented system at the study site was incorporated at all levels of the school and was included in the school's overall goals and mission

statements. It was also supported and encouraged by leadership. Participants explained that these factors had an influence on their perceptions of school climate. Barksdale et al. (2021) explained that school climate is directly connected to relationships and how a school is able to foster a safe and caring environment. Research also suggests perceptions of school climate are connected to student growth, student motivation, student achievement, and other outcomes (Cohen, 2014; Daily et al., 2019; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Mitchell et al., 2010; Preble & Gordon, 2011; Reaves et al., 2018; Zysberg & Schwabsky, 2021). A recommendation of this study is for school wide house systems to be implemented as a means that may achieve positive perceptions of school climate. This study revealed how house systems are perceived by administrators, faculty, and students to support relationships, peer interactions, and classroom- and school-wide practices, as well as a safe, supportive, and caring environment. Participants in this study agreed these conditions resulted in increased engagement, participation, and motivation, while also having a positive influence on academic achievement.

Because of the capacity a house system may have to influence belonging and connection, literature related to belonging and connection was critical for this study. Belonging and connections are achieved through teacher connection, peer relationships, academic support, classroom practices, and institutional affiliations (Borman et al., 2019; Durand & Blackwell, 2022; Green et al., 2016; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019; Kiefer et al., 2015; Maestas et al., 2007). Current research suggests a house system is a place where everyone can find connection and belonging. This is because a house system can foster relationships, connection, academic and personal support, sense of community, positive classroom practices, and institutional affiliations (Dierenfield, 1975; Dulwich College, 2021; Green et al., 2016; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019; Maestas et al., 2007). Belonging is noted in research as a key factor associated with a positive

school climate (NSCC, 2007, 2021), and connection occurs when students have a strong connection to a staff member (Pekel et al., 2018; Tillery et al., 2013). Having a bond to the school can increase participation, social and emotional development, motivation, and academic success (Catalano et al., 2004; Rambaran et al., 2017). This study explored the school wide house system implementation at Blue Mountain Middle School and extends the research on belonging and connection. The house system in the study was discussed as the system responsible for the deep connections students had to peers and staff members as well as the sense of belonging felt throughout the school community. This study contributes empirically because it corroborates past research. It is also an important addition to the research because of the positive influence belonging and connection have to student success outcomes; understanding pathways for student belonging and connection are critically important to student success.

Finally, while the research on the lived experiences related to house system implementation are not robust, there is research to suggest how to implement a house system and why to implement a house system. To implement a house system, schools must consider leadership, training, and fidelity measures (Bakari et al., 2017; Bradshaw et al., 2009; Gordon et al., 2019; Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2019). By exploring the lived experiences of staff and students and by examining the artifacts at the study site, information on the importance of leadership, the provision of training and professional development, and fidelity and accountability measures were provided. Research suggests schools must also consider how to incorporate all members of the school community (Cary et al., 2020; Rosenberg & Jackman, 2003). At the study site, participants shared that the entire school community was involved in the house system by being sorted into one of six houses and being invited to engage in monthly meetings and activities connected to the house system. School systems that have implemented

house systems share information on best practice related to the implementation of a school wide house system (Bryant, 2021; Dulwich College, 2021; Gandy, 2019; RCA, 2021). The majority of schools that implement a school wide house system utilize the house system, houses, colors, flags, crests, and symbolic elements originally created at the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia (RCA, 2021). This study contributes to empirical research on how to implement a house system and why house systems are a viable option when considering the components necessary to increase perceptions of school climate. It suggests implementation strategies and pathways for engagement. This study identifies how and why house systems support positive perceptions of school climate by identifying components perceived to be connected to positive perceptions of school climate: relationships, belonging, connection, engagement with school activities, leadership involvement and directions, and fidelity measure. By providing a place, a purpose, pastoral care, and a potential for positive progress, house systems create a pathway to achieve positive perceptions of school climate.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical frameworks guiding this study are self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and Maslow's (1954) theory of motivation. These theories propose development and success are connected to needs and motivational fulfillment. Using these theories to guide educational understandings suggests fulfillment along the hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954) will increase student success levels; this is also true for self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) because as psychological needs are met through social structures and bonding, increased levels of success can be expected. School climate is also connected to both motivation and student success (Cohen, 2014; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Mitchell et al., 2010; Preble & Gordon, 2011; Reaves et al., 2018; Zysberg & Schwabsky, 2021). The theories of self-determination

(Deci & Ryan, 1985) and motivation (Maslow, 1954) are important educational constructs because when students' fundamental needs are not met, they experience a fragmented and chaotic existence (Acevedo, 2018).

