The Role of the Principal in Promoting Positive Teacher-Student Relationships as a Component of a Positive School Climate

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Abstract of Dissertation

The Role of the Principal in Promoting
Positive Teacher-Student Relationships
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The purpose of this study was to determine the role of the elementary principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships as a component of a positive school climate. This study focused on the connection between positive teacher-student relationships, psychological safety, school climate, student outcomes, and the ability of building principals to positively influence these components through their actions. A basic interpretive qualitative approach was utilized, and data were collected from 13 elementary school principals using structured interview questions. The results of the study suggest that the primary role of the principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships is to provide teachers with global support to improve their skills in forming relationships with students, enact policies to ensure the use of positive contacts between school and home, and establish expectations around teachers engaging in a morning meeting daily routine with their students. Although the results of this study align with extant literature surrounding the importance of positive teacher-student relationships and the role of the principal in creating a positive school climate, teachers and principals require more training to adequately support students' social and emotional needs.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

The ultimate goal for education in the K-12 setting is to provide the supports necessary for students to achieve their greatest potential (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). The topics of teacher-student relationships and positive school climate, both of which contribute to student success, have become increasingly significant as the emphasis on student learning and growth has shifted to include more than just academic competency and progress (Kostyo et al., 2018).

Educational equity and access have been a focus for several decades, beginning with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. In 2001, ESEA was reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which focused on standards-based reform for schools. NCLB emphasized high-stakes accountability for students along with high-stakes consequences for stakeholders not meeting the standards. Since the beginning of standards-based school reform, clear goals were outlined for what students should know and be able to do at each grade level (Thomsen, 2014). However, even with federal policies such as ESEA and NCLB, students nationwide, including underserved students residing in low-income households, students with disabilities, and students of color, continue to underperform on measures of academic accountability (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Kostyo et al., 2018). As a result, recent studies have indicated that students who consistently score below grade level achievement may lack the social/emotional skills and connection to school required to make academic gains (Bryk, 2010; Cantor et al., 2019).

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a reauthorization of the ESEA meant to provide equitable learning opportunities to all students regardless of demographics, race, ethnicity, or disability, was signed into law to replace NCLB. In an attempt to provide an accountability system that emphasized greater equity in student achievement with measurements such as school connection and climate, in addition to academic proficiency rates, ESSA now requires state departments of education to report on at least one measure of school quality aside from student academic achievement, student growth, graduation rate, and English proficiency (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

The provisions in ESSA provide state education departments with examples of additional school quality indicators, but states have the flexibility to choose any research-based indicator focused on equitable practices to improve student achievement. The additional school quality indicator that each state chooses subsequently becomes part of the state accreditation model for its schools. While a large percentage of states in 2018 chose chronic absenteeism (35 states and D.C.), college and career readiness (39 states and D.C.), and extended-year graduation rates (35 states) as a measure of school quality, eight states selected school climate as a measure of school quality in their statewide accountability system (Kostyo et al., 2018). This aligns with the available data indicating that school climate reform is a valuable and multidimensional construct (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Moreover, Buckley et al. (2017) maintained that

> measuring school climate and culture requires assessing the quality and environment of a school with regard to the level of safety, trust, and connectedness experienced by students and teachers. Research indicates that schools where students feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe are more likely to foster student engagement and academic learning. (p. 9)

The research is clear regarding the interplay between positive affective environments and student academic growth, but with the new ESSA requirements, school quality indicators such as school climate highlight the significance of interpersonal relationships as an avenue to student growth and success (Buckley et al., 2017; DePaoli et al., 2017; Kostyo et al., 2018).

Accordingly, creating and maintaining a positive school climate, built on positive interpersonal relationships, one where teachers, students, and families feel emotionally and physically safe, requires support from the school principal (Freiberg & Stein, 1999; Payne, 2018). Positive teacher-student relationships, a component of school climate characterized by high degrees of closeness and support, balanced by low incidences of conflict and dependency, provide a foundation for student success in all subject areas as well as improved social and emotional skills (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2019; Sointu et al., 2017). Moreover, as educators and promoters of student growth and learning, school leaders must recognize that "the mind is a relational process" and work to create optimal learning climates in which all students can reach their highest potential (Siegel, 2011, p. 55).

Background and Context

High quality teacher-student relationships that promote a sense of belonging are a contributing factor for students' academic, social, and emotional growth (Cantor et al., 2019; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Wessels, 2015). Although this area of research is still growing, seminal studies from Pianta and Hamre (2001), together with Birch and Ladd (1997), are widely cited in contemporary research, and their studies establish a timeline for the durability and importance of this topic. The

research on students' ability to adjust to the interpersonal and academic demands of school related to teacher-student relationship quality is prolific. Birch and Ladd (1996, 1997, 1998) determined that close teacher-student relationships are associated with positive outcomes, whereas negative relationships can contribute to disengagement and poor academic performance. The data from this line of research emphasize the importance of positive teacher-student relationships in the school setting. For example, teachers' perceptions of teacher-student relationship quality have implications associated with the quality of the relationship, the effect on children's school performance, and levels of school engagement (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). Accordingly, positive teacher-student relationships influence academic achievement, improve social and emotional skills, and contribute to equitable learning environments for all students (Curby et al., 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Mikki et al., 2016; Sointu et al., 2017).

Equally important is the research on child attachment theory, which contributes to the construct of positive teacher-student relationship factors through the understanding that children develop models of attachment based on the relationships in their lives (Pianta et al., 2003). Predicated on attachment theory is the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) that researchers developed to measure a teacher's perception of the teacher-child relationship quality in terms of teacher closeness, teacher conflict, and teacher dependency (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Pianta et al., 1995). The STRS, designed for students in preschool through third grade, is a 28-item self-reporting tool that uses a five-point Likert rating scale. The subset scores from each reporting category of teacher closeness, teacher conflict, and teacher dependency combine for a total score of relationship quality. In essence, a high total score reflects a high-quality teacher-student

relationship indicated by high levels of closeness and low levels of conflict and dependency. This tool, which include measurements of effective communication, empathy, and feelings of warmth and caring, can be utilized by schools to determine the state of positive relationships in the classroom environment (McCroskey, 1992).

In contrast, this tool also provides measurements to determine poor-quality teacher-student relationships. According to the STRS, characteristics of teacher-student conflict encompass reports of perceived emotional disconnect between the teacher and student and contribute to school disengagement and academic underperformance. More importantly, the quality of the teacher-student relationship, as indicated by the level of teacher closeness, conflict, and dependency, predicts students' level of current functioning as well as future achievement related to emotional regulation and cognitive growth (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Howes et al., 1994; Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Loeber, 1990; McCormick et al., 2013). The overall purpose for using the STRS in schools and classrooms is to identify teacher-student relationships in need of intervention or repair and to offer the necessary supports to improve the relationship as a means of contributing to a positive school climate, influencing academic achievement, or improving social and emotional skills.

It is important to note that a prosocial school climate, where students experience positive relationships with their teachers and perceive teachers as caring individuals, decreases the risk of school failure and contributes to students' social, emotional, and academic achievement (Baker, 2006; Downey, 2008; Greenberg et al., 2017; Lyon et al., 2009; McClelland et al., 2017; Wentzel, 1991). Furthermore, positive teacher-student relationships can counterbalance the negative effects of adverse environmental conditions

that might serve as a tipping point in a child's life, resulting in a life filled with conflict (Gambone et al., 2002; Gladwell, 2011). More importantly, the quality of teacher-student relationships, as early as kindergarten, promotes children's interpersonal acuity, which can positively affect students' adjustment to the social, emotional, and academic demands of public school (Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Pianta, 1994). Conversely, teacher-student relationships wrought with conflict might result in students disengaging from the learning process and other fundamental aspects of school, thus contributing to poor academic, social, and emotional outcomes (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Roorda et al., 2011). With this in mind, school leaders play a prominent role in instituting guidelines and setting expectations for teacher-student relationships due to their efficacy in establishing a positive organizational climate (Cohen et al., 2009; Sergiovanni, 1991).

In addition to the available research on teacher-student relationships and school climate, the literature on school leadership is robust with regard to the principal's responsibility for creating positive school climates, promoting change to improve student outcomes, and creating environments where students feel physically and psychologically safe (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; DePaoli et al., 2017; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Murtedjo & Suharningsih, 2018; Osher & Berg, 2018). However, the process of conducting the literature review for this study revealed limited information regarding the role of the school principal in creating a positive school climate with a focus on teacher-student relationships. In fact, one of the studies reviewed focused on the role of the principal in promoting a positive school climate, but the process was focused on teacher performance and not teacher-student relationships (Murtedjo & Suhamingsih, 2018). Conversely, a report for the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

outlined the role of the principal in establishing good environmental conditions through increased social and emotional learning (SEL), but did not specifically focus on teacher-student relationship quality (DePaoli et al., 2017).

Although SEL is multidimensional, interpersonal relationship skills between the teacher and student are an essential component of this construct (Osher & Berg, 2018). Further, increased SEL creates the conditions necessary for a positive school environment, but at the same time, such an environment fundamentally affects the school climate (Osher & Berg, 2018). In a national principal survey conducted by CASEL, 884 principals were surveyed to determine how SEL was perceived, implemented, improved, and assessed (DePaoli et al., 2017). The outcome of the survey revealed that, although principals indicated that they understood the value of improving the school climate through increased SEL, they required more support and resources to implement SEL initiatives.

It is important to note that although schools are required to choose an additional school quality indicator under ESSA, with respect to school climate quality indicators, school principals and teachers may lack the necessary skills and tools required for effective implementation. Moreover, in the nationwide survey conducted by CASEL, 60% of school principals stated that more teacher training was required to increase SEL in their schools as a component of positive school climate. This finding aligns with Osher and Berg's (2018) assertion that "at the heart of what it takes for students to thrive are supportive, respectful, trusting relationships" (p. 2). Although research supports the need for increased teacher development, this study is grounded in the understanding that positive interpersonal relationships are a fundamental component of SEL and positive

school climate and that “healthy schools require a positive school climate that supports the social and emotional development of students and adults” (Osher & Berg, 2018, p. 5), and addresses how school leaders are leading this process.

School leaders are able to establish guidelines and set the expectations for teacher-student relationships because of their key role in establishing a positive organizational climate (Cohen et al., 2009; Sergiovanni, 1991). However, the available data often overlook the role of the principal in utilizing positive relationships to improve school climate and result in student success. As an example, a meta-analysis of 297 empirical, descriptive, correlational, experimental, and quasi-experimental studies in elementary, middle, and high schools recognized four broad categories of school climate: the academic, community, safety, and institutional environment (Wang & Degol, 2016). This meta-analysis emphasized that a positive school climate focused on interpersonal relationships can act as a catalyst for school improvement and student success in behavioral, academic, and psychological outcomes. Another examination of school climate research from Thapa et al. (2013), which incorporated over 200 studies and reviews, determined that improving school climate through the promotion of positive interpersonal relationships in the school was an evidence-based strategy for student success and school improvement.

There was no mention in these studies, however, of the role of the school principal in promoting teacher-student relationships, which is a significant component of the current study. As evidenced above, the existing and current research recognized that a positive school climate is important and that school climate is a responsibility of the building principal. Equally important, as previously noted, is the supposition that students

thrive socially and academically in the presence of positive relationships. Conversely, what was lacking from the literature reviewed was information addressing the principal's role regarding teacher-student relationships. In light of this information and after a thorough review of the literature, it was determined that a gap exists in research on the principals' role in promoting teacher-student relationships at the elementary school level. Addressing this gap was the focus of this research study.

Statement of the Problem

Healthy human development and optimal brain development are dependent upon supportive relationships (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Center on the Developing Child, 2016; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Specifically, the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004) stated, "Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development" (p. 1). In light of this information, it is important to note that interpersonal relationships have short- and long-term effects on human health in addition to psychosocial and physiological development (Osher et al., 2020; Umberson & Montez, 2010). Several theoretical orientations have a bearing on the importance of interpersonal relationships, including those pertaining to positive attachment (e.g., children with secure attachments are better able to navigate new and challenging learning experiences), belongingness (e.g., all humans need relationships in order to survive and thrive), and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (e.g., lower-level physiological, safety, and love/belonging needs must be fulfilled before higher-level esteem and self-actualization needs are met) (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bretherton, 1992; Maslow, 1943). The classroom environment, as it relates to teacher-student relationships, is central to a

positive affective learning environment (Noguera & Blankstein, 2015). Similarly, the whole-child approach includes the affective, along with the cognitive, aspects of education and is an integral component of positive teacher-child relationships (Eisner, 2001; Noddings, 2005). Moreover, the research supports the numerous benefits of positive teacher-student relationships. Researchers Birch, Ladd, and Pianta have presented over four decades' worth of seminal research on the benefits of positive teacher-child relationships (Birch & Ladd, 1997, 1998; Pianta, 1994, 1999; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Pianta et al., 2003, 2012; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). This research is significant in that Birch and Ladd (1997, 1998), Pianta (1994, 1999), Pianta and Steinberg (1992), as well as Pianta et al. (1995) provided empirical data on the importance and predictive effects of positive teacher-child relationships. Their studies demonstrated that students who engaged in positive relationships with their teachers experienced greater school adjustment and academic achievement, in addition to being viewed more positively by their peers than students reported as having negative teacher-child relationships.

Additionally, Sabol and Pianta (2012), in their review of trends in research on teacher-child relationships, expressed the need for increased professional development for teachers in order to improve teacher-child relationship quality. They also pointed out that much of the existing work on the effect of teacher-student relationships in early childhood focuses on teacher reports. For older students, teacher-student relationship reporting is typically student generated. The researchers indicated that a lack of consistency in reporters may influence study findings and that more research is needed to determine whether study effects hold up across multiple reporters. Increasing the level of

informants, such as school principals, would likely add to the robustness of current study findings.

Given the abundance of literature surrounding the benefits of teacher-student relationships and the impact the school principal has on school climate, it is the school principal's responsibility, as the instructional leader in the building, to foster an emotionally responsive climate that supports teachers' effectiveness in developing and maintaining positive teacher-student relationships with all students (Cornelius-White, 2007; Krane et al., 2016; McCormick et al., 2013; Rutter & Maughan, 2002). School climate, as defined by the National School Climate Council (2007), is a "multidimensional concept that reflects the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, safety, and organizational structures of a school community" (p. 2). In a review of over 200 studies, Thapa et al. (2013) identified five categories of school climate: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, institutional environment, and the school improvement process.

The present research study focused on the intentional practices of the elementary school principal related to the transformational leadership trait of inspirational motivation, with regard to the relational aspect of school climate as evidenced by positive teacher-child relationships that cultivate a sense of belonging and safety for students. Even though teaching and learning are often reported as highly important aspects of school climate, the cognitive and social exchange that occurs during teaching and learning relies heavily on positive interpersonal relationships (Aspelin, 2014; Thapa et al., 2013). In 2018, Crownover and Jones captured the essence and importance of teacher-student relationships when they asserted, "Education occurs not in the mind of

the student or the actions of the teacher, but in the relational space that connects them" (p. 20). School principals have agency over this space because of their responsibility in establishing and maintaining positive conditions for learning. A positive school climate is yet another relational space that fosters an emotionally safe environment for students so that teaching and learning can occur. The research is prolific on the benefits of a positive school climate, including a sense of belonging for all stakeholders, socioemotional well-being, prosocial behavior, group cohesion, cooperative learning, positive youth development, student academic achievement, and teacher retention (Cohen, 2006; Cohen et al., 2009; MacNeil et al., 2009; National School Climate Center, 2012; Thapa et al., 2013).

Positive teacher-student relationships continue to serve as an integral component of a positive school climate, and as a result, a positive school climate supports positive teacher-student relationships (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Berg et al., 2017; Myers, 2014; Villenas & Zelinski, 2018). These components of education not only affect one another but also affect the overall aim of education, so that students continue to grow and learn in order to reach their highest potential (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Osher & Berg, 2018). Additionally, a great deal of research exists surrounding the responsibility of the school principal to create and maintain the conditions for a positive school climate (Devos & Bouckenooghe, 2009; Hofstrand, 2003; MacNeil et al., 2009; Moolenaar et al., 2010; Murtedjo & Suharningsih, 2018). The research is limited to the behaviors of the school principal with regard to creating structures, procedures, and policy to promote positive teacher-student relationships that support an overall positive school climate.

To garner the principal's unique perspective on this topic, this study utilized the qualitative methodological approach of a basic interpretive study. The study adds to the existing body of knowledge, as this is an underresearched topic from a qualitative perspective. For example, many studies regarding teacher-student relationships or school climate are quantitative and primarily focus on either the teachers' or the students' perspectives. Additionally, many studies reviewed with reference to teacher-student relationships emphasized the associated academic outcomes as opposed to the underlying psychological effect from a sense of belonging (Crosnoe et al., 2010; McCormick et al., 2013; Mikki et al., 2016; Roorda et al., 2011). Lastly, the theory of belonging undergirding this study is comprehensive, encompassing ideals from several of the theoretical frameworks utilized in other studies reviewed such as attachment, self-determination, and Maslow's human development theory. In sum, this study addressed the gap in the literature surrounding the role of the elementary school principal in promoting teacher-student relationship quality as a component of a healthy school climate from the unique perspective of the principal, as gained through a qualitative approach.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of the elementary school principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships as a component of a positive school climate. The research supports the notion that interpersonal relationships are an aspect of school climate and positive teacher-student relationships are a component of positive student outcomes (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Berg et al., 2017; Myers, 2014; Villenas & Zelinski, 2018). Further, school leadership plays a fundamental role in

establishing policies and procedures, a school vision, and a mission that lead to a healthy school climate in which students can flourish (Burns, 1978; Murtedjo & Suharningsih, 2018; Quick & Normore, 2004).

Specifically, the study addressed two research questions and two subquestions:

RQ1: What is the role of the elementary school principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships?

SQ1a: What structures do elementary principals put in place to ensure that all students have access to positive teacher-student relationships?

SQ1b: What structures do elementary principals put in place to ensure that all students feel a positive sense of belonging to the school community?

RQ2: How do elementary school principals perceive the contribution of positive teacher-student relationships to a positive school climate?

Significance of the Study

School principals have an influential effect on school climate, teaching practices, and student outcomes (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; ten Bruggencate et al., 2012; Thoonen et al., 2011). The information from this study has the capacity to influence many areas of education including research, policy, and practice. First, this study contributes to the professional literature by addressing the current gap in research with regard to the role of elementary school principals in cultivating a positive school climate through the promotion of positive teacher-student relationships. Although the literature is robust from the standpoint of teacher-student relationships, school climate, and the school principal, as previously evidenced, no studies to date have addressed the specific role of the

elementary principal in promoting teacher-student relationships as a means to create and sustain a healthy school climate.

Second, from the standpoint of education policy, this study supports elementary schools and policy makers who choose school climate as their nonacademic "fifth" school quality indicator to comply with the federal requirements of ESSA. Although school climate is a multidimensional concept, one of the components of school climate is the relationship between teachers and students (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Further, positive teacher-student relationships are part of the conditions for learning that help establish a positive school climate, and improving relationships between teachers and students is one method school principals can use to build positive school climates that contribute to student growth and progress (Berg et al., 2017; Payne, 2018). Additionally, this study also informs local and school policy makers on the importance of teacher-student relationships and placing emotionally competent teachers in the classroom. In fact, in their study of how to address the social and emotional competence of teachers in the classroom, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) noted "the need for policies and interventions that can better prepare teachers to develop supportive relationships with all students and promote students' feelings of connectedness to school" (p. 503).

Next, as related to educational practice, this study could influence the manner in which principals view the role that teacher-student relationships play in academic underperformance, student self-efficacy, motivation, peer relations, and the overall climate of the school. Equally important, this research has the potential to highlight the need for school principals to develop and apply methods to monitor the status of teacher-

student relationships from multiple perspectives, as well as offer systems of support to create professional development for teachers who require assistance in fostering positive relationships with their students. For instance, the Bridging Mental Health and Education in Urban Schools (BRIDGE) training program is one of several programs that use a sustainable consultation and coaching model to provide teachers with the necessary tools and training to create effective classrooms and positive school climates (Cappella et al., 2012).

Although the significance of this study is multifaceted, overall it serves to support the fundamental goal of education: helping all students reach their highest potential. When elementary school principals create, model, and sustain a positive school climate based on inclusivity and positive interpersonal relationships, students may have every opportunity to meet their social, emotional, and educational goals (Thapa et al., 2013). In like manner, Thompson (2014) described the importance of interpersonal relationships by stating that "children depend on the care of adults in the environment of relationships in which they live" (p. 42). Reflecting on that notion, this study supports researchers and practitioners as they gain a broader perspective of the role of the elementary school principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships as a component of a positive school climate.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of belongingness and transformational leadership theory are the two key theories that supported this study. Baumeister and Leary (1995) posited in their theory of belonging that humans have a drive to satisfy their desire for interpersonal attachments. With this in mind, this theory was selected because it encompasses the

underlying theme of human connection present in many of the theories utilized in the literature on the subject of teacher-student relationships and school climate. The second theory undergirding this study is transformational leadership (Avolio, 1999; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1978; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999, 2009; Northouse, 2010). This theoretical leadership framework is a highly effective model outlining how leadership can foster a sense of belonging among group members to create a positive learning and work environment whereby the organization and all its members benefit (Bass, 1999; Myers, 2014; Pepper & Thomas, 2002). Although other theoretical models are discussed, the theories of belongingness and transformational leadership represent the tenets of this study focused on positive relationships and positive school climates that support the overall aim of education.

Theory of Belongingness

The theory of belongingness is based on the work of Baumeister and Leary (1995) and centered on the hypothesis that to belong is a fundamental human motivation. Crossing the boundaries of sociology, anthropology, and psychology, authors Baumeister and Leary clarified, "The belongingness hypothesis is that human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). Additional theoretical perspectives discussed in this study are from human development theorists such as Maslow (1943), who developed the human needs theory, and Bowlby (1969), whose work with infants established attachment theory. The central ideas from these researchers involve relationships and the need to belong, either with oneself, within the family unit, or in an all-encompassing system of relationships.

According to Baumeister and Leary, the following criteria must be satisfied to validate the need to belong as a fundamental human necessity. Fundamental needs must (a) be applicable in different settings, (b) have an emotional effect, (c) have a cognitive effect, (d) lead to a disorder if not fulfilled, (e) lead to behavior related to fulfillment, (f) have universal application, (g) be distinct from other forms of motivation, (h) influence a spectrum of behaviors, and (i) affect many aspects of what it means to be human. Moreover, the theory of belongingness serves as an appropriate primary framework for this study because of the overarching relational aspect and reciprocity between teaching, learning, school climate, and school leadership (Cantor et al., 2019; Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, n.d.; Drago-Severson, 2012; Ibrahim et al., 2014; Krasnoff, 2015; Stafford-Brizard, 2016; Sturgis, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013).

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership theory originated from the work of Burns (1978) and was further developed by Bass (1985). According to Burns (1978), transformational leadership focuses on the efforts of leaders who employ the power of interpersonal relationships in order to raise the moral value of the organization. Burns placed transformational leadership on a continuum with transactional leadership, which emphasizes an exchange of contingent rewards for satisfactory job performance (Northouse, 2010). In essence, transactional leadership may lead to maintaining the status quo of the organization, whereas transformational leadership has the potential to surpass the original vision of the organization (Burns, 1978). Further, Burns acknowledged that transformational leadership focuses on the collective behaviors of the followers to

achieve a common organizational purpose. Burns (1978) also asserted, "Transformational leadership becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both" (p. 20).