This study has theoretical implications because the components of a school wide house system connect directly to the theories of motivation (Maslow, 1954) and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These theories posit that provision of needs and pathways to encourage motivation can lead to a successful existence. When considering house system implementation in connection with these theories, this study suggests a house system offers necessary layers of connections and belonging. Participants expressed the connection and belonging offered through the house system influenced feelings of safety, family and friendship (belonging), achievement and respect; each of these being components integral to Maslow's (1954) theory of motivation and needs fulfillment. Connection and belonging allow for the creation of affectionate, meaningful, and sustained relationships through which bonding and attachment is achieved. Participants in the study described the connections made through the implementation of a school wide house system and the influence the house system has on belonging. Meaningful and sustained relationships were one of the most consistently described aspects of the house system at the study site, and staff members agreed that relationships fostered through the house system potentially influenced student success in a positive way. Maslow's (1954) theory would suggest that these layers of connection and belonging can contribute to positive success rates for students.

The house systems also incorporates a means through which intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can be achieved, thus revealing the theoretical implications of the study as it relates to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Through the house system, students can be

intrinsically motivated through their connection to their individual house and their connection to their peers and staff members in the house; this intrinsic motivation was seen in the study at Blue Mountain Middle School as the house system connected to increased levels of engagement and participation at school. As students are engaged with the house system and participate in school wide house system activities, they have the potential to earn house points and contribute to a larger system of rewards and recognition. This structure of rewards and recognition contributes to students' extrinsic motivation. Having layers of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation through a connection to the school wide house system can offer students increased success rates within the school system. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) connects needs fulfillment to motivation, behavior, and well-being. This study suggests that the implementation of a house system may influence motivation and behavior in a positive way and can, therefore, potentially increase student success rates as posited through SDT.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations and delimitations are important to consider when conducting research because both have the potential to interfere with a study's generalizability and validity. Limitations in a study include constraints beyond the researcher's control. Delimitations include the purposeful and specific choices made by the researcher in order to control the study. The limitations in this study include the participant demographics, the study site, student responses, and a post-pandemic atmosphere. Every effort was made to ensure the limitations did not weaken the study's findings and results. The delimitations on the study include geographic location, participant population, and time constraints. These delimitations were intentional choices that were necessary to complete the research.

Limitations

Qualitative research is limited by design. Often times, qualitative research is time-consuming, it encompasses ethical concerns due to close interactions with participants, it cannot be quantified, and it does not allow for causation. This study was limited by qualitative design as well as other limitations. Participant demographics, the study site, student responses, and a post-pandemic atmosphere contribute to the limitations in the study. While the participant demographics in the study are diverse and include different races and genders, the majority of the responses are from white and female participants. This demographic representation is typical for public education. Still, every effort was made to recruit a diverse study population in order to include diversity in the lived experiences of the study participants. The study site is also a limitation; at the time of the implementation of the house system, I was not aware that I would conduct case study research at the site. Being actively involved with the site and the implementation of the house system does present a study limitation, but bracketing was used to ensure that research focused on the voice of the participants and did not include any personal biases. Student responses are another, possible limitation to the study because, at times, students were not well aware of the processes related to implementation, nor were they always aware of the educational terminology in the questions asked. When this did occur, every effort was made to provide fair and unbiased information to assist in their understandings. A final limitation to this study is the post-pandemic atmosphere in education. My personal experience as an educator has shown me the difference in the pre- and post-pandemic atmosphere in educational systems; staff members mentioned post-pandemic choices in their interviews.