Later, Bass and Avolio (1990) expanded upon the concept of transformational leadership to establish four distinctive roles of this leadership style. These characteristics include idealized influence, with leaders as role models; inspirational motivation, with leaders who promote meaning and challenge; intellectual stimulation, with leaders who solicit the ideas of others; and individual consideration, with leaders who listen and empower followers (Avolio et al., 1991). Additionally, Bennis and Nanus (1985) identified four strategies leaders should consider when using a transformational approach to incite change in their organizations: having a clear vision of the organization, having the ability to shift the mindset of followers with respect to organizational identity, creating a level of trust, and viewing the leader's role as central to organizational change.

Although the scholars mentioned above used different labels, categories, and definitions in their descriptions of transformational leadership, what is clear is that transformational leadership has a positive effect on the organization's culture, which in turn affects the organizational climate that allows innovation to flourish (Sarros et al., 2008). This type of leadership influences both the follower mindset and the culture within and beyond the organization (Tucker & Russell, 2004). Followers working in organizations led by transformational leaders feel empowered and are more committed to their jobs, which contributes to improved intrapersonal relationships and a positive climate (Avolio & Bass, 1994). In short, transformational leadership theory is aligned with the purpose of this study based on the concept that improving the school climate through interpersonal

relationships is directly related to the leader's ability to promote team cohesion in working toward the organization's collective goal (Schaubroeck et al., 2007).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is supported by the theories of belonging and transformational leadership (Bass, 1999; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). These theories, combined with the responsibility and intentionality of the building principal to create and maintain a positive school climate through positive teacher-student relationships, provide the fundamental design for this framework. Key to these positions is their relationship with each other and ability to affect one another.

Situated at the apex of the conceptual framework is the intentional practices of the school principal. The principal's intention to utilize inspirational motivation, one of four components of transformational leadership theory, along with facilitating and communicating a collective vision, establishing guidelines and leading by example, as well as designing and implementing structures, procedures, and policy aligned with a collective vision, serves to establish teacher expectations and create greater capacity for positive teacher-student relationships in the school.

As a component of and contributing to a positive school climate, positive teacher-student relationships contribute greatly to students' growth and learning, psychological safety, and sense of belonging. Psychological safety is "the degree to which individuals feel comfortable taking positive interpersonal risks," and could mean the difference between students' engagement versus disengagement in the learning environment (Wanless, 2016, p. 6). All individuals, based on prior life and early attachment experiences, have differing degrees of the need for psychological safety (Fonagy &

Allison, 2014; Wanless, 2016). The presence of positive teacher-student relationships in the school setting based on trust and respect is paramount to psychological safety (Newman et al., 2017). Additionally, students who experience positive relationships with their teachers feel a greater sense of belonging to the school community and benefit from improved student growth and learning. Further, there is a bidirectional effect between students' sense of belonging and positive school climate as well as between student growth and learning and a positive school climate.

Transformational leadership is based on a set of four principles of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration (Avolio et al., 1991; Bass, 1999). Although all four components work in tandem with one another, this study focused on the intentions of the elementary school principal in creating structures, procedures, and policy that inspire and motivate staff members to work collectively toward a shared vision. The intentions of the school principal when acting on the principle of inspirational motivation include establishing and communicating a vision, creating actionable steps for staff members to obtain the vision, setting performance checks and measures, and leading by example (Bass, 1999). When the collective vision is one of facilitating positive teacher-student relationships as a component of a positive school climate, the overall conditions for student growth and learning improve (McGiboney, 2016; National School Climate Council, 2007; Thapa et al., 2013; Tschannen-Moran et al., 2006). Further, positive teacher-student relationships create a sense of belonging for students, which is a central component of a positive school climate, under the direct responsibility of the school principal (Berg et al., 2017; Cantor et al., 2019; Myers, 2014). Overall, "emotions and relationships strongly influence

learning" and are "the byproducts of how students are treated at school" (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018, p. 1).

Figure 1.1 graphically demonstrates that the inspirational leadership actions of the elementary school principal can affect both positive teacher-student relationships and positive school climate. Both elements result in establishing conditions for psychological safety, creating a sense of belonging to the school community, and producing a positive effect on student growth and learning, which, in turn, improves the overall conditions of the school (Berg et al., 2017; Cantor et al., 2019; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Wanless, 2016).

Figure 1.1
The Study's Conceptual Framework

Summary of Methodology

A basic interpretive design was used as a means to explore the role of the principal in building capacity for positive teacher-student relationships to support and improve school climate. Qualitative research is an inductive process that involves a specific design whereby the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis with a focus on "process, meaning, and understanding" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). Qualitative researchers "seek rich descriptions" about the world around them and use methods such as interviews and observations to obtain a close perspective on their subjects (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 12). A basic interpretive methodology was used to collect lived stories directly from the principals. The essential purpose for this study was to understand and interpret the meaning of the lived experiences of participating elementary school principals in their role of promoting positive teacher-student relationships as a part of a positive school climate (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Elementary schools located within the state of Virginia served as the setting for this study, while elementary school principals served as the participants. The method for collecting data consisted of semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol drew on the typology of Patton's (2003) six types of questions: experience/behavior, opinion/values, feeling/emotions, knowledge, sensory, and background. Interviews were transcribed using the live transcription feature in Zoom and were coded and analyzed for emerging themes (Creswell, 2013).

Delimitations of the Study

Several factors delimited this study. First, the site selection, which included only elementary schools, served as a delimitation. The rationale for focusing solely on elementary schools was that the majority of the research reviewed regarding teacher-student relationships was conducted at the elementary level. Second, many components of school climate were delimited, such as teaching and learning and the external environment, in order to concentrate on safety and relationships. Another delimitation was the geographical region explored, which excluded participants in other areas of the United States. Lastly, although teacher-student relationships were a major element of this study, the study was delimited to the role of the school leader in promoting teacher-student relationships.

Limitations of the Study

There were notable limitations associated with this study. First, conducting interviews during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about some challenges. Although principals willingly participated in the interviews, most had pressing staff shortages to contend with in addition to conceptualizing how COVID-19 mitigation strategies would work in their buildings. Having to find swift solutions to these or other problems may have resulted in participant inattention or an inability to respond to the interview questions to the best of their ability. Further, although the results of this research may have sufficient transferability to other schools, the nature of qualitative research does now allow generalization to the larger population (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lastly, the number of years of experience as a principal could serve as a limitation, as novice principals may not have the skill set to focus on the social and

emotional aspect of school (Bohn, 2013). Only one first-year principal was interviewed. This principal did seem to have difficulty answering the interview questions compared to other participants. However, the results of the study garnered a sufficient amount of data to accurately answer all research questions.

Definition of Key Terms

The following key terms were used throughout this study and are defined below.

Positive school climate. A climate that "reflects attention to fostering social and physical safety, providing support that enables students and staff to realize high behavioral and academic standards as well as encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 1).

Psychological safety. The degree to which an individual feels safe "to take interpersonal risks in a particular context" (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 23).

Quality teacher-student relationships. Relationships that include high levels of closeness and low levels of teacher conflict (Birch & Ladd, 1997).

School climate. "The quality and character of school life. It is based on patterns of school life experiences and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures" (National School Climate Council, 2012, p. 5).

Teacher-student relationships. The academic and emotional support the teacher provides to the student (Wentzel, 2009).

Transformational leadership. Leadership that raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led (Burns, 1978, p. 20).

Conclusion

Across the United States, some state departments of education are working to adhere to ESSA guidelines by incorporating measures of school climate as an additional school quality indicator for accountability or school improvement purposes (Kostyo et al., 2018). At the heart of a positive school climate is a sense of safety and belonging for all stakeholders, with outcomes representing increased student engagement, growth, and learning (Buckley et al., 2017; National School Climate Council, 2007). The current study focused on the relational aspect of school climate and emphasized students feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe through purposefully established processes to promote positive teacher-student relationships (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Foundational to this study is the concept that positive relationships between teachers and students are a key component of a sense of safety and belonging and contribute to student engagement, growth, and learning (Crosnoe & Benner, 2015; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

The school principal is able to structure a school environment supportive of the social and emotional needs of the students through a positive school climate that emphasizes interpersonal relationships between teachers and students (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Crosnoe & Benner, 2015). Additionally, the school principal is a key agent in establishing the school climate (Cohen, 2014; MacNeil et al., 2009; Murtedjo & Suharningsih, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013). More specifically, principals who exhibit the behaviors of transformational leadership are able to affect the organizational culture that leads to a positive school climate (Murtedjo & Suharningsih, 2018; Myers, 2014).

Overall, teaching and learning are a relational process, and the aim of education is to support students' social, emotional, and academic development so they can maximize their full potential (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013). As a result, the purpose of this study was to examine the role of the elementary school principal in building greater capacity for positive teacher-student relationships that contribute to a positive and healthy school climate.

CHAPTER 2:

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

An extensive search of relevant literature was conducted to gain a thorough understanding of the new policy on quality school indicators, the importance of a positive school climate and teacher-student relationships intended to foster a sense of safety and belonging for students, and the role of the building principal to create and maintain an environment conducive to fulfilling the aims of education. The information for this literature review was garnered from peer-reviewed journals, articles, dissertations, and books. The databases used in the literature review consisted of JSTOR, ERIC, ProQuest Research Library, Web of Science, PubMed, Education Source, Google Scholar, Gelman Library System, and Himmelfarb Health Sciences Library. Except in the case of seminal studies and theoretical frameworks, searches were limited to the 15 years between 2005 and 2020. Over 200 distinct peer-reviewed sources were identified that were directly related to the topics of transformational leadership, school climate, and teacher-student relationships. Table 2.1 outlines the key words and search terms utilized to garner empirical research in support of this literature review.

Table 2.1
Key Words and Search Terms

Affective learning	ERG theory	Regulation theory
Child development	Psychological safety	Teacher effectiveness
Epigenetics	Socioemotional learning	Belonging theory
Prosocial education	Transformational leadership theory	Effective leadership
School climate	Belongingness	Neuroscience
Transformational leader	Developmental systems theory	Relational pedagogy
Attachment theory	ESSA	Teacher-student relationships
Conditions for learning		

The literature review revealed four major themes. The first was the concept that all human organisms require interpersonal relationships to thrive (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bretherton, 1992; Cantor et al., 2019; Cassidy et al., 2013; Maslow, 1943; Schore & Schore, 2008; Sturgis, 2018; Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). Another theme that emerged was the notion that positive teacher-student relationships are an essential component of positive school climates that allow students to feel a sense of safety and belonging (Cantor et al., 2019; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). The third theme that emerged from the literature was that schools with positive climates are better able to foster students' sense of safety and promote students' academic, social, and emotional growth and well-being (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; McGiboney, 2016; Payne, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013). The fourth and final theme was that building principals are in a position to set expectations through policy and a shared vision to create the conditions necessary in the school environment for a positive school climate (Cohen, 2014; Hattie, 2015; McGiboney, 2016; Payne, 2018; Quick & Normore, 2004; Villenas & Zelinski, 2018).

Over the last century, American education has experienced a multitude of changes in policy (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). In an effort to improve equal access to quality education, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB) ushered in an era of high-stakes testing and accountability. Schools across America focused on students making adequate yearly progress in the areas of math, reading, and content. This emphasis on academic standards and accountability left little room for expansion and improvements in school climate and, in some cases, created adverse learning

environments whereby students felt their socioemotional needs were not being met within the school community (Berg et al., 2017; Cohen, 2006; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Groen, 2012; McGiboney, 2016). Then, with the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), states continued to focus on student academic progress in the core subjects, but were now expected to demonstrate an additional measure of school quality. Under ESSA, states were mandated to choose at least one additional nonacademic research-based measure of school quality such as school climate, suspension and expulsion rates, extended-year graduation rates, and student engagement in courses that support college and career readiness skills (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Over the last few decades, research on school climate and interpersonal relationships in the school setting has grown steadily, supporting the notion that a positive school climate is the underlying framework for student achievement, positive youth development, and school reform (Berg et al., 2017; Cohen et al., 2009). Due to the recent evidence demonstrating the effect of a positive school climate on students' social, emotional, and educational well-being, school climate is becoming a crucial focus of state education departments nationwide (Kostyo et al., 2018). Conversely, a gap exists between the available research and daily practice because not all states include school climate as a measure of school accountability under ESSA (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Cohen, 2006; Cohen et al., 2009). The review of the literature that follows establishes a connection between positive teacher-student relationships, positive school climate, and the role of the building principal in promoting positive teacher-

student relationships as a component of a positive and healthy school climate. In the next section, the theories most relevant to this study are discussed.

Interdisciplinary Theories on Affective Relationships

Relationships are the foundation through which children grow and develop, learn about themselves and the world around them, and form emotional connections to other human beings (Jones & Kahn, 2017; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Osher et al., 2020; Thapa et al., 2013). More specifically, affective relationships are close relationships that encompass emotions of warmth and caring as well as satisfy the need for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Takahashi, 2005). Through the use of positive relationships, educators can foster social and academic student advancement for all students regardless of past history or demographics (Gambone et al., 2002; Harter, 1996; Midgley et al., 1989; Pianta et al., 2012; Wentzel, 1991). Moreover, theories such as the theory of human development (Maslow, 1943), existence, relatedness, and growth (ERG) theory (Alderfer, 1969), attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), affect regulation theory (Schore, 1994), and the theory of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) provide educational practitioners with the essential knowledge of the importance of a positive affective learning environment.

The theories listed above are not the only theories on affective relationships. However, they were chosen due to either their familiarity in the field of education or their expanded view of the importance of human connectedness. For example, the theory of human development is widely taught in educational theory classes. In fact, one of the principals interviewed for this study acknowledged, “We have to Maslow

before we Bloom." This statement refers to the notion that educators must ensure that students' basic needs for safety and belonging are met before expecting them to perform well on academically challenging tasks. The next theory, ERG theory, was included because it is an expanded version of Maslow's theory of development. Following the development of ERG theory, researchers Bowlby (1969) and his colleague, Ainsworth (1979), continued to make gains in the areas of human motivation through research that suggests that young children are innately driven to form early and lasting relationships with others. Decades after attachment theory was introduced, and with advances in neurobiology, Schore (1994) added that early attachment encounters between young children and their caregivers support and shape right brain organization. The right brain is responsible for human emotion, among other functions. Lastly, the theory of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which is one of the foundational theories for this research study, posits that all humans have a pervasive drive to form and foster interpersonal relationships with other humans. Table 2.2 provides an overview of these theories. The text that follows examines each theory in detail, as they provide the groundwork for understanding the significance of students' access to positive teacher-student relationships and positive school climates.

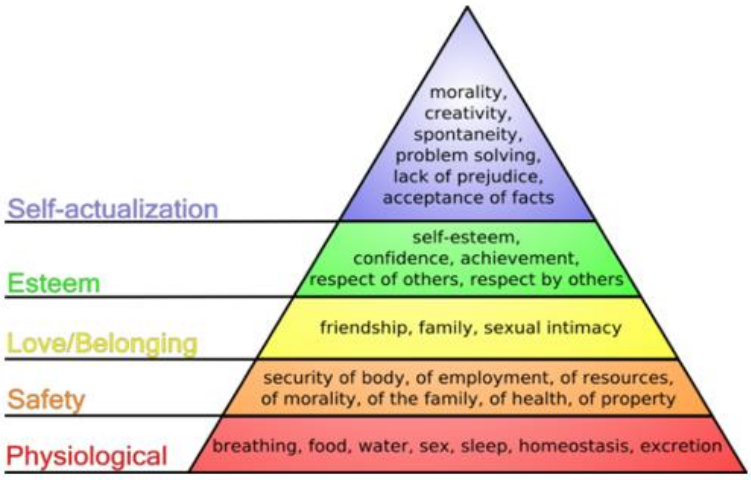
Table 2.2
Overview of Theories Utilized in This Study

Theory	Researcher(s), year	Key tenets	Implications for education practices related to positive teacher-student relationships
Theory of human development	Maslow, 1943	Humans are motivated to fulfill their needs in a succession from physiological needs and safety needs to social belonging and self-esteem and lastly self-actualization.	It is important for educators to be aware that their students' fundamental physiological needs are met. Teachers who do not have positive relationships with their students may overlook this fundamental prerequisite to student growth and learning.
Existence, relatedness, and growth theory	Alderfer, 1969	The essence of human motivation is the fulfillment of existence, relatedness, and growth needs.	Individuals are similarly motivated. However, the means by which they satisfy their needs are varied. When teachers form positive relationships with their students, they have a greater chance of recognizing behavior related to students' need fulfillment.
Attachment theory	Bowlby, 1969	When children have the opportunity to establish positive attachments and relationships with their caregivers, they are more apt to take calculated risks and develop healthy social relationships later in life.	Attachment theory highlights the importance of a child's need to belong and teachers' ability to serve as the child's one caring adult in their lives. Educators who understand this theory have a greater understanding of students' social development or lack thereof.
Regulation theory	Schore, 1994	There is an interplay between relationships, human brain development, and physiological systems within the body.	Positive relationships within positive learning environments have the potential to positively affect a child's biological brain development and subsequently cognitive development.
Belonging theory	Baumeister and Leary, 1995	The need for belonging is an underlying basis for humans to thrive, and a lack of belonging can have pathological results.	Positive teacher-student relationships are one way that students are able to satisfy their need for belonging in the school environment.

Theory of Human Development

Abraham Maslow's work on human motivation is related to the concept of teacher-student relationships in that he identified the importance of belonging and love as a pathway to knowledge and self-actualization. As a practitioner of humanistic psychology, Maslow (1943) developed a self-actualization theory comprising basic, psychological, and self-fulfillment needs. He designed a five-stage hierarchy (Figure 2.1) consisting of physiological needs and safety needs at the very basic level, leading to belonging and love needs, with esteem and self-actualization needs at the top of the hierarchical model.

Figure 2.1
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Note: From Finkelstein, 2006, Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs.png); used with permission.

A "potency" effect exists within Maslow's hierarchy. When the lower physiological needs such as physical homeostasis and safety are satisfied, the higher psychological needs such as love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization begin to

emerge (Maslow, 1943). Subsequently, overcoming deficiencies within the first four stages of psychological, safety, love/belonging, and esteem needs opens the pathway to achieve one's full potential in life. While this theory is mostly derived from clinical as opposed to empirical evidence, it aligns with neuro-scientific research on the organizational structure and function of the human brain, indicating that our basic needs must be met and we must perceive our surroundings as safe before higher cognitive processes can occur (Benningfield et al., 2015; Van der Kolk, 2014; Wahba & Bridwell, 1976).

In essence, learning occurs in the context of relationships, and organizational climate can either foster or inhibit learning (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Thapa et al., 2013). According to the five-stage hierarchy, once the needs of security, safety, belonging and love are mostly satisfied, students are able to concentrate on a sense of accomplishment. As evidenced in the seminal and current research, humans thrive when external conditions allow their lower psychological needs of physical and emotional safety to be satisfied through supportive relationships (Berg et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Payne, 2018).

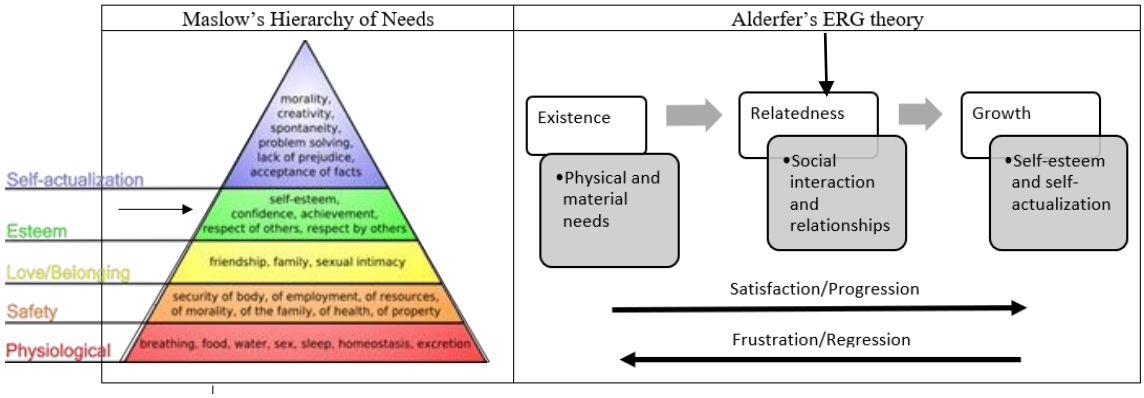
Existence, Relatedness, and Growth Theory

The ERG theory of motivation expounds on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory with empirical data (Standifer, 2013). Although the theories are parallel in terms of what humans require to survive and thrive, ERG theory uses a threefold categorical continuum rather than a five-stage hierarchy (Alderfer, 1969). The three categories of human needs on the ERG continuum consist of existence, relatedness, and growth. The existence needs are similar to Maslow's delineation of psychological and physical safety needs. The

relatedness needs encompass Maslow's belongingness, love, and esteem needs, while the growth needs category in ERG theory is comparable to the self-actualization level at the apex of the needs hierarchy (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976).

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and Alderfer's (1969) ERG theory have categorical differences, as well as distinctions, in the method of need fulfillment (Figure 2.2). Both theories, however, include relationship satisfaction as an integral component of, and path to, growth and self-actualization (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). The placement of belonging needs along Maslow's hierarchy and along Alderfer's continuum is worthy of notice, as in both instances love and relatedness needs are positioned between existence/safety needs and the higher cognitive needs of growth/self-actualization (Mathes, 1981; Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). Both theories, however, highlight the notion that an emotional connection and sense of belonging with fellow humans is an integral part of not only one's growth, but one's very survival.

Figure 2.2
Comparison of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Alderfer's Existence, Relatedness, and Growth Theory



According to these theories, an emotional connection occurs only after the satisfaction of safety needs in the hierarchy theory, or along a continuum between

existence and growth needs in ERG theory, thereby establishing the importance of relationships and a sense of belonging in human development. The ability to move along a continuum in ERG theory allows individuals to continually progress along the continuum, or regress from a higher, more developed level, down to a level that is more easily satisfied. While Maslow's deficiency model may explain a student's need to develop close interpersonal relationships prior to accomplishing the more rigorous tasks of academic achievement, ERG theory suggests that individuals may move fluidly along the continuum in order to satisfy an unfulfilled need or to avoid failure. In the face of academic struggle (frustration-regression), a student may revert to a lower, more easily satisfied level on the continuum such as relationships (satisfaction-progression). Moreover, if teachers recognize the frustration/regression shift in their students, they may better understand that their students may require additional guidance to make progress toward the specific area of growth where they are lacking. Academic growth often causes disequilibrium, which is reflected in a lack of self-esteem (Booth & Gerard, 2011). However, the foundational teacher-student relationship must exist in order to recognize this nuanced behavior and assist the student in making the shift.

Attachment Theory

Along with Maslow's theory of human motivation and Alderfer's ERG theory, the basic tenets of attachment theory also support the notion of interpersonal relationships as a precursor to cognitive expansion (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969). Young children are social beings who make meaning out of the world through relationships (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). In essence, "the self-organization of the developing brain occurs in the context of a relationship with another self, another

brain" (Schore, 1996, p. 60). For this reason, a secure and reciprocal relationship between two humans is paramount to healthy development (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Attachment theory posits that a positive infant-caregiver relationship provides a sense of safety and security for the child, as well as opportunities to explore and learn from the environment through the provision of a safe harbor (Bretherton, 1992; Center on the Developing Child, 2016; Phillips & Shonkoff, 2000; Pianta et al., 1997; Schore & Schore, 2008).

This concept of a safe harbor was echoed in the study *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development,* which was released to the public in an effort to influence educational policy and practice (Phillips & Shonkoff, 2000). For this study, an interdisciplinary team was established with representation from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the Institute of Medicine, and the National Research Council. Jack Shonkoff, director of the Center on the Developing Child, facilitated the integration of multiple disciplines, to include the behavioral, health, and social sciences, in an effort to address current and persistent issues related to early childhood development.

Three themes emerged from the study related to attachment theory and the significant work of educators and school principals:

- At birth, children are capable of understanding and experiencing six basic emotions: joy, anger, surprise, disgust, sadness, and fear. All other emotions and feelings are obtained through human interactions and experiences within the environment (Elkman, 2007). When the environment and adults in children's lives

fail to provide positive interactions, children are less likely to learn appropriate emotional and social responses (Gunnar et al., 2009; Joseph, 1999).

- Positive daily interactions with children, parents, caregivers, and teachers can contribute to positive learned social structures (Hart & Risley, 1995).
- The public education system must undergo continuous transformation to meet the needs of its students (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012).

However, even in the presence of this research, there is a gap between normative structures and behavioral structures. What we believe about how students succeed may not match with what is typically implemented to positively impact student success. To address and close this knowing-doing gap, leaders must be willing to use the available research to make appropriate changes in our schools because "policies that dismiss or ignore the science of early childhood development miss important opportunities to address the root causes of many of our nation's most pressing social concerns" (Shonkoff, 2004, p. 4).

Attachment theory explains how the biological systems in the body readily respond to both environmental and emotional stressors in a child's life (Nitecki, 2017; Phillips & Shonkoff, 2000). If children's environment is unpredictable or hostile, their cortisol levels are greatly affected. Higher cortisol levels can have adverse effects on attention, memory, and overall cognitive function (Thompson & Haskins, 2014).

Moreover, securely attached children form a cognitive and physiological working model of their environment through trial and error. If children are hurt, cry out for help, and are subsequently assisted by their caregiver, they form the cognitive connection that even though there may be a dangerous situation in the environment, they will be soothed

(Bretherton, 1992). This understanding allows them to make calculated assumptions about their caregiver's responsiveness, which permits them to perceive their environment as less threatening (Cassidy, Jones, et al., 2013). This situation would define children as having a secure attachment to their caregiver.

If children are not soothed by a caregiver, in addition to the cognitive response to a perceived threat, their body responds through the release of cortisol and adrenaline. This results in increased heart rate and blood flow, vasodilatation of the blood vessels, and other responses that prepare the body for fight or flight. The cortisol levels in children with secure attachments, however, are lower in response to stressors in the environment than for children who do not have a secure attachment to a caregiver. Although infant-caregiver relationships begin in the home, as children grow, the dyadic relationship can expand to include family members as well as members of the community such as teachers and other school personnel (Center on the Developing Child, 2016). A positive relationship formed with one caring adult can make all the difference in a child's life (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Positive teacher-student relationships contribute to children's sense of safety, social connection with peers, and academic growth and success (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; O'Connor & McCartney, 2006; Swick et al., 2013; Thompson, 2014; Van der Kolk, 2014).

It is important to note that students enter the school system with a myriad of life experiences, ranging from positive to abusive and neglectful. Students who suffer from traumatic events in their lives are susceptible to chronic stress and its negative effects including, but not limited to, heightened vigilance, poor social and emotional coping

mechanisms, attention difficulties, behavior problems, and low academic performance (Thompson, 2014). It is precisely because of the plasticity of our human bodies' biological and neurological systems that children can recover from chronic stress.

Research demonstrates that one of the most potent remedies is a positive, nurturing relationship between a caregiver and a child (Hostinar & Gunnar, 2015; Thompson, 2014). For instance, in one study, young children placed in adverse stressful conditions such as receiving an immunization shot, being subjected to loud noises, or meeting a clown did not produce higher than normal cortisol levels when comforted by a parent with whom they had a trusting relationship. However, the same was not true when the parental relationship was not secure and trusting (Gunnar & Hostinar, 2002, as cited in Gunnar & Hostinar, 2015). During the course of the school day, teachers and school staff serve as the caregiver for students; by developing positive interpersonal relationships with their students, they can offer protection against negative environmental factors (Thompson, 2014).

Affect Regulation Theory

Affect regulation theory, an expansion of attachment theory, drew on advances in neurobiological research and informs educational practitioners on the interrelatedness of relationships, brain development, and physiological systems (Schore & Schore, 2008). According to regulation theory, human development occurs because of the interaction between the brain and biological systems in response to the state of relationships occurring within a system (Schore & Schore, 2008). Under those circumstances, early positive environmental interactions lead to healthy childhood development, whereas environmental interactions filled with conflict, neglect, and trauma are linked with

emotional dysregulation, cognitive challenges, as well as changes in epigenetic expression, which is connected to genetic activation or deactivation that can affect brain development, immune functioning, and other biological processes (Benningfield et al., 2015; Evans & Fuller-Rowell, 2013; Evans & Kim, 2013; Thompson, 2014).

Providing the foundation for affective regulation theory is a comparatively new field of science, social neuroscience. This field has the ability to inform teachers and educational leaders on the interplay between biological, social, and cognitive systems that affect cognitive and social outcomes (Fox et al., 2010; Shonkoff, 2010). In the recent publication *From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts,* the Center on the Developing Child (2016) at Harvard University stated unequivocally that the myriad of experiences and relationships children encounter at an early age play a critical role in social and academic outcomes throughout the school years, as well as later in life. Subsequently, there is an interaction between what occurs in the child's environment in the early childhood years and the construction and development of neurological processes. Epigenetics, the interaction between neurological processes and a child's environment, has the ability to affect the expression of over 23,000 genes (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010). As children interact positively and negatively with the people and environments in their world, the genes in their brain cells respond accordingly, thus affecting their biological development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010).

Theory of Belonging

Baumeister and Leary (1995) argued that one of the most powerful drivers for a human being is a sense of belonging to other humans. To reach this supposition, they

reviewed decades of clinical and empirical research supporting the importance and effectiveness of positive human connections. Their research uncovered that this purely intrinsic notion of belonging is rooted in our evolutionary history. Specifically, from an anthropological perspective, the evolutionary mechanism of belonging involves the protective benefits of survival of the human species resulting from reproduction, collective child rearing, and attachments to groups for safety and economic purposes. Baumeister and Leary (1995) explained that humans have a fundamental drive to engage in a minimum quantity of stable, affectively pleasant relationships and that the lack of these relationships would be the impetus for some type of pathology. Consequently, realization of belonging theory includes at least a perception of mutuality combined with consistent and frequent human interaction.

In support of the concept of frequent human interaction, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) incorporated the notion of constancy in the first proposition of their bioecological model of human development. This proposition states that humans engage in reciprocal interactions with their environment and those interactions must occur regularly over time for change to occur. This interaction with one's environment and the change that occurs because of that interaction are defined as proximal processes in the bioecological model. Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) further defined proximal processes as an exchange of energy between an individual and his or her environment. They clarified that this energy exchange can be unidirectional on the part of the environment toward the individual or the individual toward the environment. Additionally, their research maintained that proximal processes may be bidirectional, with the individual and the environment acting reciprocally. These proximal processes

occur in the classroom on a regular basis, whether we acknowledge them or not, as teachers interact with their students in positive, negative, and/or neutral ways, each having a different effect on the students and climate of the school over time (Krane et al., 2016; Roorda et al., 2011; Uitto, 2011). With this in mind, collective proximal processes become part of the school climate and can be observed and influenced by the actions of the school principal (Wallace & Chhuon, 2014).

In their extensive review of affective science, Baumeister and Leary (1995) recognized that human beings form bonds for various reasons, but the need to belong is the primary reason for bond formation. These researchers theorized that individuals are motivated to form bonds to satisfy a need for belonging and are likely to resist breaking bonds with others, even when the relational bond causes distress (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In a meta-analytic review on the effect of social relationships on mortality rates, researchers concluded that a sense of belonging contributed to a 50% increase of survival for participants with stronger relationships (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

Further, the supposition that belonging is a fundamental human need is consistent with a Harvard study of adult development that began in 1938. It is currently one of the longest studies on record, spanning eight decades, studying the lives of 733 participants. The Harvard study, now in its second generation, began as a longitudinal study of mental health and physical well-being (Vaillant, 2012). During the study, the researchers shifted their focus to investigate the key to happiness. They found evidence that positive relationships play an essential role in feelings of happiness and maintaining healthy bodies. Likewise, in a separate study conducted in the region of Sardinia to investigate the longevity gender gap, researchers revealed that quality relationships contributed

significantly to lower mortality rates in men (Poulain et al., 2011). Buettner and Skemp (2016) further investigated this phenomenon and discovered five regions in the world where the inhabitants are among the longest living on the planet. Researchers identified nine commonalities among the individuals living in these regions. Two of the nine commonalities involved connecting with family and "finding your tribe" as a major key to health, happiness, and longevity. Similarly, teachers can model and foster the notion of "finding one's tribe" through positive teacher-student relationships within a positive school environment (Bernard, n.d.).

As demonstrated above, relationships are at the very heart of what it means to be human. Positive teacher-student relationships are one way to ensure that young children receive the necessary benefits from a sense of belonging (Ibrahim & Zataari, 2019). Positive school climates created, modeled, and sustained by school principals provide the necessary foundation for children to obtain a sense of belonging within each school day (McGiboney, 2016). Because students spend on average 6.8 hours each day in U.S. schools, the events that transpire in the classroom have the potential for lasting effects on students' lives and sense of well-being (Craw, 2018; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Osher et al., 2020; Wang & Degol, 2016).

Moreover, the notion of a need to belong has its roots in early research on human psychology and education such as Alder's 1930 book, *The Education of Children,* which identified the need for belonging as one of two fundamental motivational factors for children (Ferguson, 1989). Baumeister and Leary's (1995) research was also predicated on the earlier work of Maslow's human development theory, which identified the need to belong as a prerequisite to developing higher cognitive processes. In addition, attachment

theory (Bowlby, 1969) followed a similar supposition that a sense of belonging created the foundation for environmental exploration and engagement. Further, in his explanation of failing schools, Glasser (1996) acknowledged that a sense of belonging is a fundamental psychological need. In addition, when viewing the educational model from a systems framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), the interactions within and between environmental systems have a large bearing on human growth and development as well as how individuals identify as belonging to a particular environment.

The concept of belonging is just as salient today as when Baumeister and Leary (1995) published their seminal article and called it a "fundamental human motivation" (p. 497). There is extensive empirical evidence to demonstrate that the presence of belonging in the educational setting is beneficial with regard to growth and achievement in academic, social, and emotional areas, as well as a sense of overall well-being (Osterman, 2000). Together, these individual areas, collectively considered, encompass the whole child approach to education (Lewallen et al., 2015). More specifically, social and emotional components are the underlying factors that foster the academic process (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

To further explore this concept, Sharma and Malhotra (2010) conducted a study involving 500 young adolescents from India that considered the social and emotional benefits of feelings of belonging. Based on the results of a post-regression analysis, the researchers determined that social factors influenced the degree to which students indicated feelings of happiness (Sharma & Malhotra, 2010). Further, O'Rourke and Cooper (2010) ascertained through their research involving 4- and 6-year-old students that social indicators related to the presence of friendships (or lack thereof) represented

one of the correlations aligned with happiness. Lastly, in a study on students' abilities to take part in improving their own learning environment, researchers determined that children feel a stronger sense of belonging when their voices are heard and their ideas and suggestions result in actions of change (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009). This research suggests that children are able to experience greater success in the school setting when they feel part of the school community and part of the education process (Beck & Malley, 2003).

By the same token, a sense of belonging can also contribute to psychological benefits. Researchers hypothesized that school membership would serve as a buffer to negative psychological effects associated with students' experiences of adverse conditions connected to their old country or as a result of being a refugee in a new country. Some 76 Somali adolescents between the ages of 12 and 16 participated in the study, and researchers determined that students who indicated a high sense of school belonging experienced a combination of high self-efficacy and a lower incidence of depression (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). This study evidenced the importance of the school community as a foundation for students' connectedness and documented how educational environments foster a positive sense of belonging.

With regard to the academic benefits of fostering a community wherein students can experience a sense of belonging, current research supports the notion that learning environments supportive of students' social and emotional development provide greater opportunities for students to experience increased academic success (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013; Wiener, 2018; Zelinski, 2018). The research in this area is also related to studies regarding positive teacher-student relationships, as they

create conditions for a sense of belonging and safety (Blum, 2005; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). In the last decade, several studies have outlined the academic achievement benefits from a sense of belonging to the school community. For instance, in a report from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020) on the 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores, students who indicated a greater sense of belonging at school had higher scores on the reading PISA test than those who did not. Additionally, the data showed that students who reported a stronger sense of belonging were more likely to obtain a postsecondary degree. Of notable interest is that the percentage of students who reported a sense of belonging at school actually decreased between 2 and 10 percentage points for various groups of countries between the 2015 and 2018 PISA tests. However, some countries saw improvements between 2015 and 2018.

Due to the positive educational and general health outcomes associated with a sense of belonging to a school community, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) outlined specific strategies that school leaders, teachers, and families can use to promote greater school connectedness for students. These strategies include involving all stakeholders in making decisions, providing for and encouraging active family participation, incorporating classroom management and pedagogy that fosters a positive sense of community, offering greater professional development for teachers to increase their ability to meet the diverse needs of their students, and creating and fostering a sense of belonging through caring relationships among all stakeholders. These guidelines outline the importance of children's feeling of belonging and can serve to inform elementary school principals as they work toward creating a shared vision that

includes positive teacher-student relationships as a component of a healthy school climate. Overall, the notion of belonging or not belonging is a multidimensional construct that has historical roots in the educational setting (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Halse (2018) noted that

> schools are critical sites in the construction of belonging and non-belonging in young people's lives. Schools and schooling give young people the opportunities for the social interactions and educational experiences that create their present *and* open up possibilities for their futures. (p. xi)

This is precisely why all stakeholders in an educational process should strive for pervasive inclusivity, whereby all students, regardless of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, religion, or nationality, feel as though school is a place of belonging. Many studies have outlined the benefits of belonging, but other studies have demonstrated the negative effects of nonbelonging, especially with regard to marginalized students. Moreover, the way in which students experience belonging as they grow and develop has the propensity to color the lens with which they view the world (Halse, 2018). In sum, the theory of belonging was chosen as a theoretical foundation for this study because of its inclusion of other theoretical frameworks involving human psychology and growth as well as its ability to provide insight into the unfinished work in creating positive learning environments for all students.

Summary

Research from multiple disciplines, from neurology to psychology, has provided a wealth of knowledge, information, and evidence about the importance of positive relationships in children's lives. Toward the middle of the 20th century, Maslow (1943) developed his five-stage hierarchical model of human needs. His theory contributed to the

field of human psychology through his understanding of the need to satisfy basic human needs such as safety and belonging prior to striving toward self-actualization. Later, through the early work of Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1979), we gained a better understanding of the importance of early childhood development related to future growth and development (Cassidy et al., 2013). Bowlby and Ainsworth integrated the fields of psychology and biology into their theoretical models of development (Schore & Schore, 2008). Alderfer's (1969) ERG theory offered an expanded version of Maslow's theory of human development and sought to understand the underlying factors related to human motivation (Standifer, 2013). Similarly, affective regulation theory is an updated and expanded version of attachment theory that involves the regulatory processes of brain systems (Schore & Schore, 2008). This updated and modern affective regulation theory is important in the fields of psychology and social work, as well as neurobiology. Finally, the theory of belonging, the theoretical framework undergirding this study, is not a new concept but is relatively new as a theory. This multidisciplinary theory is significant in the field of education for examining schools and their social context related to broad educational themes associated with race, class, culture, religion, and gender (Halse, 2018).

The need to belong is an important component in the progress of developmental psychology and sociology, interrelated with seminal theories of human development, and considered a "fundamental human motivation" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). In the final analysis, educational leaders are responsible for the social, emotional, and academic welfare and growth of their students. Children who learn in a climate of positive relationships have a greater capacity to become socially, emotionally, and

academically successful and are more likely to continue to develop into successful and productive citizens.

Interpersonal Relationships in Education

Interpersonal relationships are important in education for a variety of reasons, including improved social/emotional growth, increased motivation, buffering against stress and risky behaviors, and enhanced physical health (Ibrahim & Zataari, 2019; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Martin & Dowson, 2009; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Shonkoff, 2011; Umberson & Montez, 2010; Wong et al., 2019). Major sources of interpersonal relationships in the lives of young children are parents, caregivers, teachers, and peers (Cantor et al., 2019; Martin, 2014; Osher & Berg, 2018; Thompson, 2014). To further explore this concept, Huelsnitz et al. (2018) defined interpersonal relationships as "social connections or bonds between two or more individuals that vary in closeness, commitment, and duration" and, more importantly, "have an enduring impact on the well-being of individuals" (p. 2).

In education, the concept of connective instruction centers around the quality of the teacher-student relationship in terms of student motivation, engagement, and achievement (Martin & Dowson, 2009). This concept involves three relational processes of teaching and instruction. Martin and Dowson (2009) proposed that connective instruction consists of substantive, interpersonal, and instructional relationships. They asserted that the substantive relationship represents the connection between the student and the subject matter, the interpersonal relationship represents the connection of the student to the teacher, and the instructional relationship represents the connection between the student and the instruction.

To explain further, the substantive relationship that exists in the classroom focuses on the manner in which the teacher connects the subject material to the student (Martin & Dowson, 2009). This concept reflects culturally responsive teaching as a means of improving the teacher-child relationship in addition to making new learning relevant to students. Hammond (2015) defined culturally responsive teaching as

> an educator's ability to recognize students' cultural displays of learning and meaning making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content in order to promote effective information processing. All the while, the educator understands the importance of being in a relationship and having a social-emotional connection to the student in order to create a safe space for learning. (p. 15)

Further, students who connect with and find personal meaning in a task have increased motivation to engage with the assignment, thus experiencing greater success (Priniski et al., 2018). Subsequently, teachers who take the time to develop relationships with their students will have sufficient knowledge about their students in order to connect them to the subject matter in a relevant fashion (Hammond, 2015).

The second construct of connective instruction consists of interpersonal relationships, the established relationship between the teacher and the student. Moreover, based on the work of Pianta (1992), the interpersonal relationship between the teacher and student is measurable by the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS). Subscale scores of conflict, closeness, or dependency, as well as an overall STRS score, indicate the quality of the relationship. Consequently, students with high scores on the conflict or dependency subscales may not experience the same benefit from connective instruction as students with lower scores. Martin and Dowson (2009) indicated that teachers can strengthen interpersonal relationships with students by using active listening, allowing

students to have voice and choice in their learning experiences, learning about students' likes and dislikes, and establishing realistic expectations for students in the classroom.

In a study involving 233 rising eighth-grade students, after controlling for demographics and prior grade-level motivation and engagement using survey data, Ryan and Patrick (2001) acknowledged an increase in student motivation and engagement resulting from students' perceptions of positive teacher support within a respectful social environment. Further, in an earlier but much cited study, Goodenow (1993) developed an 18-item Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale reported as a reliable instrument to measure a student's perceived sense of belonging. Positive teacher support was identified as an integral component in measuring students' perceived connection to the school environment. In effect, Goodenow (1993) stated, "Psychological membership itself may be an important contributor to school motivation, effort, participation, and subsequent achievement" (p. 88).

Overall, the existing literature is robust regarding the benefits of positive teacher-student interpersonal relationships, including improved social, emotional, and academic outcomes, but also acknowledges that positive relationships are not equitable across all demographic groups (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Osher & Berg, 2018; Payne, 2018). A positive school climate "reflects attention to fostering social and physical safety, providing support that enables students and staff to realize high behavioral and academic standards as well as encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 1). As the leader of the school, the principal is responsible for

establishing a positive school climate to ensure that equitable practices regarding students' sense of belonging are embedded in the school culture (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; McCarley, Peters et al., 2016; Wallace Foundation, 2013). This effort can be accomplished as more leaders focus on closing the knowing-doing gap between research, policy, and practice (National School Climate Council, 2007; Villenas & Zelinski, 2018).

The third and final relational process of connective instruction outlined by Martin and Dowson (2009) is the instructional relationship, which encompasses effective instructional practices used by the classroom teacher. Effective instructional practices engage students and result in student growth (DuFour et al., 2013; Hattie, 2015; Marzano, 2017). Moreover, when students are engaged, they are attentive, committed, persistent, and consider work assignments meaningful (Schlechty, 2011). Based on current best teaching practices, effective lessons should align to state standards and/or written curriculum, center around clear learning targets, and include differentiated instruction, modeling of lessons, and checks for understanding (Schmoker, 2016). Martin and Dowson (2009) maintained that in each of the three relational processes represented in connective instruction, the teacher serves as the conduit between the student and the lesson. With attention to the connection between the teacher, student, and educational outcomes, educational researcher Hattie (2003) asserted that teachers are responsible for 30% of the variance in student achievement. This influence is second only to the student's, which accounts for 50% of variance in achievement.

In an effort to identify the greatest difference between expert and experienced teachers, Hattie, along with three fellow researchers, investigated over 300 classrooms

and established three major teacher moves that accounted for 80% of the variance between expert and experienced teachers (Bond et al., 2000, as cited in Hattie, 2003). These include providing students with appropriately designed and challenging tasks, utilizing content knowledge to best suit students' needs, and monitoring students' progress while providing timely and specific feedback.

As demonstrated above, relational learning is an important construct in students' growth and learning. The literature surrounding relational learning is robust in the domain of human sciences, but equally important is the research from neuroscience, providing an additional perspective on the underlying reason why relational learning and positive teacher-student relationships promote improved student outcomes (Jones & Kahn, 2017). From a neurobiological perspective, the importance of positive teacher-student relationships is tied to the role of the brain structures and autonomic nervous system in response to relational and environmental factors (Shonkoff, 2011; Thompson & Haskins, 2014). According to Hebbian theory, formulation of long-term memory involves neurobiological structural changes in the brain. Neurons that are activated simultaneously, such as by emotions and new learning, essentially form a neurobiological connection in the brain, and depending on the strength of the emotion, can be retrieved together (Keysers & Gazzola, 2014; Tyng et al., 2017). Studies involving learning and memory highlight the neurotransmitters dopamine and acetylcholine in the process of learning. However, when these neurotransmitters are blocked, the learning process can be inhibited (Owens & Tanner, 2017). In particular, the hormone cortisol, related to chronic toxic stress, can inhibit learning (Conrad, 2010; Shonkoff et al., 2012). Therefore,

teachers should make a marked effort to ensure that classroom environments are free of excessive stress to ensure improved student outcomes (Owens & Tanner, 2017).

Further, positive teacher-student relationships are one way to foster a positive stress-response system. For example, in a study involving 113 preschool children, positive teacher-child interactions were positively correlated with a low stress response (Williford et al., 2017). The implication of this theory from a teacher's and principal's perspective is the notion that how a student feels when new learning occurs in the classroom can contribute to or inhibit the learning process. Relationships matter, and teachers who understand how the autonomic nervous system operates in response to environmental and relational factors are far more equipped to level the educational playing field for all students in terms of socioemotional regulation and academic achievement (Hammond, 2015; Jensen, 2009; Sousa, 2006; Van der Kolk, 2014). Comparatively, school principals can champion the initiative for a greater focus on positive teacher-student relationships as a component of a healthy school climate by incorporating schoolwide policies and practices focused on fostering a climate of relational trust as well as provide educator to expand teachers' knowledge about providing their students with social and emotional support to help them grow and succeed in the school setting (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Teacher-Child Relationships

Relationships are central to the healthy development of children and are foundational to

> social, emotional, and academic growth (Cantor et al., 2019; Osher et al., 2020). In effect, growth-promoting relationships are based on the child's continuous give-and-take with a human partner who provides what nothing else in the world

> can offer—experiences that are individualized to the child's unique personality style; that build on his or her own interests, capabilities, and initiative; that shape the child's self-awareness; and that stimulate the growth of his or her heart and mind. (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, p. 1)

Not only are positive teacher-child relationships an integral component of student success, but the bond that is formed by the teacher and student may also serve as a buffer against childhood stress and trauma (Cantor et al., 2019; Jones & Kahn, 2017; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). An affective classroom is one in which the quality of the teacher-student relationship contributes to socioemotional and academic gains (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Providing students in the elementary school setting with a stable environment that include positive and caring relationships within a positive school climate produces long-term beneficial effects for children in terms of socioemotional and academic success (Entwisle & Hayduk, 1988; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Shonkoff, 2011).