Delimitations

When considering delimitations, this study includes geographic location, participant population, and time constraint delimitations. Currently, a paucity of research on school wide houses system implementation exists because the lived experiences of the staff and students involved in the implementation efforts is not well explored. The paucity of research establishes the main delimitations in the study because a specific location and a specific population had to be explored in order to add to that paucity of research. For this study, purposeful sampling had to be used to achieve a specific population for the case study. Participant requirements for the staff and students in the study included active participation and engagement with the house system over the three years of implementation. The study site is a delimitation connected to purposeful sampling because Blue Mountain Middle School was the only school in the district that had implemented a school wide house system at the time of the study. Finally, a delimitation that was necessary to complete the case study research is time constraints. The research was done on site and during the school day in order to place staff and students in a safe and comfortable setting. As an educator, I was only allowed a 2 hour window within the school day during my personal planning period to conduct the research without interfering with my job requirements or staff and student schedules; at the time of the study, my planning period aligned with student elective periods meaning students would not miss core, academic classes.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is clear that school climate is a critically important element to consider (NSCC, 2007, 2021; Preble & Gordon, 2011; Piscatelli & Lee, 2011; Thapa et al., 2013). Stake holders and school staff must work together to determine which structures and implemented systems might achieve a positive school climate for staff and students. This study utilized case study

methodology to explore and describe perceptions of school climate as a result of the implementation of a school wide house system. The participants in the study were staff and students at the school. While the voices and lived experiences of the staff and students at the school were important to increase understandings of perceptions of school climate as a result of house system implementation, the paucity of research on the experiences of those connected to a house system suggests further research. Additional case studies could be performed at different schools across the state of Virginia to determine how perceptions of school climate align with the findings in this study. A phenomenological study to better understand and explain what the implementation of a school wide house system communicates to other stakeholders within the school systems including those individuals that work in higher levels of school administration and families could also communicate information on the experiences and perceptions of school climate from a different population. Adding quantitative studies may also support or extend this research; studies could be done to potentially quantify levels of engagement and participation using surveys and Likert-style questionnaires; surveys and questionnaires could also be used to potentially quantify staff and students' well-being and satisfaction with the house system and/or perceptions of belonging and connection as influenced by the implementation of a school wide house system.

This case study revealed an intentionality in practice that is needed to sustain implemented systems. Within the academic and structural constraints of a school system, this intentionality and focus can get lost in the day-to-day practices needed to sustain academics, discipline, and building management within a school. This study also revealed that there is clear evidence to support staggered levels of engagement across the grade levels for staff and students. As students progress through the middle level grades, students and teacher can lose the high

levels of engagement and excitement associated with the first year in the house system. A further examination of the lived experiences of those individuals that were unable to maintain high levels of engagement and excitement might contribute to understandings related to sustaining systems. In particular, a study might focus on how to balance implementation initiatives and activities with academic, disciplinary, and building management needs or how to implement systems that sustain engagement as students grow and mature throughout their school careers.

Finally, while a student-centered focus is a research-based and welcome approach for some teachers, not all teachers buy-in to student-centered initiatives; this study revealed that some teachers found the house system implementation efforts to be imposing and excessively time-consuming, taking away time from the traditional academic focus and purpose of the school setting. Because the participants in this study were actively involved in the house system at the time of the study, levels of buy-in amongst the participants were relatively high in connection with the overall purpose of a house system, even if they did not all have a comprehensive commitment to the implemented system. Including the voices of those participants who did not buy-in to the implementation of a school wide house system would contribute to the research on the lived experiences, house systems, and school climate. It would be interesting to examine the extent to which buy-in influences the success rates of school wide initiatives as well as a possible connection between buy-in and perceptions of school climate.

Conclusion

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to explore and describe the perceptions of school climate for staff and students at Blue Mountain Middle School, a middle school that implemented a school-wide house system. The participants in the study were one administrator, five staff members, and five students. Each participant had active involvement and engagement

with the house system over the years of implementation. Data was collected through interviews, journals, physical artifacts, and surveys. Data analysis consisted of observations, generous reading, summaries, and analytical memos. During data analysis, codes and categories were assigned to the data and used to develop patterns and themes. Five themes emerged from the data: holistic learning experiences, optimal learning environment, effective implementation of educational initiatives, cultivating a supportive community, and strategic alignment for sustainable progress. From those five themes, nine sub-themes were created. The study found that the implementation of a school wide house system can positively influence perceptions of school climate.