From the standpoint of the quality of teacher-child relationships, the STRS makes it possible to measure the emotional connection between a teacher and a student from the perspective of the classroom teacher. The STRS, developed by Pianta (1992), guided by principles of attachment theory and research on teacher-child interactions, is a reliable and valid diagnostic tool to quantify the teacher's perception of the quality of the teacher-student relationship (Baker, 2006; Birch & Ladd, 1997, 1998; Crosnoe et al., 2010; Pianta et al., 1995; Wang et al., 2016). For close to three decades, this tool has produced valuable data for teams of educators focusing on providing interventions for students in the area of socioemotional regulation and/or academic achievement (Pianta, 1992).

Based on the STRS, teacher-student relationship quality is determined using the subscales of conflict, closeness, and dependency. Teachers who rate relationships high in

conflict perceive the relationship with the student to be negative and fraught with conflict. High scores in the closeness subcategory indicate that the teacher perceives the relationship as openly communicative, warm, and friendly. Alternatively, high scores in the dependency category reflect a teacher's perception that a particular student does not yet have the skills to operate autonomously in a classroom setting. This increased dependency on the teacher by the student may cause a strain on the relationship because the teacher may become frustrated by the amount of time required by a dependent student, which limits the time spent with other students.

The limitations of using the STRS to estimate the quality of the teacher-student relationship are related to a potential reciprocal or bidirectional effect of the teacher-student relationship, attitudes toward school, and acting-out behavior (Birch & Ladd, 1997). When the teacher-student relationship is strained due to a student's acting-out behavior, the teacher would benefit from professional development. The Students, Teachers, and Relationship Support (STARS) program can provide the support some teachers require to bolster and strengthen teacher-student relationships (Pianta, 1992).

The literature is prolific with research related to the benefits garnered from positive teacher-student relationships. In another example, Baker (2006) examined the correlation between teacher-child relationship quality and children's school adjustment using data from an earlier 3-year study that included a racially diverse sample of 1,310 students in kindergarten through fifth grade and 68 teachers. This study acknowledged the importance and benefits of positive teacher-student relationships across multiple grade levels. Teacher-student relationship quality was measured using the STRS, students' behavior was evaluated using the Behavior Assessment System for Children-

Teacher Rating Scales for Children, and academic achievement data was collected from available school records. The researchers analyzed the data using regression analysis to determine associations between the quality of teacher-student relationships and students' school adjustment. Findings indicated that students in elementary school who experienced positive teacher-student relationships had stronger improvement in reading performance than students who did not form positive relationships with their teachers. These outcomes, however, were limited to neurotypical students, as no significant relationships were found between teacher-student relationship quality and school outcomes in students with cognitive disabilities. In addition, this particular study did not address math achievement or the long-term benefits of positive teacher-student relationships. A longitudinal study would provide more information on how positive teacher-student relationships contribute to students' academic performance through middle and high school.

In a different study, Birch and Ladd (1998) examined teacher-student relationships and found that student scores on closeness, dependency, and conflict yielded significant results for academic performance readiness, school affect and attitude, and school involvement. The authors questioned whether outcomes of teacher-student relationships were transactional or bidirectional. Again, longitudinal data would reveal the directional effects of teacher-student relationship quality. Still, the study highlights the importance of positive teacher-student relationships in the school setting. Regardless of the directionality of teacher-student relationships, the study implies that what teachers perceive about the teacher-student relationship has implications for the quality of the relationship and its associations with children's school performance.

Researchers determined that teacher-student relationships perceived by teachers as high in conflict can adversely affect academic growth outcomes and negatively influence the perceived social status of the student, resulting in increased academic underachievement and acting-out behavior (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Cornelius-White, 2007; Taylor, 1989; White & Kistner, 1992). For instance, in a study involving 149 students in kindergarten through second grade, White and Kistner (1992) found a correlation between teacher feedback and subsequent peer perceptions. Participants in this study were shown a 10-minute videotape of a classroom scenario involving child actors and a teacher who had her back to the camera. Differentiated teacher feedback was created by changing the soundtrack of the video to portray a specific type of teacher feedback, which fell within the categories of neutral, positive, corrective, derogatory/negative, or a combination of positive and negative. The study findings determined that the teachers' attention toward appropriate student behavior resulted in increased peer preference for and approval of those students. When the teacher's attention focused on inappropriate student behavior and used corrective statements, peer preference was neutral. Conversely, when the teacher used derogatory statements, peer preference and approval ratings were significantly lower.

Although this study demonstrated a correlation between teacher feedback and peer perceptions, this effect may be applicable only in the younger grades where students may be more influenced by adults. This study highlights the notion that teachers have a propensity to set up negative feedback loops in their classrooms leading to harmful peer rejection. In addition, this study offers implications for school principals related to school climate and positive teacher-student relationships based on the associative social stigma

and peer rejection that can result from derogatory teacher feedback. The responsibility to create and maintain students' sense of belonging through a positive school climate rests with the school principal (Cohen et al., 2009).

More importantly, the nature of interpersonal relationships in the school setting can have a significant impact on a sense of safety and belonging for some students. Psychological safety "may decrease barriers to engagement and allow individuals to freely exercise agency to activate and interact with the world around them" (Wanless, 2016, p. 1). Further, students who find themselves in psychologically unsafe environments may find the cost of engagement too high in terms of the risk of being embarrassed or singled out (Wanless, 2016). Classroom teachers are able to increase a child's sense of safety and belonging through conscious efforts. One such intervention is termed banking time, a dyadic intervention whereby teachers interact one-on-one with students and engage in "child-led play and teacher facilitation techniques" (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010, p. 38).

In a study to determine the effects of banking time, Driscoll and Pianta (2010) worked with a group of 116 children and 29 teachers in the Head Start preschool program. The STRS was utilized to measure perceptions of teacher-student relationship quality. Other measurements were related to childhood adjustment and behavior. Over a 6-week period, teachers engaged in structured nonacademic interactions with their students. Using a repeated-measures analysis, researchers noted an increase in teacher-student relationship quality, "increased frustration tolerance, task orientation, and competence and decreased conduct problems for children in the Banking Time condition compared with peers in the within-class control condition" (p. 55). In effect, relationships

are essential to growth and learning, and the positive or negative emotions associated with teacher-student relationships, and the associative academic and social impact, are the result of students' perception of safety and the physiological response to that perception (Fiske et al., 2007; Fox et al., 2010; Thompson et al., 2008).

Another study addressing the perception of safety was a randomized trial involving young Romanian children to determine the cognitive impact of institutionalized care versus foster care (Nelson et al., 2007). With the knowledge that mammalian brains require an "expectable environment" to thrive, to include "normal language exposure, and access to responsive caregivers," 68 children, both male and female, were randomly assigned to either continue living in the government institution facility or to live in foster care (Nelson et al., 2007, p. 1937). A third noninstitutionalized group, composed of children living with their biological families, was included in the study as a reference. The data consisted of cognitive information gathered at 30, 42, and 54 months. Findings showed that the children in the institutionalized group had extreme diminishment in cognitive ability, whereas the children placed in foster care demonstrated pronounced cognitive gains. The authors concluded that the results align with the notion of sensitive periods in development and are very significant for practices and policies relating to child welfare. This information confirms the urgency of finding foster homes for abandoned children as early as possible in the child's life, as institutions are historically "characterized by unfavorable caregiver-to-child ratios, highly regimented routines, . . . impoverished sensory, cognitive, and linguistic stimulation," and, specifically related to this study, include "unresponsive caregiving practices" (Nelson et al., 2007, p. 1937).

While representing the extremes that some children are subjected to, this study highlights the benefits of a sense of belonging created by positive and caring relationships.

The connection between early childhood experiences, brain development, and cognitive growth is well documented (Fox et al., 2010). Specifically, physiologic responses that occur from the environment take place in the limbic region within the brain that houses the thalamus, amygdala, and hippocampus, which continuously scans the environment for perceived threats (Benningfield et al., 2015; Van der Kolk, 2014). Students situated in learning environments perceived by them as threatening or hostile will undergo physiological changes from the release of cortisol and adrenaline in the body due to a parasympathetic response (Hammond, 2015; Sousa, 2006). The increase in cortisol levels adversely affects attention, memory, and overall cognitive function (Hammond, 2015; Thompson & Haskins, 2014). On the other hand, positive relationships and a sense of belonging in the classroom stimulate endorphins and activate the frontal lobes, which increases cognitive ability and working memory (Panksepp, 1988; Sousa, 2006). Therefore, it is imperative that all students are afforded the opportunity to learn and develop in an environment that fosters positive relationships because "the purpose of school is to give children an experience that will help them grow and develop in ways that they can be successful" (Smith, 2005, p. 2). Moreover, positive teacher-student relationships and a sense of belonging are the foundation of a healthy school climate. Given these points, and because students' school experiences can have long-lasting and compounding effects, it is important for the school principal, the instructional leader in the building, to promote teacher-student relationship quality as a component of a positive school climate.

Teacher-Student Relationships and Positive School Climate

A student's emotional state of being, sense of safety within the classroom, and relationship with the teacher all have a direct effect on the quality and depth of learning that occur during the course of a school day (Cohen et al., 2009; Davidson et al., 2000; Noddings, 2010; Sousa, 2006). School climate is defined by the National Center for Learning and Citizenship, Education Commission of the States, and Center for Social and Emotional Education as "the quality and character of school life" (National School Climate Council, 2007, p. 2). "The [school] climate includes norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe" (National School Climate Council, 2007, p. 2). To explore this topic, Cohen et al. (2009) conducted a national survey of leaders at all levels in education about the measurement and improvement of school climate. The results revealed a major gap between the research on school climate and current policies and practices—a gap so large that they determined it was "socially unjust and a violation of children's human rights" (Cohen et al., 2009. p. 181). Recognizing that the gap exists, however, is the first step toward school reform. Although the National Educational Leadership Preparation Program includes climate as part of accountability indicators for school principals, the method for assessing climate is often left up to individual leaders. These climate measurements frequently consist of informal checklists and may or may not cover all four essential dimensions of school climate: safety, teaching and learning, relationships, and environmental /structural features.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), a positive school climate is one in which "trusting, caring, and respectful relationships" are present (p. 1). Schools

consist of an interdependent web of resources, and the condition of the school climate is a result of the lived experience of the staff and students within the school (Thapa et al., 2013). Students report that simple acts of kindness such as smiling, engaging in nonacademic conversation, and being helpful have a large impact on their lived experience at school (Krane et al., 2016). The association between positive teacher-student relationships and school climate is demonstrated through an integrated neurobiological system that affects all aspects of thinking, learning, and behavior (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016; Shonkoff, 2011; Thompson, 2014). Moreover, positive teacher-student relationships foster an emotional state conducive to academic and social success within the school setting regardless of demographics, personal circumstances, or socioeconomic status (Baker, 2006; Birch & Ladd, 1998; Taylor, 1989; White & Kistner, 1992).

In light of the connection between teacher-student relationships and positive school climate, an in-depth review of the literature on school climate and school climate reform was conducted for the purposes of this study. Of particular note was a research study involving over 6,000 prekindergarten to fifth-grade classrooms, revealing that effective teacher-student relationships that provided emotional and instructional support were among several mediating factors contributing to academic achievement and student social and emotional outcomes (Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, n.d.). By the same token, and because learning occurs in the context of relationships, positive school climates are paramount to supporting students on their journey toward academic, social, and emotional success (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2019; Maxwell et al., 2017).

To extend understanding of the connection between teacher-student relationships and school climate, Wang and Degol (2016) examined 297 studies representing empirical, descriptive, correlational, experimental, and quasi-experimental studies encompassing elementary, middle, and high schools. In their review, they acknowledged four broad categorical components of school climate comprising academic, community, safety, and institutional environment (Wang & Degol, 2016). Further, the researchers were able to ascertain that a positive school climate contributed positively to academic, behavioral and psychological student outcomes and that teacher-student relationships were a key component of this connection. Above all, this review of extant research offered credence to the notion that a positive school climate focused on interpersonal relationships could act as a catalyst for school improvement and student success in terms of behavioral, academic, and psychological outcomes. In their final analysis, Wang and Degol (2016) acknowledged that while the research supports school climate as a component of positive student outcomes, other factors must also be examined, including the role of administrators in the relationship between school climate and student outcomes.

Similarly, in an integrative review of school climate research utilizing over 200 studies and reviews, Thapa et al. (2013) determined that improving school climate through the promotion of positive interpersonal relationships in the school was an evidence-based strategy for student success and school improvement. Moreover, they proposed that the components of school climate were largely similar to those in other studies, though they did recognize school improvement process as a fifth component, in addition to safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and institutional environment.

Further, this review concluded that school climate is associated with positive school academic and psychological outcomes and is supported by positive interpersonal relationships and relational trust (Thapa et al., 2013). Regardless of the information supporting a positive school climate, researchers acknowledged a limitation in regard to school leadership. The studies did not inform the reader on the role of the school principal in leading the school improvement process or in promoting teacher-student relationships, a key component of school climate.

School Connectedness

The emotional state students experience related to the quality of teacher-student relationships is associated with the research on school connectedness (Blum, 2005). School connectedness is the students' perception of the degree to which adults in the environment care for them (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Moreover, it is both a component of and contributor to a positive school climate (Cohen et al., 2006; Klem & Connell, 2004; Loukas et al., 2006; McGiboney, 2016). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) reported that trusting and caring relationships between the students and staff in the school constitute a sense of school connectedness.

The research on school connectedness parallels the research on school climate, and belongingness theory recognizes the need for humans to experience interpersonal relationships in order to thrive in any environment (Sulkowski et al., 2012). For example, in a review of educational research, Finn (1989) examined the phenomenon of school dropout via two specific models to understand the process involved in a student withdrawing from school prior to graduating. He pointed out that the decision to drop out of school often occurred after many years of feeling disconnected from the institution.

Finn (1989) acknowledged that dropping out of school was related to the concept of school identification and asserted, “Students who identify with school have an internalized conception of belongingness—that they are discernibly part of the school environment and that the school constitutes an important part of their own experience” (p. 123). Although lack of school identification may not be the singular reason for school dropout, the research supports its role as an underlying factor. With this in mind, it is important to realize the beneficial protective effects of positive teacher-student relationships. Overall, students who experience a sense of belonging and school connectedness are more likely to engage in the academic process and receive greater academic, social, and emotional rewards (Blum, 2005; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009; Osterman, 2000).

School Climate

School climate has been in the minds of educators for over a century. Educational reformers Dewey (1916), Durkheim (1961), and Perry (1908) recognized that the environment in which education takes place is as important as the education itself (Thapa et al., 2013). It is sometimes difficult to escape the impact that climate has on human beings because it interacts with all aspects of our personality and lived experiences (McGiboney, 2016). However, in the pursuit of academic accountability measures, school climate may not be at the forefront of all conversations surrounding educational reform. As Freiberg and Stein (1999) proclaimed, “Much like the air we breathe, school climate is ignored until it becomes foul” (p. 1).

Unfortunately, researchers have yet to agree on a single definition of school climate. Nevertheless, earlier definitions from Hoy and Miskel and more recent

definitions from the National School Climate Council refer to school climate as consisting of affective components. Hoy and Miskel (1987) referred to school climate as

> the heart and soul of a school, psychological and institutional attributes that give a school its personality, a relatively enduring quality of the entire school experienced by members, which describes their collective perceptions of routine behavior and affects their attitudes and behavior in the school. (p. 226)

In addition, Cohen (2014) acknowledged that school climate is "a school improvement strategy with the potential to increase school connectedness, academic achievement, prosocial education" (p. 1). Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education (2016) and National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments described school climate in the following manner:

> School climate reflects how members of the school community experience the school, including interpersonal relationships, teacher and other staff practices, and organizational arrangements. School climate includes factors that serve as conditions for learning and that support physical and emotional safety, connection and support, and engagement. (p. 1)

Finally, the National School Climate Council (2012) defined school climate as "the quality and character of school life" related to the various dimensions of the school community (p. 2). Moreover, as a multidimensional construct, school climate, depending on perspective, can include physical, social, and academic dimensions (Loukas, 2007).

The defining characteristics of school climate guiding this research emphasize the relational aspect of school climate resulting from students' experience of a sense of safety provided through positive interpersonal teacher-student relationships. Although the elements or dimensions of school climate are as numerous and varied as the definitions themselves, they share many similar components. For the purposes of this research study, school climate is defined as "the character and quality of school life shared by the

patterns of students', parents', and school personnel's experience of norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures" (National School Climate Council, 2007, p. 5). This particular definition was chosen because of its emphasis on interpersonal relationships and the feeling one receives as a result of lived experiences within the environment. Accordingly, this study focused on a positive school climate, defined as one that "reflects attention to fostering social and physical safety, providing support that enables students and staff to realize high behavioral and academic standards as well as encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 1).

The mechanism of school climate can be viewed through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (McGiboney, 2016). Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) defined ecological theory as focusing on the exchange of energy between an individual and his or her environment. They further clarified that this exchange can be unidirectional on the part of the environment toward the individual, or from the individual toward the environment. This theory is predicated on the notion that the interactions occurring within social circles or hierarchies affect the outcome of the experience (La Salle et al., 2015; Tudge et al., 2009).

To expand on Bronfenbrenner's theory, La Salle et al. (2015) introduced the notion of how an individual's culture could have an impact on the perception of school climate, thus affecting the school experience. Additionally, two other studies specifically focused on the racial and ethnic components of the perception of school climate and demonstrated that non-White students considered positive teacher-student relationships to

be one of the most important aspects of school climate (Schneider & Duran, 2010; Watkins & Aber, 2009). These data indicated that students of color are underrepresented in measures of academic achievement while being overrepresented in the discipline data (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). It is imperative that teachers form positive relationships with their students and offer a sense of belonging and safety to all students regardless of race or ethnicity, because teachers' perceptions of and feedback to their students have the potential to shape their students' self-identity and beliefs about their own self-worth and impact students' present academic ability and success as future citizens (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Overall, these studies demonstrated the complex nature of school climate as well as the importance of teacher-student relationships in students' perceptions of a positive school climate (Schneider & Duran, 2010; Watkins & Aber, 2009).

Components of School Climate

Similar to the numerous definitions of school climate, there are many different models outlining its components. To begin with, the National School Climate Center (n.d.) recognized 13 dimensions within six major categories: safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, institutional environment, social media, and leadership and professional relationships. Additionally, in a historical review of school climate literature, Zullig et al. (2010) identified five categories of school climate: order, safety, and discipline; academic outcomes; social relationships; school facilities; and school connectedness. Further, in a thorough review of the research on school climate, Thapa et al. (2013) described the five categories of school climate most salient in the literature as safety, relationships, teaching and learning, institutional environment, and

school improvement processes. According to the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (2020), the Safe and Effective Schools Model identified three categories of an effective school climate: engagement, safety, and environment. Engagement relates to the interpersonal relationships between teachers and students, as well as other relationships within the school and between the school and the larger community, resulting in positive conditions that have an impact on student learning. Overall, a common thread in all of the underlying components and categories of school climate present in the research is the emphasis on interpersonal relationships (Table 2.3). If school climate is indeed "the heart and soul of the school," it follows that a positive school climate would benefit both teachers and students (Freiberg & Stein, 1999, p. 11).

Table 2.3
Categories of School Climate

National School Climate Center (n.d.)	Zullig et al. (2010)	Thapa et al. (2013)	National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (2020)
1. Safety	1. Order, safety, and discipline	1. Safety	1. Engagement
2. Teaching and learning	2. Academic outcomes	2. Relationships	2. Safety
3. Interpersonal relationships	3. Social relationships	3. Teaching and learning	3. Environment
4. Institutional environment	4. School facilities	4. Institutional environment	
5. Social media	5. School connectedness	5. School improvement	
6. Leadership and professional relationships			

Positive School Climate

School climate has been identified as a factor of school quality and improvement for decades. Dewey (1916) stated in *Democracy and Education* that school was not so

much to prepare students for so-called real life; instead, school was real life. As early as 1961, a study indicated that school climate, rather than ability and/or socioeconomic status, was an indicator of on-time matriculation (Michael, 1961). In the mid-1960s, James Comer initiated a long-term collaborative effort between two public schools in Connecticut and the Child Study Center at Yale University. This collaboration focused on a school reform system that used support teams to make improvements to the dimensions of school climate through specific developmental pathways, resulting in positive student outcomes (Haynes & Comer, 1996). This effort is now known as the School Development Program and has succeeded in raising achievement scores and schoolwide attendance, while lowering discipline problems in the two lowest-performing schools in Connecticut. The Comer School Development Program has since been used successfully in over 1,000 schools across the nation and in countries around the world (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). Comer has insisted that the School Development Program is not a ready-made program for school reform; instead, it consists of multi-stakeholder teams that work together in both the academic and social realms to help students grow in ways they can be successful (Comer, 1999; Comer et al., 1996). In this program, school and community teams focus on six facets of development: physical health, language, ethics, social, psychological, and cognitive (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). At the heart of the School Development Program is the principal, because "a good principal has to be committed to involving the teachers, the parents, and the children in the management of the school . . . and understands that he or she is a facilitator" for schoolwide growth (Smith, 2005, p. 5).

Decades after the School Development Program was created, the Consortium on Chicago School Research launched a 15-year longitudinal study to investigate the levers for improvement in student outcomes (Bryk, 2010). The research group identified five essential supports to develop a positive school climate as a means to promote school improvement. These supports include incorporating a core instructional system; facilitating ongoing professional development with teachers and staff; creating and sustaining a connection between the school, parents, and community; building a student-centered school climate; and understanding that the principal is a key constituent to elicit organizational change (Bryk, 2010).

In essence, the school principal is responsible for creating a positive school climate that establishes conditions for learning whereby students feel a sense of safety, engage in positive interpersonal relationships with staff members, maximize learning potential and success rates, and feel an overall sense of purpose and belonging (Blum, 2005; Cantor et al., 2019). Reflecting this view, the U.S. Department of Education (2016) recognized a positive school climate as follows:

> A positive school climate reflects attention to fostering social and physical safety, providing support that enables students and staff to realize high behavioral and academic standards as well as encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community. (p. 1)

Based on the definitions of school climate and positive school climate presented by the U.S. Department of Education (2016), school climate is representative of the operative conditions for learning in addition to the manner in which these conditions are experienced. A positive school climate, on the other hand, focuses on the conditions for learning actively established by school leadership teams and school staff. Schools with positive climates actively create the conditions necessary for students to benefit from

social, emotional, and academic supports. It follows that every school has a school climate, but not every school has a positive school climate. The National Association of School Psychologists (2020) recognized that school climate improvements are under way in many districts as school leaders seek to provide supports for all students through multitiered systems of support. A positive school climate, recognized as an evidence-based strategy for school improvement by the Department of Education through ESSA, is a means by which teachers and principals can improve achievement and outcomes for all students (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Under ESSA, schools are tasked with focusing their efforts on systems of support that create greater equity among students in terms of school climate, safety, and academic achievement. The multitiered systems of support approach is a comprehensive, data-driven, tiered system that provides varying levels of support for all students based on need. Additionally, the approach allows multiple stakeholders, including school psychologists, teachers, and school leaders, to create a safe and supportive school climate that remove the barriers to social and academic gains (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020).

Benefits of a Positive School Climate

The climate of a school has the potential to make major contributions to students' academic growth as well as social and emotional growth (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; McGiboney, 2016; Payne, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013). In an effort to determine a relationship between school climate and academic growth and achievement, MacNeil et al. (2009) investigated three schools that earned different achievement ratings from the Texas Accountability Rating System using the Organizational Health Inventory.

This instrument is an 80-question survey measuring organizational health related to the school environment, with 13% of the questions linking school leadership to school climate. Based on scores from the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, schools in the study received either an Exemplary, Recognized, or Acceptable status. The results of the study indicated a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the three rating categories and measurements from the Organizational Health Inventory, demonstrating that schools with higher achievement ratings were schools with healthier climates.

Of the 10 dimensions of the Organizational Health Inventory, Goal Focus and Adaptation showed the greatest variance between Recognized and Acceptable schools. Goal Focus is defined as the "ability of persons, groups, or organizations to have clarity, acceptance, and support," while Adaptation relates to "the ability of organizations to tolerate stress and maintain stability while being responsive to the demands of the external environment" (MacNeil et al., 2009, pp. 78-79). Both Goal Focus and Adaptation are dimensions of school climate related to the institutional environment and are directly influenced by the school principal through establishing clear goals and a collective vision (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009; MacNeil et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013). Similarly, Sherblom et al. (2006) found a positive correlation between reported school climate and fourth-grade scores on math and reading as measured by state standardized tests. Their findings indicated that a positive and supportive community, founded on caring interpersonal teacher-student relationships as a component of positive school climate, resulted in a direct effect on student achievement. The researchers commented:

> Changes in these relationships can improve the school community and change the experience of the students, teachers, and parents, creating a school that not only

> has a more positive climate, but one in which the students are more successful in their academic achievements. (Sherblom et al., 2006, p. 29)

Student academic outcomes, as evidenced by academic achievement on standardized tests, are only one measure of student achievement. Many researchers have agreed that social, emotional, and physical needs are fundamental aspects of the academic learning environment that should not be discounted (Battistich et al., 1997; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Resnick et al., 1997).

In an attempt to create a "caring community of learners," the Child Development Project focused on and created measures to improve the social, emotional, and interpersonal aspects of the school environment (Solomon et al., 2000, p. 4). The results of their six-school, 3-year study demonstrated that the school environment significantly affected students' academic, personal, and social growth, confirming that a positive school climate built on positive interpersonal relationships is a central component in student outcomes. Additional research led by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) focused on the connection between a positive school climate, improved student outcomes, and pedagogical methods, as well as the leadership of the building principal (Cohen, 2006). In an attempt to assist school districts in collecting data on the effects of improving students' social and emotional competence, CASEL formed a partnership with the Collaborating Districts Initiative and the American Institute for Research. The mission of the Collaborating Districts Initiative is to assist school districts around the country to integrate social and emotional learning into all aspects of student learning. This effort resulted in a theory of action, which supported the notion that a favorable school climate and students' social and emotional development are positively related. As of June 2015, eight school districts from across the country

joined in the effort to improve student outcomes through increased social and emotional competencies that include intrapersonal relationships.

Consequently, in the school districts of Austin, Chicago, and Cleveland, reading and math scores improved over the 3 years of implementation. Also, by the end of June 2015, the school districts of Anchorage, Austin, Chicago, Cleveland, Oakland, and Nashville found that fostering a positive school climate through improved social and emotional learning yielded better attendance, grades, graduation rates, and social and emotional competence, while decreasing the number of suspensions. The positive effects experienced by these school districts resulted from a huge collaborative effort for systematic organizational change. Research supports the idea that a positive school climate provides emotional supports that contribute to student academic, as well as social and emotional development (Thapa et al., 2013). The information that follows covers relevant research regarding the school principal's role in creating a healthy school climate.

Responsibility of the School Principal in Creating a Healthy School Climate

The principal's values, beliefs, and actions affect every aspect of the school (Wallace Foundation, 2013). The research is robust in terms of identifying the school principal as a key player in creating and maintaining a healthy school climate. Collectively defined, school climate encompasses the attitudes, shared values, perceptions, and lived experiences of leadership, staff, and students in a school (Hoy et al., 2002; Koth et al., 2008). The research on school improvement and reform has identified the principal as responsible for creating and maintaining a positive school

climate (Cohen et al., 2009; Hofstrand, 2003, Myers, 2014; Pepper & Thomas, 2001). According to Quick and Normore (2004):

> The responsibility for creating a sense of community within the school lies with the principal. The principal's actions shape the experiences within the school—both directly and indirectly affecting and determining the norms and conventions of the institution, giving form to the climate, culture and, ultimately, the community. (p. 328)

Similarly, a report from the Wallace Foundation (2013) identified "'creating a climate hospitable to education' . . . as one of five fundamental roles of a building principal" (p. 4). Moreover, Hattie (2015) asserted that the role of the principal in a school's climate is vital for student outcomes in connection to a climate of inclusivity whereby everyone in the school is working toward the same goal. Nucci (2004) similarly concluded, "The principal is the key player in a school; from the principal, the climate of the school will come. The climate of a school is its moral feeling derived from the values that the principal advocates and makes actionable" (as cited in Quick & Normore, 2004, p. 338). Further, in a recent Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development report, Mulford (2003) determined that school leadership serves as the hinge between a positive climate and student learning.

In an effort to further understand the plethora of information pertaining to school climate, Thapa and Cohen from the National School Climate Center, along with Guffey and Higgins-D'Alessandro from Fordham University, reviewed over 200 school climate studies with a focus on five dimensions of school climate: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, institutional environment, and the school improvement process (Thapa et al., 2013). In terms of the safety component of school climate, researchers acknowledged safety as fundamental to human growth and development, yet many students reported not

feeling safe in school due to violence and bullying. Through implementation of schoolwide expectations and reform, school leaders are able to change the degree to which people feel safe in the school. The relational aspect of school climate was connected to teaching and learning, and relationships were identified as the pathway for learning to occur. However, although some students in the study acknowledged that teacher-student relationships were significant to them, many studies indicated that some relationships were not equitable across demographic, racial, and ethnic lines. In an effort to minimize the relational inequities that occur in schools, the research suggested that school leaders promote an awareness of relational disparities in their building through sustained school climate surveys and remain proactive in resolving this issue using prosocial education efforts.

In their review of the literature, the researchers also discovered a correlation between school climate, teaching and learning, and students' academic growth and achievement. To help students grow and succeed, school principals serve as instructional leaders, leading the teaching and learning effort in the school through professional development, classroom observations, and teacher feedback (Johnson et al., 2017; Schmoker, 2016). It is important to note that the institutional environment and school improvement components of school climate are linked to the concept of school connectedness and the importance of educating the whole child, to include social and emotional learning, as well as academic learning (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Payne, 2018). Given this information, and because the principal "remains the central source of leadership influence" (Wallace Foundation, 2013, p. 6), school principals are not only responsible for, but able to make significant contributions toward,

creating and sustaining a positive school climate through their actions, policy, and procedures (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Moreover, because of the connection between the school principal and school climate present in the research literature, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration issued new educational standards in 2018 to inform and guide higher education institutions on educational leadership program components and graduate competencies. These new standards help future school leaders understand fully the impact that school climate and interpersonal relationships have on all areas of student advancement. Fundamentally, teaching and learning are an interpersonal experience, and interpersonal relationships are one of the cornerstones of a healthy school climate, which is the responsibility of the school principal (Berg et al., 2017; Bossert et al., 1982; Osterman, 2000).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research project outlines the relationship between the role of the school principal, as the person responsible for creating and sustaining a positive school climate, and the behaviors of the teacher in establishing positive teacher-student relationships that create a sense of belonging, improve student growth and learning, and contribute to a positive school climate. Transformational leadership theory and the theory of belonging support this relationship because of their underlying emphasis on the ability to create positive change in organizations (Beck & Malley, 2003; DePaoli et al., 2017; Halse, 2018; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Osterman, 2000; Over, 2016; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Transformational leadership behaviors generate a sense of trust, facilitate buy-in of a collective vision, motivate staff

members to act in ways that benefit the collective process for change, and, in a sense, establish a sense of belonging for staff members through collective efficacy (Braun et al., 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Li et al., 2019; Steinmann et al., 2018). More specifically, among the four dimensions of transformational leadership, leadership behaviors align with the dimension of inspirational motivation, whereby the leader inspires and motivates followers to place organizational goals over individual needs and support a positive organizational climate (Bass, 1999; Ibrahim et al., 2014; McCarley et al., 2016; Orabi, 2016; Pepper & Thomas, 2002).

In addition, just as principals, through their behaviors and actionable steps through structures, procedures, and policy, can purposefully create a sense of belonging for staff members, teachers can create a sense of belonging for their students (Cohen et al., 2006; Drago-Severson, 2012; Glasser & Nelson, 2002). One way for teachers to create a sense of belonging for students in the classroom is by establishing positive teacher-student relationships (Cantor et al., 2019; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Jones & Kahn, 2017; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Osher et al., 2020). Leaders who promote the vision of a positive school climate and who uphold the importance of positive teacher-student relationships establish the conditions for a greater sense of belonging throughout the organization (Blum, 2005; Murtedjo & Suharningsih, 2018; Osterman, 2000; Quick & Normore, 2004).

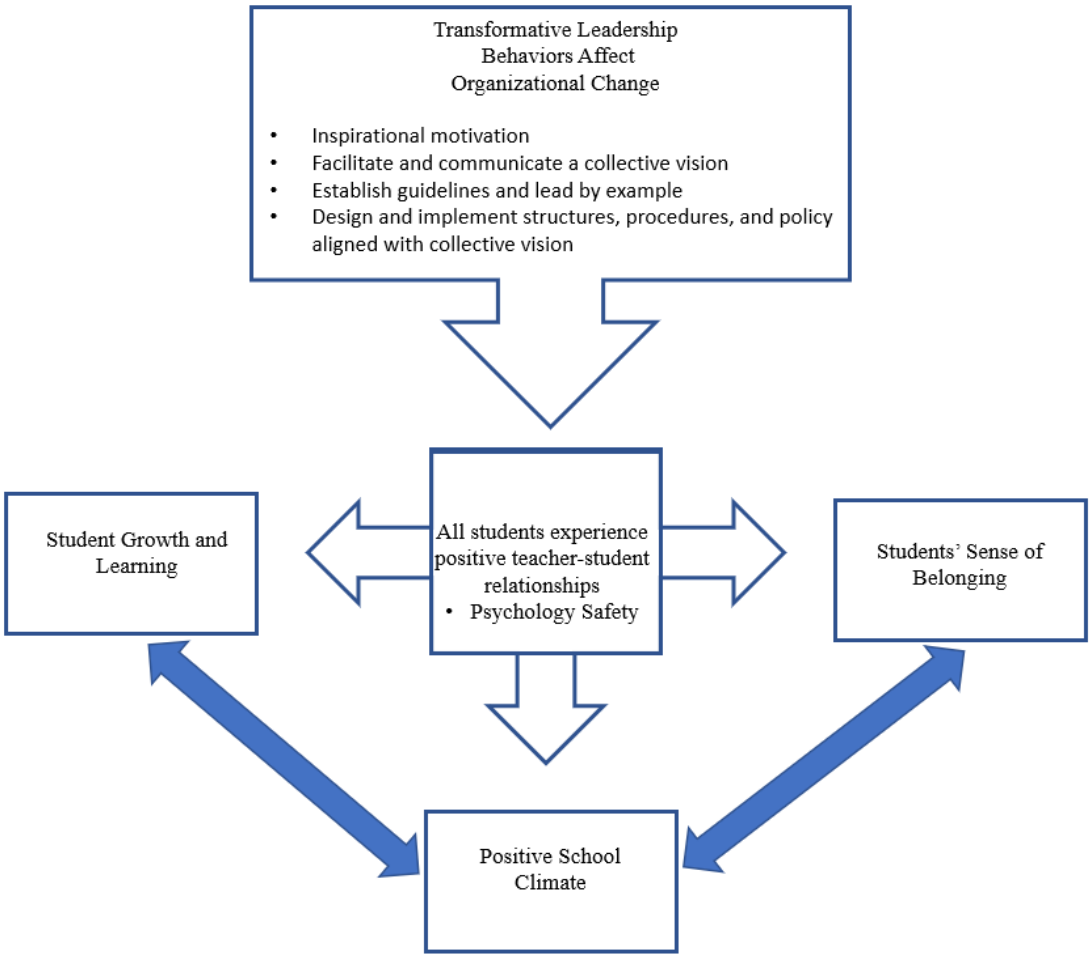
In addition, the available literature supports the positive relationship between positive teacher-student relationships and a positive school climate, both of which are

under the guidance and direction of the school principal (Berg et al., 2017; Cantor et al., 2019; Myers, 2014). Further, the seminal and current literature supports the belief that human growth and learning occur in the context of relationships (Cantor et al., 2019; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Jones & Kahn, 2017; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). According to current literature, students highly benefit from feelings of belongingness, which support their social and emotional needs and create the conditions required for growth and learning (Berg et al., 2017; Cantor et al., 2019; Jones & Kahn, 2017). Consequently, when a student's sense of belonging is satisfied through positive teacher-student relationships, it contributes to the overall improvement of the school climate (Berg et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

As shown in Figure 2.3, the conceptual framework depicts the interrelationship between the intentional leadership behaviors of the school principal and positive teacher-student relationships that promote psychological safety, students' sense of belonging, student growth and learning, and a positive school climate. The framework also demonstrates the bidirectional influences between school climate, students' sense of belonging, and improved student growth and learning. From a transformational leadership lens, the intentional behaviors and beliefs of the building principal can motivate staff members to engage in practices that result in a sense of belonging for all members, as evidenced by a positive school climate that supports the greater good and overall purpose of the organization (Bass & Avolio, 1990; Myers, 2014; Northouse, 2010; Sergiovanni, 2007). Given this information, the behaviors and action steps of the school principal, condition of the school climate, and relationship quality between the

teachers and students in the school setting have the potential to support the overall aim of education and help students achieve their highest potential.

Figure 2.3
The Study's Conceptual Framework



Inferences from the Review of the Literature

The ultimate goal of education is to provide all students with experiences that support their growth and development so they can benefit from success both in school and in life (Comer, 2005b; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). The school quality measures included in ESSA allow for greater equity in education and have the potential

for school leaders to create systems of support for all students (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017). As a result, many states have chosen to report on measures of school climate for state accountability or to inform school improvement efforts (Kostyo et al., 2018). School climate is a multidimensional construct that affects all aspects of the school community (Blum, 2005; Cohen, 2014; Payne, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013). A positive school climate creates conditions for learning whereby students can experience academic, social, and emotional success (Cohen et al., 2009; Osher & Berg, 2018; Wang & Degol, 2016). Further, the school principal, through vision and action, has the capacity to create and sustain a positive school climate (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Comer, 2005b; McCarley et al., 2016; Myers, 2014; Pepper & Thomas, 2002; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Germane to this study is the construct of interpersonal relationships, which are a component of school climate (Cohen et al., 2009; Osher & Berg, 2018; Rudasill et al., 2018). More specifically, positive teacher-student relationships in the learning environment affect not only the school climate, but also students' ability to make academic, social, and emotional gains (Cantor et al., 2019; Jones & Kahn, 2017; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Osher et al., 2020).

The overarching theoretical framework guiding this study is belongingness theory, which is both a psychological and biological construct providing the basis for human motivation fundamental to growth and development (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The need for humans to belong is a factor in other human development theories included in this research, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the ERG theory of motivation, regulation theory, and attachment theory (Alderfer, 1969; Bretherton, 1992; Maslow, 1943; Pittman & Zeigler, 2007). Central to the need for humans to belong is the idea of

interpersonal relationships, which act as a key driver of human growth and development (Osher et al., 2020). More specifically, as reflected in the conceptual framework, teacher-student relationships and a positive school climate influence one another bidirectionally, under the direction and guidance of the building principal.

Also represented in the study's conceptual framework and supported in the literature, the building principal's actions, which align with transformational leadership practices, can create an optimal school climate and classroom environment (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Myers, 2014; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Further, the principal, through specific leadership practices, has the ability to influence teacher behavior related to promoting positive teacher-student relationships. When the school leader is successful in creating a positive school climate and promoting positive teacher-student relationships, a bidirectional effect occurs between the school climate and the manifestation of positive teacher-student relationships that supports the overall aims of education.

The literature recognizes many identifiable transformational leadership behaviors, such as the ability to establish and share a collective vision, build community, and foster collaboration among stakeholders and other idealized attributes and actions that serve to uplift the school community (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009; McCarley et al., 2016). Specifically, Leithwood and Sun (2012) asserted that transformational leadership practices "have direct effects on teachers' internal states and behaviors, and these in turn influence the school conditions" (p. 387). The literature has acknowledged various instruments that can be used to identify and measure transformational leadership practices, such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire created by Bass and Avolio (1995) and the Leadership Practices Inventory originated by Kouzes and Posner (2006).

These instruments are designed for key stakeholders to identify and measure leadership practices that support a plan for school improvement (Bass & Avolio, 1995).

At its core, teaching and learning form relational processes that are dependent upon both affective and cognitive skills (Blum, 2005; Cantor et al., 2019; Comer, 2005a; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Osher et al., 2020; Osterman, 2000). The established environment and climate where the learning occurs are components of the teaching and learning process and weigh heavily on the outcomes (Berg et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; McGiboney, 2016; National School Climate Council, 2007; Thapa et al., 2013; Tschannen-Moran et al., 2006). Above all, the school principal is responsible for creating the conditions whereby growth and learning occur at all levels (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Cohen, 2014; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Murtedjo & Suharningsih, 2018; Myers, 2014; Wallace Foundation, 2013). This study sought to add to the body of knowledge by addressing the gap in the literature concerning the role of the elementary school principal with regard to positive teacher-student relationships as a component of a positive school climate.

CHAPTER 3:

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methods, processes, and considerations utilized to conduct a trustworthy and ethically sound study. Qualitative research is a method in which the researcher uses an "emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes" (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). In qualitative research, data are collected and interpreted by the researcher, who reports the information using rich, thick descriptions for the purpose of capturing the essence of what is being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A qualitative basic interpretive design offered the most appropriate approach to delve deeply into the lived experiences of elementary principals and investigate their role in promoting positive teacher-student relationships. A positive school climate and positive teacher-student relationships that contribute to an affirming sense of belonging are research-based approaches to school improvement and student achievement (Birch & Ladd, 1996; Cantor et al., 2019; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2019; Sointu et al., 2017; Thapa et al., 2013). The principal serves as the driving force behind efforts for schoolwide change and, consequently, the support of the principal is required to establish a sense of belonging and positive school climate (Cohen, 2006; Freiberg & Stein, 1999; Payne, 2018; Quick & Normore, 2004). As the ultimate goal of education is to provide the appropriate supports so that students can achieve their greatest potential, this research method allowed for deep insight into the principals' perspective regarding the actionable steps taken to promote teacher-student relationships as a

component of a positive school climate (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Purpose and Research Questions

Responding to the gap revealed in the review of literature, the purpose of this research was to explore the role of the elementary school principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships as a component of a positive school climate. The study addressed two research questions in addition to two subquestions.

RQ1: What is the role of the elementary school principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships?

SQ1a: What structures do elementary principals put in place to ensure that all students have access to positive teacher-student relationships?

SQ1b: What structures do elementary principals put in place to ensure that all students feel a positive sense of belonging to the school community?

RQ2: How do elementary school principals perceive the contribution of positive teacher-student relationships to a positive school climate?

Research Design

A qualitative approach was selected to address the research questions. Using a qualitative design allowed for a deeper understanding of the actionable steps of the elementary principal with regard to promoting positive teacher-student relationships, while capturing their individual points of view and perspectives about positive teacher-student relationships as they relate to school climate (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In contrast, an objectivist quantitative approach, focused more on statistical analysis and

generalizability, would not permit analysis of the subjective interpretations of the principals' conscious experiences with the purpose of finding meaning in the information (Crotty, 1998).

A basic interpretive study was the specific qualitative methodology chosen for this study because it more closely aligned with the research questions. This type of qualitative study allowed the researcher to understand the lives of the participants, their lived experiences, and their perspectives of their work based on the data gathered through participant interviews (Merriam, 2002). As the participants shared their experiences, the researcher's objective was to understand and interpret this information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Two theories served as the theoretical framework for this study. First, the theory of belonging describes a sense of belonging as a fundamental human need and was chosen to provide a deeper understanding of why teacher-student relationships are a crucial component of the students' educational experience (Baumeister, 2012, as cited in Higgins et al., 2012; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The second theory used in this study was transformational leadership theory, which outlines the potential for a leader to elicit positive change in an organization through a clear vision and collaborative effort (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1999; Burns, 1978; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999, 2009; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). This particular theory was included because the principal remains the primary agent to influence positive change in the school, and according to transformational leadership theory, the school principal is able to influence the key stakeholders through

vision, communication, and actions to create the conditions necessary for positive change to occur (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Quick & Normore, 2004).

As previously emphasized in the conceptual framework, there is a connection between the actions of the school principal in establishing a positive school climate and the presence of positive teacher-student relationships (Berg et al., 2017; Cantor et al., 2019; Myers, 2014). More importantly, the school principal is directly responsible for establishing a positive school climate, which affects positive teacher-student relationships through a bidirectional process, meaning that each concept affects the other (Berg et al., 2017; Cantor et al., 2019; Myers, 2014). Further, according to the theory of belonging and associated with the idea of teacher-student relationships, Baumeister (2012) theorized that "people have a fundamental, strong, and pervasive motivation to form and maintain at least a certain minimum number of social relationships" (p. 4). Positive teacher-student relationships allow students to feel a greater sense of belonging and contribute to a positive school climate, which sets into motion a greater sense of belonging (Berg et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). The resultant effect is that students benefit greatly in the areas of social, emotional, and academic growth through established positive teacher-student relationships in the presence of a positive school climate (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Creemers & Reezigt, 1999; Jones & Kahn, 2017; McGiboney, 2016; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Osher et al., 2020; Payne, 2018).

Epistemology Perspective

The epistemological framework undergirding this study was a constructivist viewpoint, supporting the notion that humans make meaning from the experiences they

encounter (Crotty, 1998). This framework was chosen because constructivism, as a learning theory, has been a longstanding component of pedagogical approaches to learning as guided by the educational philosophies and theories of Dewey, Vygotsky, Bruner, and Piaget (Liu & Chen, 2010; Von Glasersfeld, 1995). More specifically, social constructivism as represented by knowledge obtained primarily through interpersonal means reflects the importance of teacher-student relationships, as noted in the conceptual framework of this study (McLeod, 2019).

In congruence with a constructivist epistemology, the methodological theoretical perspective for this study was interpretivism (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interpretivism as defined by Crotty (1998) focuses on the "culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (p. 67). This concept is closely connected to the theory of belonging, in that being a member of a group allows humans to process information with one another, and through that process, make meaning of the world around them (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Methods

Research Site and Sample

Research Site

Thirteen public elementary schools across the state of Virginia served as the research sites for this study. Elementary schools were used because most of the literature available and reviewed focused on the elementary level, with students in kindergarten through fifth grade. In addition, information from several studies revealed that the effects of positive teacher-student relationships from lower grades carry over to subsequent grade levels (Crosnoe et al., 2010; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; McCormick et al., 2013; Wang

et al., 2016). Consequently, information gathered from this study on the role of the elementary principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships as a contributor to a positive school climate adds to the body of knowledge on intentional strategies to support this work while students are still in the early stages of their academic career.

Sample Type

To gain the most insight on the notion of the principal's role in promoting positive teacher-student relationships, purposeful sampling was used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Purposeful sampling involves obtaining the most information-rich cases that align with the purpose of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Further, two specific strategies were used: snowball sampling, which is growth of the sample by the sample itself, and intensity sampling, which involves samples that by nature of their beliefs and actions meet the criteria for information-rich cases (Creswell, 2013). Both snowball and intensity sampling were useful in securing quality information-rich subjects willing to share their knowledge and experiences related to the role of the principal in promoting teacher-student relationships as a component of positive school climate.