Participants revealed that positive perceptions of school climate were influenced by the ways in which a house system can foster connection and belonging while offering opportunities to build authentic relationships between students and their peers and with students and trusted adults in the building. The house system allowed for vertical connections across grade levels and encouraged students to make new friends and interact with peers beyond their immediate social circles and outside of predictable social circles, athletics, or academic endeavors. The relationships created as a result of the implementation of a school wide house system offered essential support for students at Blue Mountain Middle School and resulted in positive student outcomes. Even with several factors positively contributing to school climate as a result of the house system, buy-in and sustainability were mentioned by staff and students as variables that inhibit the success of the school wide house system. Participants in the study did not provide an immediate answer to achieving widespread buy-in, but they did suggest that fidelity measures and progress monitoring are used to address sustainability. As a result of this study, the implementation of a school wide house system emerges as a promising strategy to create an

inclusive and supportive environment where students thrive as a result of the authentic relationships and connections established as well as the engaging environment created. The implementation of a school wide house system has the potential to create positive perceptions of school climate because a house system provides members of the school community a place, a purpose, pastoral care, and the potential for positive progress.

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APPENDIX A

October 18, 2023

Mallory Graham
Amy Schechter

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY23-24-336 EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A SCHOOL-WIDE HOUSE SYSTEM: A CASE STUDY

Dear Mallory Graham, Amy Schechter,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the following date: October 18, 2023. If you need to make changes to the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit a modification to the IRB. Modifications can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) exempt.)

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX B



CITY OF [redacted] SCHOOL DIVISION

August 21, 2023

Mallory Graham has my full approval to conduct her research study and data collection at [redacted]. She may have access to staff, students, and data as needed to complete interviews, journal prompts, descriptive statistics on previously used surveys, and she may review any site artifacts throughout the process. I understand she will consider the ethical nature of educational research and follow ethical procedures.

Thank you,

[redacted signature]

[redacted]
Assistant Superintendent

[redacted]

[redacted]

APPENDIX C

Combined Parental Consent and Student Assent

Title of the Project: Exploring Perceptions of School Climate at the Middle School Level Through the Implementation of a School-wide House System: A Case Study

Principal Investigator: Mallory Graham, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

Your child is invited to participate in a research study. To participate, he/she must be an 8th grade student at [REDACTED] that participates in the school-wide house system and acts as a leader within that system. Student participants will need to have participated in the house system from the initial implementation. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to allow your child to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of school climate as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system for staff and students.

What will participants be asked to do in this study?

If you agree to allow your child to be in this study, I will ask her/him to do the following:

1. Participate in a video-recorded interview that will take no more than 45 minutes.
2. Respond to a set of journal prompts by typing responses in a provided document taking no more than 45 minutes.
3. Review typed transcripts of the video-recorded interview to ensure accuracy of information taking no more than 30 minutes.

How could participants or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to education include a potentially deeper understanding of practices and programs that may be implemented in order to influence school climate as school stakeholders need to establish a positive school climate to promote student success. Benefits to literature include adding to the paucity of research on house systems and house system implementation.

What risks might participants experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and members of the doctoral committee will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Journal prompts will be conducted and typed online in a password protected application and shared only with the participant and the researcher.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked file cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

How will participants be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the conclusion of the participant transcript review, participants will receive a \$20 Chick-fil-A gift card. Compensation will be delivered in person at the study site.

Is the researcher in a position of authority over participants, or does the researcher have a financial conflict of interest?

The researcher serves as a teacher and house leader at [REDACTED]. To limit potential or perceived conflicts, understand that as a researcher, my goal is not to express my views or beliefs but to understand that participants will have differing viewpoints, beliefs, realities, and truths, and these things will influence their perceptions and perspectives. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to allow your child to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to allow his or her child to participate or not participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect your or his/her current or future relations with Liberty University or [REDACTED]. If you decide to allow your child to participate, she/he is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should be done if a participant wishes to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw your child from the study or your child chooses to withdraw, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw her/him or should your child choose to withdraw, data collected from your child will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Mallory Graham. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Amy Schechter, at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about rights as a research participant?