To garner best-fit participants for this study, all research participants who contributed to this study worked in schools within districts focused on students' social and emotional learning. Six of the 13 principals interviewed worked together in a school district with an established social and emotional learning department that provided education and support to school leaders and staff members. Additionally, two other participants were asked to participate in the study by the researcher after she attended their presentations at a regional leadership conference. Although these principals

presented at separate sessions, their message was similar in that student relationships are paramount to student success. Another principal served in a school district where the superintendent's message emphasized student-centered schools and classrooms. Three principals worked in schools that focused on the promotion of all students' unique gifts and talents. Lastly, one participant was asked to take part in this research based on continued work surrounding students' social and emotional growth and sense of school belonging. Overall, all research participants' knowledge, expertise, and continued engagement in the areas of positive teacher-student relationships, students' sense of belonging, and positive school climate garnered robust data to address the gaps in the existing literature surrounding the role of the elementary school principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships as a component of a positive school climate.

Participants

The study participants comprised public elementary school principals under district contract for the school year 2020-2021. Specifically, participants were selected from six school districts across the state of Virginia. Participants were not limited by the number of service years as a principal and had a range of 1 to 14 years of experience, with a median experience of 6 years. The goal was to obtain 12 to 15 participants for this study. The final sample size of 13 was large enough to achieve data saturation, but not too large as to inhibit the collection and analysis of participants' descriptive experiences (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

Data Collection

Data were collected in the form of participant interviews. The purpose of using semi-structured interviews to collect data for this study was to structure questions in such

a way as to allow the researcher to get as close as possible to the lived experience of each participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A semi-structured interview approach included both closed- and open-ended questions. Using open-ended follow-up questions allowed the participants to expound on any lived experience related to the focus of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interview questions included in Appendix A, consisted of Behaviors/Experiences, Opinions/Values, Knowledge, and Background questions, and were purposefully aligned with the focus of the study to garner answers to the research questions (Patton, 2002).

The individual interviews took place using the videoconferencing tool Zoom at a time that aligned with the participants' schedule. All interviews were conducted during a 2-week period in July when most schools were finished for the year. It is important to note that interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when most schools were transitioning from mostly virtual instruction to in-person learning the following year. Although all of the participants acknowledged that they were happy to assist with this study, there seemed to be a palpable agency to complete the interviews in a timely manner. Many principals were tasked during this summer period with filling staff vacancies and designing COVID-19 mitigation procedures to maintain a safe learning environment for all students and staff members. The length of the interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes, and no follow-up interviews were required.

Participant interviews were transcribed during each interview in live time using auto transcription in Zoom, and the researcher took notes as needed for clarification during the interview. Transcriptions were read and corrected after the interviews and stored using a secure data management system. In future research, it would be useful to

audio record interviews in addition to using the live transcription feature in Zoom. Most of the interactions with participants were anonymized during the interviews, as no mention of the participant's name, school, or district were used. If names were used, transcripts were deidentified prior to storing.

Data Analysis

For a basic interpretive study with a narrative design, Maxwell (2013) posited that analysis of the data should begin upon completing the first interview and continue throughout the entire data collection process. Maxwell also maintained that although there is no one way to analyze data, data analysis should be well thought out, answer the research questions, and seek to address any threats to validity. Conversely, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted that there is indeed a "preferred way" to conduct data analysis for qualitative research, which is to collect and analyze data simultaneously (p. 197). For this study, transcribed data obtained from individual interviews via Zoom were organized, coded, and analyzed for the purpose of making meaning from the data (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, Maxwell (2013) emphasized that

> reading and thinking about your interview transcripts and observation notes, writing memos, developing coding categories and applying these to your data, analyzing narrative structure and contextual relationships, and creating matrices and other displays are all important forms of data analyses. (p. 105)

Ultimately, the goal of the researcher with regard to qualitative data analysis was to work through a systematic process in order to obtain answers to the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1
Data Analysis Process

Note: Based on Bloomberg and Volpe (2019).

The first step in the data analysis process was to read the transcribed interviews. During this process, the researcher engaged in reflective writing in the margins of the text to identify any subjective notions and record preliminary thoughts related to overarching ideas (Maxwell, 2013). This process continued while the interviews were conducted. The second step in the data analysis process was to create a data summary table to begin locating patterns in the participants' responses. The MAXQDA software system was used to store, manage, and code the data.

The next step in the process of data analysis was coding and classifying the information. Coding is a process of methodological organization of data. Saldaña (2016) noted that "a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 4). Interview data from this study were coded for the purpose of identifying categories and themes from which to begin looking for connections between the data (Maxwell, 2013).

Once the coding was complete and themes began to emerge, the researcher engaged in the process of data interpretation. Specific themes were filtered through the lenses of transformational leadership's inspirational motivation, a sense of belonging, interpersonal relationships, teacher-student relationships, and school climate. Creswell (2013) described interpretation as "abstracting out beyond codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data" (p. 187). Further, Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) maintained that interpretations should be "clear, logical, relevant, and credible" (p. 290). The final step in the data analysis process involved synthesizing the findings in a coherent manner that reflected the study's overall purpose to answer the research questions posed with regard to the gap in the existing literature on the role of the principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is an important element to consider since the researcher acts as the research instrument as well as interpreter of the data (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The concept of trustworthiness in qualitative research involves a process to ensure that the researcher utilizes ethical protocols in order to generate a high-quality research product (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Although there are many different ways to establish trustworthiness, this study utilized Lincoln and Guba's (2000) guidelines for safeguarding trustworthiness in research to include credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

To ensure credibility, the study included measures of alignment of the participants' description of experiences with the researcher's interpretation, including memoing, thick description, and the use of direct quotations. The process of memoing

involved the researcher keeping a journal and recording any subjective reflections that arose throughout the research process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Thick descriptions of the research process were provided to allow the reader to gain a thorough understanding of the methodological process involved (Creswell, 2013). Lastly, member checks allowed participants the opportunity to review interview transcriptions as a measure to ensure that the researcher correctly and fully captured their information (Creswell, 2013). Member checks were offered to all participants but were not utilized.

The next guideline used to establish trustworthiness is to instill a sense of dependability in the study. Dependability can be obtained by creating and maintaining an audit trail. The reason for an audit trail is to track the processes involved in collecting, managing, and analyzing data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There are many ways to conduct an audit trail; for this study, MAXQDA software was used to streamline the process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

The third guideline provided by Lincoln and Guba (2000) for maintaining trustworthiness is to present a level of confirmability. The presence of confirmability verifies that any conclusions are a result of the research process and not the outcome of the researcher's subjective thinking (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Both audit trails and memoing for reflexivity were used in this study to ensure a measure of confirmability.

The last guideline utilized in this study to instill trustworthiness was transferability. This guideline consists of including an appropriate amount of data so that readers are able to determine whether the interpretations and conclusions garnered from the study apply to their particular situation or setting (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This is not to be confused with generalizability, as qualitative research makes no claims to be

generalizable to the larger population (Maxwell, 2013). Transferability was obtained by using purposeful sampling and thick description. The purposeful sampling techniques used in this study included snowball sampling and intensity sampling (Creswell, 2013).

In sum, trustworthiness is an important component of qualitative research as a means to establish an element of rigor for the process and believability for the outcome (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Morrow, 2005). The goal of this qualitative researcher was to collect and analyze data while adhering to strict guidelines and then to interpret the data with the intent of understanding the lived experience of the participants involved (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It was therefore the responsibility of this researcher to make evident her attempts to produce quality work that adds to the body of knowledge regarding the principal's role in promoting positive teacher-student relationships (Maxwell, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

The trustworthiness of any study is largely dependent upon the ethical decisions upheld by the researcher prior to and throughout the research process (Patton, 2015, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As previously stated, this is important because the researcher is both the instrument and the interpreter of the data in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher made every effort to carry out the study in the most ethical manner possible. Because this study involved human participants, a study proposal was submitted to the university's office of human research and reviewed by the institutional review board. The researcher commenced the study only after institutional review board approval was obtained (Appendix C) and followed recommendations from Creswell (2016) on ways to maintain ethical standards while conducting this study.

All participants were informed of the overall purpose of the study, and the researcher obtained expressed consent from the participants through their voluntary participation in the interviews. All research regulations involving studies with humans were followed. After local permission was granted to conduct the research either by the superintendent or a supervisor in the human resources department, care was taken to minimize disruption and follow COVID-19 safety precautions by conducting interviews via the teleconferencing tool Zoom.

During the research, care was taken to not present questions during the interview that led the participants to respond in one specific way or another. Utilizing a well-formulated and research-based interview protocol aligned with the research questions helped to mitigate this issue. In addition, participant anonymity and data were protected by using pseudonyms and a numerical system. Further, clear language was shared with the participants during the interview outlining how the data would be protected in order to quell participant fears about how the sharing of information might result in undue consequences (Maxwell, 2013).

Finally, ethical considerations were addressed during the analysis, reporting, and publishing phases of the study (Creswell, 2013). To uphold ethical standards when analyzing the data, the researcher ensured the inclusion of multiple perspectives of the participants by including all data obtained in the primary coding process. In addition, because it is the role of the researcher to elicit the perspective of participants' lived experiences, the researcher remained true in reporting an authentic narrative by "including relevant participant quotations" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Lastly, special

care was taken to avoid plagiarism by properly citing all information that was not original text from the researcher.

Overall, it is the responsibility of the researcher to make ethical decisions before, during, and after the research. In each step in the process, the researcher remained fully aware of how each decision could affect the outcome of the study. All attempts were made to ensure that the study was carried out in an ethical manner.

Subjectivity Statement

Part of establishing a sense of trustworthiness and ethical consideration in research is to investigate and report on one's subjectivity**.** Failure to do so could result in a melding of the researcher's notions of subjectivity with the participants' experiences and consequently undermine the entire project. Because qualitative research is an interpretive endeavor, it is not possible to be 100% objective. It is not sufficient to simply acknowledge the existence of subjectivity if the purpose is to produce a quality research product.

In a search for his own subjectivity, Peshkin (1988) proposed several ways to actively engage in the process of exposing researcher subjectivity. First, it is important to acknowledge that subjectivity can pose a threat to the data collection, analysis, and reporting phases of the research process. To minimize subjectivity, researchers should continuously mine and monitor for occurrences of subjectivity and actively seek awareness throughout the research process. Second, the researcher should remain curious but not critical of the participants' responses or actions, and should be conscious of thoughts when either negative or positive feelings are evoked. Peshkin (1988) acknowledged that these extreme feelings were an indication that he was engaging his

subjectivity. Once he linked the discovery of subjectivity to fluctuating feelings, he began to record his physical senses and subjective thoughts in a notebook. This action did not necessarily stop subjective thoughts, but it made him aware that they were occurring. Lastly, Peshkin pointed out the importance of not highlighting or minimizing participants' data that elicits subjectivity. One way to accomplish this is to make efforts not to lessen or lengthen the distance between researcher and participant. It is important that researchers maintain awareness of how emotionally involved they become with their participants, as well as whether they begin to make a conscious effort to minimize engagement with participants due to breaking researcher/participant boundaries.

As a human being and educator, I acknowledge that I carry my own subjectivities. I admittedly believe that school should be a safe and positive place in which students can grow and learn. I agree with the data in the existing literature that the educational environment should be physically as well as psychologically safe for students and that the absence of these components could result in undesirable outcomes. Lastly, in my 8 years teaching students in first through third grade, and 6 years of administrative experience, I have observed instances whereby students demonstrated through their words and actions that they did not feel school was a safe and positive place to grow and learn. In an effort to establish a sense of trust and engage in ethical practices, I actively followed Peshkin's prescriptive techniques to minimize my subjectivity by consistently monitoring and recording subjective thoughts and feelings in a researcher's notebook throughout the data collection, analysis, and synthesis process. Because it is critical that I approached my data analysis and synthesis through a scholarly lens, I adhered to the procedure of journaling any thought that came to mind for 10 to 20 minutes after each interview for the purpose

of separating my own thoughts, feelings, and opinions from those of each participant. Additionally, I utilized the loft in my home for the sole purpose of conducting research, whereby the process of entering the space signified a mental and physical transition from practitioner to scholar.

Summary

In summary, this chapter reviewed the justifications, processes, and considerations to conduct a basic interpretive study. After reviewing the literature, a gap was identified that was addressed in this study. All of the processes were carefully designed and reflect accepted qualitative techniques found in peer-reviewed literature. The purpose of this study was to add to the existing body of knowledge on the subject of leadership, positive teacher-student relationships, and positive school climate. Moreover, the overarching purpose was to explore the role of the elementary school principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships as a component of a healthy school climate. Both elements, positive teacher-student relationships and a healthy school climate, support the overall aims of education, which is to provide the supports and opportunities necessary so that all students can fulfill their greatest potential (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

The next chapter presents the collected responses from the participant interviews, organized by six themes and 15 subthemes. Themes 1 to 3 correspond to the first research question: What is the role of the elementary school principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships? Next, Themes 4 and 5 include the results connected to the two subquestions, which seek to understand the structures elementary principals put in place to ensure all students have access to positive teacher-student

relationships and feel a positive sense of belonging to the school community. Lastly, research findings related to the second research question on how principals perceive the contribution of positive teacher-student relationships to a positive school climate are presented in Theme 6.

CHAPTER 4:

RESULTS

The extant literature suggests that positive teacher-student relationships in elementary school drive many aspects affecting student success. Additionally, these positive teacher-student relationships are an integral component of school climate, which is currently being tracked by schools across the United States and used as an indicator of school quality under the Every Student Succeeds Act. It is the role of the school principal to create and sustain a positive school climate and ensure that the interactions between teachers and students create learning conditions that lead to a positive climate. The overall purpose of this qualitative study was to address the gap found in the literature regarding the role of the elementary school principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships as an integral component of a positive school climate.

This study was grounded in transformational leadership theory (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999, 2009; Northouse, 2010) and the theory of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The first theory, transformational leadership theory, is a leadership model outlining four behaviors that contribute to organizational transformation through positivity and feelings of belonging (Bass, 1999; Myers, 2014; Pepper & Thomas, 2002). These behaviors, or leadership characteristics, include individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence (Bass et al., 2006). Although all of these characteristics work in tandem, this study was particularly focused on the leadership characteristic of inspirational motivation, which highlights the leader's ability to communicate a shared vision and to inspire staff members by serving as a role model for the organization (Bass et al., 2006). The second theory used in this

study, the theory of belonging, is based on the work of Baumeister and Leary (1995). The premise of this theory is that a feeling of belonging is a basic human need and central to human motivation. Accordingly, the conceptual framework of this study includes all of these elements. It links the leadership behaviors of inspirational motivation to students' experience of positive teacher-student relationships and feelings of psychological safety, leading to positive school climate and student growth and learning.

With a basic qualitative research design, this study addressed two main research questions and two subquestions:

RQ1: What is the role of the elementary school principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships?

SQ1a: What structures do elementary principals put in place to ensure that all students have access to positive teacher-student relationships?

SQ1b: What structures do elementary principals put in place to ensure that all students feel a positive sense of belonging to the school community?

RQ2: How do elementary school principals perceive the contribution of positive teacher-student relationships to a positive school climate?

Thirteen elementary principals participated in the study and answered questions in a semi-structured interview. The resultant data are presented using rich, thick descriptions from the participants' responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An interview matrix (Appendix B) served as an organizational tool to align interview questions, research questions, and theoretical tenets.

This chapter presents the salient results from the data garnered from the interviews with the principals. For organizational purposes, the data are presented

utilizing six themes and corresponding subthemes constructed from the lens of the two theories undergirding this study, the study's conceptual framework, and the research questions.

Participant Descriptions

All research participants were elementary school principals under contract for the 2021-2022 school year. The elementary schools served students in either kindergarten through fifth grade or kindergarten through third grade. Thirteen principals, including five men and eight women from six school districts, participated in the study. The participants' principalship experience ranged from 1 to 14 years, with a median experience of 6 years. Participant characteristics are summarized in Table 4.1. In the table and throughout the dissertation, pseudonyms are used in place of participant names, as well as school names.

Table 4.1
Participant Demographic Summary

Principal name (pseudonym)	Gender	Principalship experience
Savannah	F	1 year
Carissa	F	2 years
Boyd	M	2 years
Leslie	F	2 years
Andrew	M	4 years
Mason	M	4 years
Francine	F	5 years
Cierra	F	5 years
Patricia	F	6 years
Amanda	F	7 years
Christopher	M	7 years
Tim	M	11 years
Christine	F	14 years

Emergent Themes and Subthemes

Through the process of data analysis and synthesis, very clear patterns of information emerged when analyzed through the lens of the theories and conceptual framework for this study. Responses from participant interviews were organized into six global themes with corresponding subthemes (Table 4.2). The results from participant interviews are shared using rich, thick detail aligned with qualitative research methods.

Table 4.2
Overview of Findings

Research questions	Themes	Subthemes
RQ1: What is the role of the elementary school principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships?	1. Elementary principals incorporate intentionality with daily practice to promote positive teacher-student relationships.	• Walking the talk and modeling expectations • Having explicit knowledge of the students they serve • Engaging in reflective practices
	2. The work of relationship building is a continuous process for principals.	• Offering teacher coaching and professional development • Working to broaden understanding of cultural and socioeconomic differences
	3. Principals work in conjunction with staff members to create a caring climate.	• Fostering school collaboration • Engaging school counselors
SQ1: What structures do elementary principals put in place to ensure that (a) all students have access to positive teacher-student relationships and (b) all students feel a positive sense of belonging to the school community?	4. Principals demonstrate passion and commitment to the work of positive relationships in elementary schools.	• Considering teacher and student placement • Communicating expectations • Supporting teachers through the work
	5. Principals inspire big change through small moments.	• Establishing trusting relationships • Providing student exposure and experiences • Having celebrations and fun
RQ2: How do elementary school principals perceive the contribution of positive teacher-student relationships to a positive school climate?	6. Principals who focus on relationship building inspire a collective vision for a positive school climate.	• Building a positive community and climate • Establishing consistent expectations that lead to psychological safety and student outcomes

Theme 1: Elementary Principals Incorporate Intentionality with Daily Practice to Promote Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

Through their responses, the principals conveyed that their intentions, combined with daily practice, were what brought about the change they envisioned. These leaders expressed that they understood that as the building leader, they served as a representation for the entire staff regarding their expectations for positive teacher-student relationships. Three examples of principals' intentionality and daily practice focused on positive teacher-student relationships were modeling, knowing the students they serve, and being reflective.

Subtheme 1: Walking the Talk and Modeling Expectations

Modeling behaviors allowed the principals to "walk the talk" and serve as an active participant in delivering their own message. Seven of the 13 principals interviewed identified modeling as their primary means of getting their message across with regard to positive teacher-student relationships. Principals shared examples of modeling the schoolwide expected behaviors directly with teachers in addition to modeling behaviors while working with students. With regard to modeling behaviors with staff members, Principal Tim shared:

> I make sure that I have good relations with the teachers, so I think what I do is model—because I think you are symbolically and practically a model for everything you want in your school. If you want good relations between students and staff, then you better have good relations between the principal and the teachers. And so, in everything I do, I try to model. And that doesn't mean I am perfect, but even in your imperfection you can discuss what's working, what's not working.

He also added, "If you're mad about how people are interacting out there, you got to look at how you're interacting with them; that is number one." On the same note,

Principal Savannah felt confident that the positive relationships she developed with her teachers would "carry over to the students."

Principal Mason also focused on developing relationships with his staff members as a way to demonstrate positive relationships. He did note, however, that these relationships were collegial. He said:

> I try to model, like I really try to relate to my people, my staff in a way that I hope they were relating to their students. So, knowing what's happening in their lives and following up with those things. And that's kind of a tricky line there because I'm not really going to be slapping people in the back and going out on Friday nights with folks. I'm just not going to do that, but I want them to feel valued, and seen, and heard.

Principal Leslie expressed the importance of modeling because staff members actively watch how principals handle specific situations. She offered:

> When the principal is involved in conversations with teachers or parents about anything related to the student, the teacher will watch the administrator in the building, and I say administrator because I'm the only one because it's a small building, but administrators in general. They will watch how they handle situations, watch how the administrator will work with or address a particular situation with a family or student.

In addition, Principal Leslie also shared that whatever she expected from her teachers with regard to establishing positive relationships with their students, those same relationships should occur between herself and her staff members. In those relationships, open and honest communication was critical to finding solutions to challenging situations.

On a different note, Principal Christine's modeling came in the form of leading school climate conversations during faculty meetings. Her focus was to be intentional about modeling directly with the teachers because, ultimately, she was looking for these relationships to also occur at the peer-to-peer level in her school. Likewise, Principal

Andrew acknowledged that it is important for teachers to see how he interacts with both students and parents. However, his modeling process began with explicit teaching during faculty meetings. He pointed out that he first modeled the behaviors for and with the teachers. Next, he modeled these behaviors for the teachers with the students. Further, Principal Andrew pointed out that this was a recursive process from year to year because teachers transferring to his school from other districts may not have had the same level of focus on relationships at their prior schools. Principal Tim took a similar approach in modeling positive routines with his staff members. Each interaction, staff meeting, and professional development session was designed to foster "very clear routines of interpersonal interactions."

Whether modeling directly with teachers through the act of fostering positive principal-teacher relationships, or modeling specific structures and strategies during faculty meetings and professional learning community meetings, many principals expressed the importance of serving as the model for what constitutes a positive relationship. Principal Carissa acknowledged, "I like to do a small thing every single month for every single child just to make those connections because I want the teachers to see the difference those little things can make." Similarly, regarding principal modeling, Principal Boyd said that he was essentially trying to paint a picture for staff to follow. In the same fashion, Principal Mason offered that he was very intentional in his practices when out in the school hallways. He shared a scenario that occurred whereby a student was experiencing emotional dysregulation and he was called for assistance. As opposed to taking the student to his office, he chose to model a positive adult-student

relationship by sitting on the floor outside in the hallway and talking with the student. He continued:

> I think that's important because there are adults walking by and they're seeing that, and that says something. I think what that says is, he's going to take the time away from whatever other thing principals do to relate to this child. I think the more I can do that kind of a thing, the more they'll understand that if I expected it from them, it's fair because he also does it.

Another example of principals modeling positive teacher-student relationships directly with students was reflected in Principal Carissa's practice of going into classrooms and having conversations with students. Sometimes they asked her about her daughter, her little dog, or even about her students from her former schools. Under the watchful eyes of classroom teachers, she would tell students that she missed them over the weekend and share things with them about her life because she "wants them to feel like they're part of a family."

Beyond modeling positive behaviors through fostering professional relationships with teachers and serving as role models for appropriate teacher-student relationships, principals also shared that they modeled positive adult-student interactions for teachers through daily morning greetings with students. Principals shared that this behavior was intentional so that teachers could see the effect that a positive greeting had on the students. Principal Carissa shared that she participated in the daily drop-off routine to "look at their facial expressions" and stated, "The eyes definitely tell so much more than anything else, especially with masks that we're wearing now." Additionally, one principal in particular expressed that the positive feelings of the morning greeting routine made him feel happy as well. Principal Boyd remarked:

> I just love being there to greet kids either on the bus each morning or in the car route loop each morning because it starts my day off well, and I also get to touch base with parents and get to greet kids and give them a high-five or a hug (pre-COVID).

Principals were enthusiastic in their descriptions of how they modeled for the staff members the behaviors they expected to see in their building. Their modeling either took place between the principal and teacher, or between the principal and the student. Also, principals incorporated intentionality with daily practice to promote positive teacher-student relationships by taking the time to fully understand the students they serve.

Subtheme 2: Having Explicit Knowledge of the Students They Serve

Building principals were in a position to have a global view of their school. This global view allowed them to potentially form relationships with all of the students and families in their school community. These relationships, however, did not come automatically. Principals had to put forth effort and be intentional in how they allocated their time each day. As a result, some of the principals interviewed conveyed the importance of knowing students and their families.

Principal Carissa shared a situation involving a very low performing student who displayed acting-out behavior in one of her teacher's classes. The acting-out behavior did not occur in the student's morning language arts class where the teacher took the time to build a positive relationship with the student. Principal Carissa stated, "After looking at it, I just had to dig deep to find out some background information on this young lady." She went on to share that this third grader, the oldest of seven kids, was responsible for waking up in the middle of the night to take care of a newborn baby, as well as getting her other siblings ready for school each day. She was also responsible for packing extra

clothes in her own backpack in case one of her younger siblings had an accident during the day. Most importantly, she stated:

> So now, fast forward, it's 8:00 and you want me to read. Reading is probably not at the top of her list. It took another teacher to clearly understand that about her. And we saw zero behaviors. We did see deficits, but zero behaviors. Do you know she passed her SOL [Standards of Learning] test? So, it's about those relationships. We're talking about a kid who averaged, you know, normally two, three grade levels behind. But all of that trauma, all of those responsibilities can hinder that growth, but a positive caring relationship between a student and teacher can make a world of difference, and they can make that student want more.

This same principal shared that she knew the students in her school were experiencing trauma when schools were shut down in 2019 due to COVID-19. She shared that in her own family, she would take long drives each day with her daughter and her dog and explained that her life was a stark contrast to her students' lived experiences during this time. She remarked:

> But I can tell you, our kids didn't get that. Our kids were in homes, like my young lady I told you about. She's in a home with 10 people in an apartment. A two-bedroom apartment with 10 people from March all the way up until the release. They're not going on vacations, they're not taking drives to parks just to take a quick walk—none of those things occur for them in this community.

This knowledge was an integral component of the actions she took when schools opened the following year and families had the opportunity to send their children back for in-person learning. Understanding who their students were and what their students needed to be successful was a main focus for a few of the principals interviewed.

At the beginning of each new school year, Principal Amanda made it her mission to learn the name of every new student in the building within 2 weeks so that she could greet each and every student by name. She pointed out,

> I know every child's name in this building, and I can also give you a pretty good idea of where they each live. To me that's just a nonnegotiable. Within 2 weeks, my goal is always to know all of the new students, including pre-K and K, in addition to transfers, because if I can't call you by your name and say good morning have a great day, that's on me.

In the same fashion, Principal Andrew reported that both he and his assistant principal knew every student in the school. This was quite a feat, as the average student enrollment at Principal Andrew's school was 760 students.

Principals learned about their students and families by taking the time to talk with them. This intentional practice allowed them to gain insight into their lives that might otherwise be kept hidden, but could manifest in other ways such as negative behaviors. In one specific discipline situation, Principal Mason had a conversation with the classroom teacher to ask if she took the time to ask the student why he engaged in the negative behavior he displayed during an outburst. He was dismayed when she stated that she did not ask the student. He later told the teacher that the student's grandmother was in the hospital. In cases such as these, principals can share information that they know the student is experiencing at home that may explain the acting-out behavior.

Sometimes, just being present and available allowed principals to find out information about their students. Principal Christine reported that some students would approach her in the hallways just to have conversations. She also heard from parents on a regular basis "for both the good and the bad." Also, in order to gain in-depth knowledge of his students and families, Principal Tim established a system of personally welcoming each and every student and their family who transferred into his school after the first day of school.

Principals had the opportunity to learn about student and family dynamics that affected student success and school climate. However, intentional practices had to be in place to have the conversations to learn about students' lives outside of school. Principals had to be present, available, and willing for these conversations to take place.

Subtheme 3: Engaging in Reflective Practices

The last subtheme that emerged from the data with respect to the intentional practices of principals in promoting positive teacher-student relationships was reflection. When considering several of the questions from the interview protocol regarding positive teacher-student relationships, students' feelings of belonging, and a positive school climate, principals shared their reflections surrounding these notions. Some principals reflected on their leadership, others on their practices regarding the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic had on students' lives, and still other principals reflected on educational systems in general.

Principal Tim, who in addition to his job as an elementary school principal had achieved several notable leadership awards and was a national keynote speaker and author, reflected that much of what happened in his school was dependent on his interactions with his staff. He shared:

> There're all these ideas of like, you know, posters and plans, and programs, and all these things you can put in place to inspire people to do the right thing. But the reality is, it's about you inspiring them to do these things. So, a lot of times they do it because they like you or not. And so, if they don't like you as a leader, you're not getting anywhere. So that's why for me, I have to try really hard to be careful not to grind too much with people. And in our job, our bosses love to make us like fix everybody, and fix everything, and all these things have to be written down and perfect, blah, blah, blah, but that's not really how an organic organization works. People are much messier than that. But they do, they do follow you if they like you.

With regard to thinking about the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic had on his students, Principal Andrew wondered about how the social and emotional piece would come into play in upcoming years. He expressed that determining students' individual needs would be important in getting "students to talk about things and to make them feel comfortable in the school." He also stated that relationship building would be a key element to students making headway in this area.

When Principal Leslie's building opened back up after the COVID-19 school closure in 2019, she reflected on whether her students truly felt as though they belonged in her school community. She explained that, like teachers, administrators have a vision of wanting to make a difference in the lives of children and that sometimes "you have all these wonderful thoughts and beliefs that it's going to be rainbows and sunshine, but that's not how it always happens." Oftentimes what is envisioned is more difficult to put into place than is initially realized. In a similar vein, Principal Christopher reflected whether sometimes he was just going through the motions with some of the processes he had in place, such as the district-mandated positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) system. He tried to do the right thing, but shared, "I feel like I'm just checking boxes, to be honest with you." With all of the other items to monitor, like teacher retention and student academic progress, he wished he had a "value-added" system to promote a positive school climate. Conversely, Principal Cierra had an established positive school climate and shared that as the school principal, it was her job to "figure out how that's happening, and keep that happening."

In addition to principals sharing their reflections about leadership and practices needed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, one principal in particular shared her

reflective musings about the power of the education system to make changes in students' lives. She confided:

> I look at our society and I look at some kids and the crime and things that happen. And as an educator, I often wonder, was there anyone who, you know, reached out? Did anyone like reach that kid? I often wonder that, because our jobs are that serious. You're paid, of course, but it's that serious because I think that we have the ability, we have the access to change a child's life. I really do.

In response to analyzing collected data from principal interviews, the first theme aligned with Research Question 1 and looked at how principals combined intentionality with daily practice to promote positive teacher-student relationships by modeling expectations, having explicit knowledge of their students, and engaging in reflective practices. The next theme addresses the ongoing nature of relationship building.

Theme 2: The Work of Relationship Building Is a Continuous Process for Principals

Principals conveyed the message through their interviews that relationships do not occur overnight. Instead, they take intentional practice, observational skills, and the ability to assist teachers in crossing over the sometimes-difficult divide between teacher and student. These behaviors are not always automatic for teachers, and it is up to the leadership of the principals to assist teachers in this process.

Subtheme 1: Offering Teacher Coaching and Professional Development

The level of support principals offered to help their teachers improve their relationship skills and relationships with students ranged from a simple conversation all the way to involving human resources, and in some cases resulted in teacher resignation. Principals expressed that in order to provide support to teachers, however, they first had to be aware that teachers required assistance. Most of the principals stated that they spent

the greater part of their day outside their office observing in the hallways and in classrooms, while other principals used the expertise of the administrative team, to include the assistant principal, instructional coach, and school counselors, to assist them in determining need. In one school division, principals shared they were able to tap into the resources of a division social and emotional learning department to help guide teachers in establishing positive teacher-student relationships. In many cases, principals were more likely to report specific methods of responding when a negative relationship was present than to report exact behaviors they utilized to promote positive teacher-student relationships. This discovery is addressed in further detail in Chapter 5.

One of the lessons that some principals felt the need to teach their staff was the notion that behavior is a student's way of communicating. Specifically, Principal Carissa shared that she "wants kids to always feel valued and loved and even the baddest kid, the baddest kid behaviors are communication. I tell teachers that all the time: behaviors are communication." Another example of students communicating through their behaviors was when they shut down. Principal Amanda, who reported knowing the names of all of her students, had opportunities to coach her teachers through situations where students were not responding to a particular situation in the classroom. Through her observations of adult interactions with students, she was able to point out to the teacher the connection between the students' behavior and needs and the role of positive relationships in these circumstances. Principal Savannah acknowledged that some teachers actually had the viewpoint that all students come to school ready to learn and that it was the parents' responsibility to teach their children appropriate relationship skills. She stated that it was

her job as principal to convey to her teachers that they had to be the models for positive relationships. Principal Boyd's stance on this topic was similar. He emphasized:

> The relationship piece has always been important to me. So, it was kind of hard for me to acknowledge that there were some staff members here that would rather somebody else fix the problem than for them to fix the problems. So, what we are doing is moving forward along the realm of restorative conversations. We're really going to bolster the type of classroom conversations and classroom communities that teachers are going to have within the classroom so that they understand we will help navigate those conversations with kids, but ultimately, they need to drive that ship.

Further, Principal Carissa shared a story about helping a teacher navigate a teachable moment with a kindergarten student who was demonstrating disrespectful behavior. She told the teacher, "In those moments it's okay to build that relationship with him, because guess what, he's not going to say that word if he's well aware he has a relationship with you, and he knows it's unacceptable." Principal Carissa reminded her teachers that they should engage in self-reflection and honesty about their part in building relationships with students rather than justify their negative behaviors with students. This was another level of support that was discovered from the data. In some cases where teachers were unwilling to participate in the vision of building a positive school community through positive relationships, principals had to take their support to another level.

In some reported cases, it was not necessarily the behavior of the student that challenged the relationship with the student, it was the behavior of the teacher. However, the notion that behavior is communication still applied. Principal Carissa encouraged teachers to just admit that they were tired and unwilling to help students in the way that they needed to be helped rather than rationalize their behavior. Principal Mason revealed that some teachers had an old-school mindset when it came to their students, believing

that students should come quietly into the classroom, sit in their seats, listen to the teacher talk during the entire block, and not express an opinion of their own. He pointed out:

> It's hard to have those conversations with those kinds of people because as you're speaking you can almost hear what they're hearing is, "you know, this kind of touchy-feely teaching just lets kids do what they want." And that's not what I'm asking for either. I'm just asking them to really see children as humans and to see that they have an impact on humans, and hopefully that will be enough to spur them to be more positive in their relationships.

When those conversations did not "spur them to be more positive in their relationships," Principal Mason had to take further steps to ensure that his students were afforded the types of positive relationships he believed they should have with their teacher. In one particular instance, when several actions—conversations, creating a plan for the teacher to engage in specific relationship-building skills, and expanding her knowledge through articles—did not work in changing the teacher's behavior, the teacher and principal came to an agreement that she would resign her position. In similar fashion, Principal Carissa reported that she was quick to put measures in place if she felt a teacher was not "good for kids." She explained that she put measures in place with the expectation that the teacher's behavior would improve. If that did not happen, she would get the human resources department involved. When this happened, if the department deemed that the teacher had not made the appropriate amount of improvement given the proper time and support, they would most likely move forward to discuss teacher resignation. Echoing this process, Principal Boyd had a similar situation and stated that he was "dedicated to helping people grow up or grow out."

Overall, the principals' responses demonstrated that providing support and professional development was a continuous process. In order to assist teachers and help

them overcome hurdles in developing relationships with their students, principals had to be present and aware of what was occurring behind closed doors in the classrooms. When principals discovered that a less than desirable relationship was present between a teacher and a student, they had many processes at their disposal to provide the teacher with support or to help expand their knowledge of and purpose for positive teacher-student relationships.

Subtheme 2: Working to Broaden Understanding of Cultural and Socioeconomic Differences

In a few of the interviews, the topic of cultural diversity surfaced regarding positive teacher-student relationships. Principal Carissa worked in a school where most families were considered economically disadvantaged. She was passionate about teachers truly understanding the needs of their students. When relating her expectations surrounding this topic, she would tell them:

> I'm not expecting you to buy kids. I'm not expecting you to go into debt for kids. I'm just expecting you to understand that kids don't pick their parents. They don't pick their situation, and that we have teachable moments where we can change their lives. That's all I want my teachers to do. Kids do not get a lineup of parents where they say, "No, I think I want to go ahead and go with the travelers." "No, I want the educated," not think, "I want the crackhead parents." They don't get those options. So, some kids are dealt with serious blows. We have to understand that a lot of their behaviors are learned. So we have to teach them code switching on what's appropriate in school settings and in society. That's our job. That's what we sign up for. So, when we're not willing to take those steps to do that to create good citizens, you got to find a new place, I share with staff.

In a similar manner, Principal Mason was passionate about his teachers understanding their students. He shared that he had a predominantly White teacher population, and it was important for him that his teachers have a "feel for what it is like to have a mindset that is not their lived experience." Using book chats and conversations,

he encouraged open and honest conversations around equity and diversity in the hopes that his teachers would be able to truly acknowledge and value all of the students in the classroom regardless of differences in socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity. In Principal Leslie's school, she focused on both sides of the scale, meaning that she worked so that her teachers had a wide understanding of students' different cultures and backgrounds, but at the same time ensured that the students from those different cultures and backgrounds felt a sense of belonging to the school community.

Similarly, Principal Tim not only supported his teachers in understanding diversity and equity, he also made sure that his school was a representation of his student body, "whether it's staffing, programs, literacy, music, the arts, or input from parents and students about the things they want to do and see here." His school sponsored cultural nights where students and their families could share their cultures in a festive and positive environment. He was explicit in his expectations surrounding equity and diversity:

> You have to like have a nonnegotiable about how we treat students and families, and how we blame or don't blame families. And so that piece of blaming families, I think, goes into this a little bit. If you really want to make sure everyone feels like they belong, you can't judge them. You can't judge them for being different than you. You can't judge them for having different values than you have, and they have to feel that. So that perception that they have affects how they feel like they belong or not. You know, whether you are doing things or not, it's almost irrelevant because it's how they feel about what you're doing is what's more relevant.

In summary, the data revealed that in order for principals to support teachers in promoting positive teacher-student relationships, they had to be aware that a problem existed, have the resources to assist their teachers, and be willing to engage in tough conversations when teachers demonstrated unwillingness to comply with engaging in positive teacher-student relationships.

Theme 3: Principals Work in Conjunction with Staff Members to Create a Caring Climate

When principals were asked about how they ensure their students have access to positive teacher-student relationships and feel a sense of belonging to the school community, they quickly recognized the other staff members' support in these processes. Principals expressed that they required the assistance of classroom teachers, lead teachers, instructional coaches, office staff, assistant principals, district supervisors, and of course school counselors. Working as a team allowed the principals to be more effective in their efforts to actualize their vision for the school with respect to promoting positive relationships and students' feelings of belonging. The two subthemes associated with Theme 3 are fostering school collaboration and engaging school counselors.

Subtheme 1: Fostering School Collaboration

Principal Amanda shared that she had to learn about team collaboration the hard way. The first school where she served as principal was participating in a state-led school improvement process due to low state test scores. Because she was fearful of never exiting the process and receiving school accreditation, she stated that back then she was "probably a fear-based leader" and that's "really not the way to lead." In her new school, she included teachers as part of the process of actualizing their schoolwide common goals. She continually asked for their feedback and was not afraid of letting them run with an idea as long as it aligned with their collective vision. On the other hand, Principal Andrew acknowledged that although he included his teachers in the school vision, he had some naysayers regarding the changes he had made since taking over the role as principal. In the end, those teachers eventually got on board with the program of

establishing positive relationships because they saw the outcomes: the teachers in the classes who worked to build relationships with their students and families appeared happier, student negative behavior decreased, and more learning was occurring in their classrooms. Similarly, Principal Cierra explained that she believed every principal endured some level of challenge when it came to organizational change. She went on to say that the way she combated negativity and push-back was to develop a teacher team to help spread the message. She recounted, "If teachers understand the why, then it's easier for them to grasp and buy into what you're trying to do."

In some schools, principals relied heavily on their assistant principal to help create a caring climate. Principal Christine, who also had a core group of teachers who helped to facilitate the school's vision, admitted that her assistant principal was phenomenal when it came to implementing programs that promote positive teacher-student relationships. In like manner, the assistant principal in Principal Patricia's school worked to follow through on reported instances where parents communicated that their child was not feeling appreciated or part of the school community. She conducted classroom observations to try to get a sense of what was going on with the student and determine if any changes needed to be made. Additionally, Principal Patricia's instructional coach, who also served on the administrative team, was available to observe classroom interactions between the teacher and student. The assistant principal in Principal Boyd's school worked closely with both the principal and the school counselor in weekly professional learning community meetings to discuss and create next steps for students who did not feel positively connected to the school community. Their main focus was ensuring that everyone in the school felt connected and welcomed.

Principals reported that they also relied on other staff members to create a caring community, including the front office staff, custodian, and cafeteria staff. In most schools, the front office staff members were the first school personnel that families and students encountered. Principal Leslie stated:

> We want them [students] to feel important and belong, you know, a sense of belonging in the school itself. The climate of the school is extremely important. If parents and families feel like they can come in and have a conversation with the teacher, or even with the secretary in the front office, the administrative associate, they will feel like they belong when they come in. So, it's really that first impression that's important, but then also when you go throughout the school day.

Principal Leslie and Principal Carissa both shared that their office staff regularly handed out treats to teachers and students. Regarding the community aspect of school, Principal Carissa said, "It's everyone, it's all of us." This was reflected in the fact that it was her head custodian who set up everything for the students to have the s'mores experience. Further, her cafeteria staff was involved in setting up a nacho bar for students during teacher appreciation week.

Sometimes the message and vision were so pervasive that everyone had buy-in and was able to act swiftly in an "all-hands-on deck" situation. Principal Tim disclosed the following story:

> We had a student that we thought ran away from the building. And immediately as soon as someone says, "student out of the building" everybody, because everyone in our building has a walkie-talkie, so everyone is on the walkie-talkie now. I walked out of the building and I saw 30 people. I didn't know where they all came from, or who was covering their classroom. I saw so many people outside of the building—teachers, assistants, resource teachers—because they all heard it and they all went, you know. And those are the things that where you can see the empowerment, that a clear mission and vision about what we're trying to accomplish.

School collaboration was an important aspect of transformational leadership. At the heart of transformational leadership is the established interpersonal relationships focused on the mission of the organization (Burns, 1978). The principals above shared instances where they depended on all staff members to assist them in creating a caring climate. Further, throughout the principal interviews and later during the data analysis process, it became apparent that the school counselor was an integral component in working with the school principal in establishing and maintaining a positive school climate.

Subtheme 2: Engaging School Counselors

School counselors are often tasked with serving the needs of the entire school body in addition to students' families. School counselors wear many hats while working directly with students regarding their social and emotional needs. Principals reported that school counselors sometimes served on the principal's instructional leadership team or participated during professional learning community meetings. Due to the nature of their skills and training in helping students navigate the social and emotional aspects of school, school counselors were an integral component in assisting the principal in creating a caring climate.

When asked about positive school climates, Principal Andrew conveyed the message that school counselors are "important with letting the principals know about or checking the pulse of the school." In a similar fashion, Principal Patricia's school counselor was always out and about checking in with students to try and "get ahead of anything before a storm could brew." In Principal Savannah's and Principal Boyd's school, their school counselors worked with teachers and students to help form, navigate,

or repair relationships when power or personality conflicts existed. Principal Boyd shared that he had to be creative with the master schedule in order to remove their school counselor out of the 'specials' rotation so she could be more present in classrooms, respond to students in crisis, or help facilitate morning circles. In Principal Christine's school, two school counselors supported the school vision due to an enrollment of about 760 students. She shared that one of her school counselors led the front in her school with regard to the ideas of student growth mindset and motivational conversations. Additionally, both counselors focused on relationship building and assisting with the school check-in/check-out system, where they checked in with students daily to assess their social and emotional needs.

Principal Christopher shared a compelling story about how his school counselor contributed to the caring school climate in his school. He said that his school counselor had been working at the school for 38 years. Because of this nearly four decades-long history, she knew not only the students, but their siblings, cousins, parents, and, in some cases, grandparents. He added, "So, what I find is that a lot of my parents call and ask for her because she is a staple of the school, and she is such a resource to the community." He continued:

> So, there's always a sense of belonging, even with our parents. I think they feel comfortable when they come in because of her and because she is the cheerleader for the school. Especially when we have situations where we have parents that come up here upset, she's able to de-escalate the situation. And she's usually the first line of defense. So, that's one of the things that I have in this situation that I've never had in any other situation as an administrator was that strong bridge between school and home, establishing a sense of family with the community.

The above data represented how principals reported working in conjunction with staff members to create a caring climate and highlighted how it is the responsibility of

everyone in the organization to work together to actualize the vision of a positive school climate. Although the principals were the leader of the building, they had to rely on their staff to bring to life their mission and vision. Additionally, if the message from the principal was not clear and consistent, staff members would be ineffective in their collaborative efforts. The examples and stories provided by the principals who were interviewed for this study demonstrated that their staff clearly understood the vision of the school regarding positive relationships and a positive school climate and were empowered to act upon it in various ways.

Theme 4: Principals Demonstrate Passion and Commitment to the Work of Positive Relationships in Elementary Schools

Based on principals' responses and the excitement with which they shared their vision and gave examples related to positive teacher-student relationships, it was evident that these principals were passionate and committed to this work. The subthemes linked with Theme 4 are considering teacher grade-level placement, expressing expectations, and supporting teachers through the work.

Subtheme 1: Considering Teacher and Student Placement

During the principal interviews, the topic of the importance of teacher and student placement arose. Principals shared that sometimes they had to move a teacher to a different grade level, but in other situations, principals had to move students out of a particular teacher's classroom. Principal Leslie stated, "It's important to have the right people in the right places." She shared that it's all about fit, meaning that the teacher at a very basic level should be able to relate to the grade level of students they are working with. When the teachers are unable to make connections with their students, and the

relationship between the teacher and student suffers, sometimes the principal will have to move the student out of that classroom.

Principal Christopher provided one example. After having many conversations with a teacher and putting systems in place to help repair the relationship between a teacher and student, he eventually had to move the student. He went on to say:

> I do realize the fact that, you know, students are people, and people don't necessarily get along with people. And you know and I know it's hard. It's not fair for a child to be in a situation like that to where they feel that the teacher doesn't like them, or shows favoritism towards other students, or highlights their failures or their negative behaviors in the classroom. So, I don't want that to be an experience for any child.

Conversely, Principal Francine stated that she was very careful to only staff her school with "positive individuals." Sometimes, though, the transition was not to another classroom but out of the building itself. Principal Francine also shared, "If I don't feel that they are good for children, they will not be working here in my building."

For the most part, Principal Boyd reported that moving teachers from one grade level to another had been successful in his school. Last year, he made the decision to move some staff members from the upper grades (3-5) down to the lower grades (K-2) because he thought they would be a better fit with the younger students. While there was some apprehension on the teachers' part, the move turned out to be positive. Further, he acknowledged that although the academic piece is an important part of school, the social and emotional aspect is important as well, which can be obtained through details such as proper teacher placement.

Although the data connected to this subtheme were not as robust as for some of the others, it was still important to include this subtheme in the chapter. School staffing is a large responsibility of the building principal and is directly connected to teacher-student

relationships. The data demonstrated that one of the ways to promote positive teacher-student relationships is to move a student from one teacher's class to another. In other cases, moving a teacher from one grade level to another promotes greater teacher-student relationships based on personality traits and provides a better fit with the students they serve.