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 IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to allow your child to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to allow my child to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record my child as part of his/her participation in this study.

Printed Child's/Student's Name

Parent/Guardian's Signature

Date

Minor's Signature

Date

Consent

Title of the Project: EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A SCHOOL-WIDE HOUSE SYSTEM: A CASE STUDY

Principal Investigator: Mallory Graham, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a staff member at [REDACTED], participate in the house system, and serve as a staff house leader at the site. You will need to have participated in the house system from the initial implementation. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of school climate as influenced by the implementation of a school-wide house system for staff and students.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

4. Participate in a one-on-one, audio- and video-recorded interview that will take no more than 45 minutes.
5. Respond to journal prompts by typing your responses on a provided document taking no more than 45 minutes to respond to the provided prompts.
6. Review the video interview transcripts in order to ensure accuracy and confirm agreement through member checking taking no more than 30 minutes to review.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit for taking part in this study.

Benefits to education include a potentially deeper understanding of practices and programs that may be implemented in order to influence school climate as school stakeholders need to establish a positive school climate to promote student success. Benefits to literature include adding to the paucity of research on house systems and house system implementation.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and the doctoral committee will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Journal prompts will be conducted and typed online in a password-protected application and shared only with the participant and the researcher.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked file cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the conclusion of the participant transcript review, participants will receive a \$20 Chick fil A gift card. Compensation will be delivered in person at the study site.

Is the researcher in a position of authority over participants, or does the researcher have a financial conflict of interest?

The researcher serves as a teacher and house leader at [REDACTED]. As a researcher, my goal is not to express my views or beliefs but to understand that participants will have differing viewpoints, beliefs, realities, and truths, and these things will influence their perceptions and perspectives. 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 or not participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address 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.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Mallory Graham. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Amy Schechter, at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

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 IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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 and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

APPENDIX D

1. Describe your current position at the middle school and the most enjoyable aspect of your current position.

I am the 7th grade assistant principal, and the most enjoyable aspect of my position is the relationship building with the students and teachers. I'm naturally a relational person, so it's the day to day human aspect of this job that I love the most.

2. How would you personally define a positive school climate? (CRQ)

A positive school climate is one where when you walk in the door and most classrooms, you can tell that the people want to be there. We're humans, so people will have off days, but when you look at people, they seem happy, they seem engaged, and they're committed to what it is that they're here to do. To me, that's a positive school culture. You don't see people cutting corners. You don't see people undermining each other. People are all pushing in the same direction and in a school that's for kids, right? Kids are your North Star, you're all pushing to improve their lives.

3. What practices might occur at schools that have a positive and supportive school climate?

(CRQ)

Hopefully, you'll see an intentional focus on social emotional learning, and you are educating the whole child. Clearly, there's a focus on content, but you're also focusing on the humans in your building. You'll see teachers collaborating together not just on a lesson plan, but also to communicate home to families. There is a community focus to school that what you do is bigger than the four walls of any individual classroom. So focus on community, focus on family, including families, focus on social, emotional learning and educating the whole child.

4. In recent years, what practices have occurred to address the school climate at your school?

(CRQ)

I see that there's more intentional, and this is from the state as well, but there's definitely surveying; we see climate surveys for parents, staff and students. We're not just administering them, but we're looking at them to help shape the school strategic plan. [REDACTED], what's been different is we, when I first was here, we were doing Rachel's Challenge, which was supposed to focus on kindness, but it was a little disconnected. A lot of kids didn't know what the Columbine shooting was or who Rachel was. I think the intentional focus on the house systems is probably much more inclusive because every kid has a space. Kids can understand the idea of families and communities and teams and competition. That's been a positive change in the 10 years of my experience in this building.

5. Summarize the implementation of the house system at the middle school. (SQ1)

I'm coming into it new as an admin to see this side, but from the teacher side, I witnessed the houses themselves being assigned a house, the pep rally aspect, the competition, and the community giving piece, which I thought was big because it was kind of like the Harry Potter aspect-everyone had an identity. Last year, I watched it move into the family groups. I like the idea of that sort of the advisory group, but I'm not sure that that landed the way it was supposed to the way it was implemented last year. I appreciate this year that we are not doing family groups every week. I think that was hard on the staff and the disruption of scheduling. I like within the big groups, with that addition of the social emotional lessons, that teachers are still pulling their family groups. They are still having an opportunity for smaller connection with a teacher within the larger house system. You hope that you progress monitor, and you refine a program over time. I feel like you all have done a really nice job of that. Tweaking the program to better meet the needs of kids and teachers, so it's sustainable.

6. What professional development practices were provided over the course of the house system implementation? (SQ2)

I can speak to some of it because I wasn't full time in the building as a teacher. I do know that there are teacher leaders who have taken advantage of the opportunity to go to Ron Clark for the past couple of years. I imagine that is a helpful component when you're thinking about best practices of the house system to go to the source. Watching you all do some PD within the building on here's what you'll do when you have kids. That's super important because the more teachers are communicated with the more likely they're going to do what you're asking them to do with fidelity.

7. Please describe your current connection to the middle school house system. (SQ1)

I am in a house, and I right now kind of help oversee the logistics of it. As three administrators, we go through wherever the large groups are when they aren't separated out into the smaller family groups, we are monitoring the safety because there's a bunch of kids in one space. For me, I was telling [REDACTED] this last week, I can stand in the small gym and watch them, or, and some teachers do, I can use that as an opportunity to make relationships with kids. The large gym is my assignment, and I play basketball with kids because this should be a relationship building time. I wish I saw that more often because a lot of the teachers are super fun, and kids are playing with kids often. I'm going to take that opportunity. There may be some people who don't like that-to watch me play with kids, but if you're going to discipline them later, you need to have a relationship first.

8. Describe how you personally have utilized the house system in your classroom and/or educational practices. (SQ2)

I have not, but I've witnessed teachers. I could. I probably need to be more intentional about that. I've witnessed teachers use it as a positive reinforcement with the house points. When I was a coach in the classroom, I would see teachers use it to gamify learning or incentivize competitions, learning competitions. That was super effective. I probably could use it, probably should use it here. Positive referrals would be probably something we could do in the future; it would be a smart way to use the house and admin relationship with kids.

9. Describe the successful practices you believe are a result of the house system at the middle school. (SQ2)

I see two things. Every kid has a place, right? I think that was the point. Every kid has something that gives them an identity and human identity is huge. I mean, that's part, especially for middle schoolers. But especially, gosh, it's awfully cool to watch the sixth graders come in and have a real excitement for something that's novel to middle school. And again, a place beyond a classroom, I think is big.

10. Describe the challenges you believe are a result of the house system at the middle school. (SQ2)

It's the same challenge in education in general, which is 100% buy -in from staff. [REDACTED] says with VTSS, if you can get 80% mostly on board, then that's about as good as it's going to get.

11. In what ways do you believe the implementation of the house system influenced the practices at the middle school? (SQ1)

I think it's a positive way to give kids an identity. Kids are going to find a family and an identity, so it's a positive way in middle school where they are seeking that sense of self. For teachers who

are looking for ways to build a relationship, and maybe it doesn't come naturally, this is an easy outlet to build relationships with kids.

12. In what ways do you believe the implementation of the house system influenced relationships at the middle school? (SQ1)

It gives every kid a place, and it gives every kid an opportunity to interact with, how many, 8 to 10 teachers that are sort of theirs, and for the teachers that really lean into that; how amazing that is!

13. In what ways do you believe the implementation of the house system influenced student belonging at the middle school? (SQ1)

It gives them from sixth grade an identity with something bigger than themselves, and it gives us a vehicle to deliver social emotional lessons, but also school spirit, community giving campaigns, a place to be a kid, I mean all of those things.

14. In what ways do you believe the implementation of the house system influenced school climate at the middle school? (SQ1)

I think the bad part is that it's an extra lift for teachers who already feel like there's so much to lift. There is that, and you have to acknowledge that, right? That's something extra we're putting on teachers' plates. To me, it's worth it because if you're a student -centered school you're doing what's best for kids, not what's best for teachers, and this forces teachers to be student focused and do something social/emotional for kids, and that's huge. We won't know the effects of that yet, but there will be kids who will remember the relationships, and the house system, and think about middle school as a place where they belong as opposed to, "middle school is the worst year of my life."

15. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with the house system at the middle school?

It's one of those programs that will get better over time, and it's not quite a part of a part of, "this is what we do," yet, but it will be; it takes time to build that sort of culture-this is what it means to be a part [REDACTED]; you were in a house.

APPENDIX E

Code	Theme	Related Themes	Adult Ideas	Students Ideas
Leadership	3: Effective Implementation of Educational Initiatives	Approachability; responsiveness; support administration	Leadership must deliver/support initiatives; leadership can influence buy-in; leadership influences school climate; leadership participation influences perception and buy-in; need for leadership to encourage engagement and participation	leadership opportunities increase support of HS; 8th grader feel sense of leadership and being the head of the school
Guidelines	3: Effective Implementation of Educational Initiatives	Behavioral expectations; enforcement of rules; modeled appropriate behaviors and interactions	Focus on discipline; directives given from Central office; HS allow for focus on behavior/behavior reinforced; reinforcement of guidelines has caused a perceived decrease in negative behaviors; clear and consistent guidelines connected to school climate	given boundaries needed and welcome; rules important; consistent discussion of bullying/cussing/fighting; school must teach kids how to learn and provide punishments too
Professional Development	3: Effective Implementation of Educational Initiatives	Accountability for staff; effectiveness, relevance,	groups sent to RCA; PD provided in building ; school-wide meetings to	videos and introductory materials provided to students; sorted and given opportunities to learn more about system

		alignment, impact, support	instruct on HS; reminders given; support materials created/provided; perception of training dependent on person interviewed; team in place to support as needed	and given house; teachers need PD on instruction
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APPENDIX F

Sample reported results from the Panorama (n.d.) survey including 622 respondents.

90% of the students reported that their experience with the House System has been positive

82% of the students reported that the rules for students ranged from neutral to fair.

9% of students reported that their peers do not respect them at all

Sample reported results from the Survey of Climate and Working Conditions (Virginia

Department of Criminal Justice Service and Virginia Department of Education, 2021) including 603 respondents.

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? *Mark one response per line.*

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
7. I like this school.	1.8%(11)	7.3%(44)	52.9%(319)	38.0%(229)
8. I am proud to be a student at this school.	2.0%(12)	6.3%(38)	54.4%(328)	37.3%(225)
9. I feel like I belong at this school.	3.0%(18)	11.4%(69)	54.6%(329)	31.0%(187)
10. I want to learn as much as I can at school.	2.0%(12)	5.0%(30)	47.1%(284)	45.9%(277)

27 How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about this school? *Mark one response per line.*

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
23. Adults at this school care about me.	1.8%(11)	4.8%(29)	53.7%(324)	39.6%(239)
24. Adults at this school treat me with respect.	1.2%(7)	5.1%(31)	51.9%(313)	41.8%(252)
25. Adults at this school want me to succeed.	0.7%(4)	2.8%(17)	46.1%(278)	50.4%(304)
26. Adults at this school listen to what I have to say.	1.7%(10)	7.1%(43)	56.2%(339)	35.0%(211)

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? *Mark one response per line.*

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
18. I stop and think before doing anything when I get angry.	5.3%(32)	16.9%(102)	50.4%(304)	27.4%(165)
19. I work out disagreements with other students by talking with them.	2.8%(17)	18.1%(109)	55.4%(334)	23.7%(143)
20. I can disagree with others without starting an argument or a fight.	3.6%(22)	9.8%(59)	54.1%(326)	32.5%(196)
21. I know how to decide right from wrong.	1.0%(6)	5.0%(30)	51.9%(313)	42.1%(254)
22. I can control myself when I am upset.	3.6%(22)	12.1%(73)	50.9%(307)	33.3%(201)