Subtheme 2: Communicating Expectations

All of the principals interviewed for this study were able to provide examples of how they communicated their expectations for positive teacher-student relationships to occur in their buildings. One of the characteristics of a transformational leader is the ability to inspire and motivate group members through a collective vision (Avolio et al., 1991; Northouse, 2010). Not only is it important for principals to establish an organizational vision related to positive teacher-student relationships, but the vision must be communicated effectively to staff members in order to contribute to increased organizational change (Braun et al., 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Li et al., 2019; Steinmann et al., 2018). Principals interviewed for this study shared a myriad of ways in which they conveyed their vision and expectations for students to experience positive teacher-student relationships in their building.

Some of the principals chose to express their expectations using direct communication with teachers. When asked how she communicated her expectations surrounding positive teacher-student relationships, Principal Francine stated,

> I just say it directly. We are a school where we know our students, we show our students, and we grow our students to be the best, so in order for them to be the best, they have to see the best.

She also shared the importance of engaging in courageous conversations with present and incoming staff about the importance of having a positive nature. Francine expressly communicated to staff members that she expected the same level of respect between teacher and student as they experienced in their relationship with her. Similarly, Carissa, principal of a K-5 school, shared that she understood that her expectations surrounding teacher-student relationships were high, but teachers ultimately have a choice in employment and if the standards were too high, then perhaps they should request to transfer to another school. Another way principals got their message across was by front-loading at the beginning of the school year during preservice week. This served as another means through which they could spread the collective vision for positive teacher-student relationships in addition to setting the tone for schoolwide expectations and focus areas.

Principal Patricia set aside special time during preservice week to speak with new teachers coming into the school to ensure that they had a plan in place so that all of their students had access to a positive teacher-student relationship and felt a sense of belonging. Prior to our interview, she was finishing up the teacher handbook that outlined the school vision and expectations regarding that vision. She also incorporated time to review these expectations throughout the school year. Additionally, several other principals reported setting aside time at the beginning of school for faculty meetings to review the mission and vision of the school, offer professional development, and engage in open dialogue about teachers' plans to build relationships with their students. Consistency and constancy were topics that emphasized leaders' commitment to spreading this message.

Principal Andrew, who had been at the same school for 4 years and whose key message to teachers was relationships first, then relevance, and lastly rigor, shared:

> We have to work at it. We continuously work at it because it's changing. Every year we're bringing in new students, we're bringing in new teachers, so we continue to have to talk about it and we do staff development training on how do you build a relationship with your students, how do you build a community of learners, how do you build relationships with parents, and how do you build relationships with community members?

On a similar note, Principal Mason expressed that his communication to staff members during the first couple weeks of school was that teachers should focus primarily on building relationships with students instead of focusing solely on obtaining baseline academic data. He shared with his teachers that "we have to establish relationships first in this classroom for any kind of effective classroom management or education instruction to happen later on."

Sometimes, of course, clear communication and feedback regarding expectations needed to take place in the moment. When Principal Leslie saw teacher behavior that was not in line with her expressed expectations, she addressed it right away. She reported during the interview: "If I have a concern, I'm going to come to you. I'm not going to wait. If I'm not okay with a particular behavior or situation or how things were handled, I'm going to address it right then."

Principal Amanda and Principal Tim mentioned taking a different approach related to implementation of their vision. Principal Amanda reported:

> That is the expectation, that all kids are going to feel safe. We're going to believe in all kids and we're going to do anything and everything we can to develop a relationship with our kids. Getting to know them, letting them know about us too. But, yeah, that is kind of a nonnegotiable. We're going to do all we can do to develop a safe, healthy, loving relationship—and genuine, because it can't be a fake relationship; they'll know it. This is the expectation. However it shows up is

> fine with me as long as the expectation is honored that all students feel safe, they feel loved, and they have that relationship.

On a similar note, Principal Tim allowed for teacher autonomy when it came to precisely how teachers brought his vision to life. He shared that he although he set the standard and modeled what he was looking for in the classroom between the teacher and student, he was intentional not to be prescriptive, saying that he preferred to "inspire rather than require."

Six of the 13 principals reporting using the morning meeting to promote positive teacher-student relationships. *The Morning Meeting Book*, which aligns with the responsive classroom approach to teaching and learning, was first published in 1999 (Kriete & Bechtel, 2002). The four-part morning meeting structure enlists the teacher to aid in the development and practice of important social skills. Classrooms that utilize the morning meeting structure and content on a daily basis create psychologically safe spaces for students within a caring and respectful learning environment (Kriete, 2003). Although principals specifically mentioned that their teachers participated in a daily "morning meeting," it was unclear if they ascribed to the specific practices outlined in *The Morning Meeting Book* or whether they used another resource. These organized meetings are also known as circle time, class meetings, and community meetings, but are generally considered to be a structured time in which teachers and students come together to share feelings, as well as learn and improve upon important citizen-ready social skills (Grant & Davis, 2012). Regardless of the specific program used, morning meetings are a way to assist in improving peer-to-peer relationships and relationships between teachers and students (Grant & Davis, 2012).

The principals explained that morning meetings were a nonnegotiable part of the daily schedule and noted the importance of protecting the time for these meetings. They offered that morning meetings were a time to get a "temperature check of all our students just to see if they're okay," and "an opportunity to kind of get a feel for how the kids are feeling." In like manner, Principal Cierra pointed out:

> There's a climate of praise and of camaraderie amongst students, and a lot of times that's fostered through morning meeting. We've been implementing that for the last 2 years, so it's very important that they have those moments to connect with their teacher.

She also shared that social and emotional lessons were modeled during morning meetings and were facilitated by the school counselor. Similarly, Principal Amanda described a morning meeting whereby a student was sharing a sonogram picture of her new sibling. She gave this example because this was exactly the kind of information that positive relationships can be built upon. When teachers get to know their students at their level, it promotes positive relationships. She went on to say that protecting that first 15 minutes of the day is important because "if not, it was going to be, 'Come in, do your lunch count.' You know, 'Put your homework where the homework goes, put your book bag on your hook'—and that's not the way we want to start our day." Principal Boyd also talked about the importance of the morning meeting time as a way for students to share and talk candidly. He established a routine during the first few weeks of school through which the administrative team observed every teacher leading a morning meeting to ensure that they had the requisite skills to navigate some of the hard conversations that sometimes arose during this time.

Another expectation that principals revealed to be an important part of ensuring students felt a sense of belonging to their school community was the morning greeting

procedure. Student greeting as part of the arrival procedure was a method mentioned by six principals to facilitate students' sense of belonging. Half of the participants shared that morning greetings were an expectation for teachers, while the other half of participants expressed that they engaged in the greeting process themselves. With regard to establishing morning greeting as an expectation, Principal Patricia outlined this procedure in the staff handbook. In like manner, Principal Amanda described an image of teachers standing at their doorways to greet students as they entered the classroom. While expressing her definition of a positive teacher-student relationship, Principal Cierra stated that positive relationships are demonstrated by the teacher going out of his or her way to "build a relationship and make a connection with that student, and that starts as early in the day as just being at the door to greet them when they come in." Many principals expressed that their morning greetings for students occurred outside at the bus loop, in parent drop-off lines, as well as through teachers greeting their students upon entering the classroom. Regarding greeting students outside, Principal Boyd disclosed:

> I just love being there to greet kids either on the bus each morning or in the car loop each morning because it starts my day off well, and also to get to touch base with parents, to greet kids and give them a high-five or a hug (pre-COVID). You know, it makes a big difference, and I think it starts everybody's day off. I think that it plays a big piece into our students feeling celebrated, and welcomed, and loved, and cared for.

Principal Carissa expressed that she used the opportunity of the morning greeting time to connect with her students as well as model appropriate adult-to-child interactions. She shared,

> I go out every single morning. I stand out at parent pick-up and I greet kids. I look at their facial expressions. I believe that the eyes definitely tell so much more than anything else, definitely with the masks that we're wearing now, but I go and make those connections with kiddos.

A morning greeting to students, Principal Patricia stated, whether initiated by the principal or the classroom teacher, was one way to check in with the students as to their emotional well-being as well as to quickly determine whether the student required additional social and emotional support before starting their day. This greeting process served as a new segment in the child's day and could serve as a positive emotional reset for the day.

Finally, one other expectation that principals conveyed to their staff members as a way to promote positive teacher-student relationships was positive contacts. These school-to-family contacts typically occurred within the first 2 weeks of school. In Principal Christopher's school, teachers were required to make a school-home connection at least once each month to share a positive highlight about the student with the family. Principal Savannah's teachers also started off their year with positive phone calls to their families. She stated that this was an important part of relationship building and that building a relationship with the family early on benefited both the teacher and student.

In sum, principals reported using different means to express their expectations to teachers regarding the practice of engaging in positive teacher-student relationships. Some principals had very explicit expectations, outlining procedures like morning meeting, morning greeting, and/or positive first contacts. Other principals reported that although they had very clear expectations surrounding positive relationships between teachers and students, they believed the teachers should have autonomy regarding how it looked in their classrooms. Although principals used several ways to convey their message to staff members about the importance of positive teacher-student relationships, they nonetheless chose to express it collectively to the entire teaching staff or

individually to teachers requiring additional support. Once the schoolwide expectations were in place and communicated, principals acknowledged that some teachers required additional support to deepen understanding or practice the skills necessary for relationship building. This "additional support" required by teachers related to the third subtheme: Supporting teachers through the work.

Subtheme 3: Supporting Teachers Through the Work

All of the principals who were interviewed reported that it was essential to support their teachers through the process of relational work. In some instances, the support came in the form of acknowledging the stressors teachers had and were still enduring related to teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other types of support came in the form of helping to add tools to the teachers' toolbox or just being there to listen to teachers.

Principal Mason shared that teacher support was paramount to students feeling supported. He shared that if teachers don't feel like their needs are met and that they are supported in their work environment, then that feeling can trickle down into how that teacher relates to the students in the classroom. Principal Savannah recounted that she focused on boosting morale with the staff due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She mentioned that one of the ways she did this was by allowing teachers to wear jeans on special "jean days." Similarly, Principal Boyd pointed out that he tried to be "cognizant of teacher burnout." He explained:

> So, we're trying to make sure that we're not just focusing on students, that we're focusing on teacher needs as well. We're doing something every single week first semester for staff members. You know, bringing around smoothies or bringing around ice cream or coffee or just various treats to kind of uplift teachers and understanding that, you know, happy teachers hopefully equate to happy students.

With regard to supporting teachers by adding tools to their toolbox, Principals Cierra and Boyd utilized articles to provide additional knowledge and support to teachers, while principals Amanda, Patricia, Savannah, Christine, and Mason all utilized book studies around the topics of cultural responsiveness, positive discipline, empathy, and relationship building to support teachers in building positive relationships with their students. These book studies included the titles *Better than Carrots and Sticks, Teach Like a Pirate, Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain, Empathy Is my Superpower,* and *Culturize: Every Student, Every Day, Whatever It Takes.* Regarding the process of engaging in a book study, Principal Patricia stated that she provided voice and choice by allowing her teachers to choose which book study they wanted to participate in. She also shared that the book studies were teacher led and that she and her assistant principal would participate, but she wanted teachers to have autonomy over the process. She went on to report that this method had been very successful for her in helping teachers to learn and grow in their knowledge of positive relationships.

Finally, some principals supported their teachers just by letting them know that they were there for them. Principal Carissa, who raved about her teachers, expressed that she had a true open-door policy and that all of her teachers had her personal cell number to use if they had a question and didn't feel comfortable coming down to her office. Principal Tim prided himself on the relational work he has done with his teachers. He believed in really supporting his staff even when things got tough and "having approachable sort of dialogues that they know they can talk to you."

In sum, whether providing teachers with support due to environmental factors, helping them to expand their knowledge of the relational aspect of teaching, or just

letting teachers know that they were available, principals showed commitment to providing support for teachers. This subtheme on how principals supported teachers through the work is directly related to the next theme of inspiring big change through small moments—which shows the various ways that principals established trusting relationships, provided students with creative experiences, and fostered a fun and celebratory climate in their schools.

Theme 5: Principals Inspire Big Change Through Small Moments

In the process of interviewing 13 principals from different regions in Virginia, a pattern emerged related to the principals not only reflecting on daily practices, but actually making small changes for the purpose of making a larger difference in the lives of their students. Related to this theme was an overarching subtheme present in the principals' responses of the importance of establishing trusting relationships. Other ways that principals demonstrated making big changes through small moments were through varied exposure and student experiences, along with incorporating fun and a celebratory environment into the school day.

Subtheme 1: Establishing Trusting Relationships

Each day throughout a child's life, parents and guardians entrust the schools and the staff members to keep their children safe and to facilitate their social and academic growth. The principals expressed during their interviews that growth cannot occur without first establishing trusting relationships, not only with the students, but with the families as well. Principals shared their ideas of what constitutes a positive teacher-student relationship along with how they as the building leader helped to foster those relationships.

When asked to share his idea of a positive teacher-student relationship, Principal Mason expressed that positive teacher-student relationships are grounded in the desire on the part of the teacher to actually establish a relationship with the student. Once the desire is present, the teacher must move forward with intentionality. He mused, "In what ways does a teacher demonstrate that the child is important to them? What systems does the teacher put into place in the classroom to garner how the student feels about their environment, or what interests the student has?" He added that aside from desire and intentionality, the student's reciprocation of those actions is important in establishing positive relationships.

Principal Cierra echoed this notion through her response that these types of relationships are created through the effort of teachers in going out of their way to connect with the students. She also touched on the intentionality piece of the teacher incorporating procedures such as greeting students at the door when they come into the building, along with setting time aside for teachers and students to connect with each other during morning meeting. Her teachers, similar to Principal Savannah's teachers, also worked to establish trusting relationships outside of school by getting involved in extracurricular events and clubs.

In addition to the effort required to establish trusting relationships, time was a factor that should be considered. Principal Leslie stated that she would describe a positive relationship as "ongoing." Even though the student body in her school was relatively small, at about 245 students, and most of the teachers and families knew each other, it still took ongoing effort and time to build positive relationships with students. She emphasized the importance of spending time with the students to build rapport and trust

so that both the teacher and student understood each other. She also mentioned the importance of children feeling a sense of safety to be able to communicate their needs to the teacher. For this communication to occur, the parties involved in the communication had to have the skills for effective listening.

Principal Christopher similarly viewed a positive relationship as one that involved "open dialogue between both parties." He went on to say, "I definitely believe that ongoing communication is vital to that positive relationship. Effective listening plays a huge role in it, and not necessarily hearing what you want to hear, but hearing it all and making sure that you are present in the conversation as well." Students were certainly free to have open dialogue with Principal Christopher during his biweekly principal talks, where he randomly selected students from each grade level to allow them to share whatever they had on their minds so he could "get a sense of what's going on in the building and how students are feeling."

Responses from several principals touched on the idea that trusting relationships occur in the presence of reciprocity. Principal Francine stated that positive relationships were not only established through mutual respect, but also occurred when the teacher knew something about the child "outside of the academic realm." She went on to say that teachers should be open and share something about themselves because if

> they don't share anything personal, they only see you as a teacher. They don't see you as a mother or maybe they don't see you as a pet owner, or a sister, or whatever. They just see you as the authoritative figure in that classroom. But in order to build relationships, you got to kind of tell something about yourself and learn something about the children as well.

Principal Tim succinctly emphasized this point:

> Relationships are reciprocal, so students and teachers have to be able to voice their opinions and give feedback to each other. Like I said, I have high expectations for students. So, it is clear that the teacher wants the student's best interest and helps them get there so there's trust involved. A student will follow a teacher if the student feels that the teacher is actually leading them in a direction that's good for them.

He also shared that his school was in a very transient area with a lot of immigrant and military-connected families. His welcoming system for these families helped to establish trusting relationships. Principal Tim personally welcomed every family new to his school; he walked them down to class and introduced the student to the class and the parent to the teacher. Further, he took a picture of the student with his or her teacher so the child could take it home that same day. He also asked fellow classmates, "Who's going to help this child have a friend today?" All of these processes helped both the child and the family feel a sense of belonging to the school community.

Evidence of trusting relationships occurred when families felt part of the school community and vice versa. Both Principal Savannah and Principal Patricia shared that their teachers lived in the community where the school was located, which allowed them to establish relationships on a different level with students and families. Principal Patricia shared that when any of her staff members entered a store in their community, she wanted families to feel comfortable greeting them outside the school setting. She added, "If I've got to look a parent in the face, I want to be able to say at the end of the day, we did everything that was best for that student, or then I'm not doing my job."

On the whole, principals interviewed for this study were very clear on what constitutes a positive and trusting relationship. They also were able to explain the process through which these relationships show up in their schools. Another method that

principals used to make big change through small moments was through Subtheme 2, student exposure and experiences.

Subtheme 2: Providing Student Exposure and Experiences

Several principals shared during their interviews the importance of providing students with engaging experiences and exposure to nonacademic concepts. These experiences contributed to students' positive feelings about school and to a positive school climate. This was exemplified by Principal Cierra's statement about her memories of being in school.

> And, you know, as you talk to adults, those are the things that they remember. I remember when my third-grade teacher had a picnic outside with us. We laid out beach towels, we had lunch, and she played kickball with us every day. Those are the things that kids remember. That's what caused that connectedness and good feelings, that family camaraderie amongst kids.

Principal Carissa understood that her students and families may have limited exposure to extracurricular activities due to socioeconomic factors. Because of this, she focused on allowing her students to have experiences that broadened their understanding of seemingly simple concepts like s'mores. She went on to explain that a teacher sent her a text to say that all of her students except for one didn't know what a s'more was. They only knew that s'more was a flavor, not actually a dessert. She recounted:

> So, I want them to feel comfortable celebrating kids and teaching. We did s'mores. My head custodian got on the grill and showed them how you create them. You would have thought that we were all rock stars. Our kids and parents are still talking about it. I can't believe that, you know, you'd do that for them. That was even more than teaching about Virginia studies and the regions to me. I mean, that was something they will never forget. I think it's about exposure, and not that I don't follow safety protocols, I'm real big on them. That's my military side. I'm following those, but in following those, you can still celebrate kids.

Clubs were another way for principals to create structures for their students to have experiences outside of academics. They allowed students to explore varied interests and connect with staff members on a different level. Principal Andrew's view of clubs was mirrored in his statement that many elementary school students don't have opportunities to engage in school-based clubs. Both he and Principal Cierra expressed that establishing clubs for elementary students was a way to get students involved and build relationships with staff members.

Team building and out-of-the-box learning experiences were two other methods principals discussed of providing students exposure and experiences. Principal Leslie described a learning activity that her students were involved in that provided a real-world experience combined with peer-to-peer collaboration. She painted the picture of students having a learning experience before the winter break. They were on the floor with measuring tape measuring floor tiles outlined in painter's tape. Her students "were moving, they were happy, they were collaborating, they were talking with each other and learning from each other." These types of activities added an additional experience to a traditional learning model.

One final representation of student exposure and experiences was through team building, which aided in establishing systems for interpersonal connections. Principal Mason emphasized the importance of team-building activities for students, while teachers in Principal Tim's school used more formalized corporate learning structures as a way to foster interpersonal relationships.

In sum, allowing students opportunities to expand their knowledge of the world, engage in school-based clubs, learn in authentic ways, and use structured interpersonal

systems of engagement were all ways principals shared they were making big change through daily small moments. These activities fostered an expanded view of their school experience and created pockets of connections where students could build relationships with both staff members and each other. Additionally, these value-added experiences helped students feel a sense of belonging, which contributed to a positive school climate.

Subtheme 3: Having Celebrations and Fun

The last subtheme under the theme of principals making big change through small moments focused on celebrations and fun. Principals shared that these small acts paid big dividends in the form of student engagement and connections. Principals reported that students in their schools were celebrated for their achievements, while others described how they prioritized fun and belonging in their schools.

Public recognition of students was one method some schools used to highlight the efforts of students who achieved academic growth or who displayed positive citizenship traits throughout the school year. Principal Christopher reported that his school used the PBIS system to highlight students' positive behaviors on a daily basis. They also recognized students each 9 weeks who demonstrated progress toward both academic and behavioral goals. Also, Principal Savannah stated that their school used the PBIS system to encourage students, as well as Mighty Hawk awards and Student of the Month awards, and sent home positive postcards to families as ways to celebrate their students.

Using a somewhat different approach, Principal Amanda brought in her two husky dogs daily. The dogs served as the school's unofficial mascot, which added an element of fun to students' day. Her staff and students also celebrated and engaged in fun activities within their house system. Every student (and adult) in the school belonged to

one of four houses. Throughout the year, students participated in house competitions and were celebrated for their achievements within their houses as well as schoolwide.

At Principal Boyd's school, his students started each day with a song and movement. Each day, a different student was chosen at random and came down to the office to help with the Pledge of Allegiance. This student was also able to choose his or her favorite school-appropriate song, which was played over the public announcement system for students to start their day off with a little movement. Principal Boyd explained:

> Selfishly I have enjoyed it so much because it's been so cool to see songs that kids pick that I never in a million years would have thought they would pick. But honestly, small things like that I have seen play out exponentially with kids because it creates this feeling that I'm a part of something. I have a voice.

Principal Boyd also shared that his school recognized students for doing the right thing by handing out Tropical Smoothie passes. The passes provided tangible student recognition and connection to the community. Similarly, Principal Carissa believed in giving every one of her students a tangible reminder that she cared for them. This was also an opportunity for her to model for the teachers. She recounted, "I try to do little small things every single month for every single student just to make those connections, because I want teachers to see the difference those little things can make." Further, when school buildings opened back up after they shut their doors in March of 2019, Principal Carissa put forth great effort to turn her school into a celebratory climate focused on welcoming students. She and her staff set up large bouquets of balloons and had music blasting in the parent drop-off line and bus lane. They even decided to play music in the cafeteria. She credited her in-person school enrollment, one of the highest in the district during school year 2020-2021, to the climate that she and her staff created for students

and families. Students also participated in an entire month of classroom wars for the purpose of building a sense of community. She explained that when they did their door decorating contest, the prize wasn't just for the teacher, it was a "major celebration for the class." Additionally, during the month of the military child, all military-connected children were celebrated; connections included any family member on active duty, retired, or providing service to their country. Principal Carissa also shared, "You know, school is not fun like it used to be. But it's okay to have fun, it's okay to get to know your kids. It's okay to provide them opportunities to grow."

Principal Tim's "Minute-to-Win-It" game is a final example of fun and celebration in the school setting. He shared that this was an intentional positive routine that he played with the staff that modeled and highlighted positive interpersonal routines. Each week the game was played live on the morning show for the students. The winner got to display the 3-foot trophy in his or her classroom for the week. He acknowledged that this game was

> an example of a routine we do very regularly where we're putting ourselves in a positive and fun atmosphere and environment to build those relationships. Because you know, my biggest thing is you can't build relationships when things get bad; you have to already have that relationship in place.

Overall, principals shared stories and provided examples of ways they worked to infuse celebrations and fun into each school day. This subtheme, along with the other subthemes of establishing trusting relationships and providing students with exposure and experiences, provided examples of how principals inspire big change through small moments. The next theme revealed through the data analysis process was how principals utilized relationships to facilitate a positive school climate.

Theme 6: Principals Who Focus on Relationship Building Inspire a Collective Vision for a Positive School Climate

The final theme that emerged from the data aligned with the notion of principals inspiring a collective vision for a positive school climate. The process of building a positive school climate began with an understanding of what constitutes a positive environment. During their interviews, principals were asked to describe their vision of a positive school climate. The other subtheme for Theme 6 connects to psychological safety and clear and established expectations in the school community. Results also revealed that principals believed that positive relationships affect student outcomes.

Subtheme 1: Building a Positive Community and Climate with Positive Relationships

Principals expressed that a positive community was supported by the relationships within that community. For instance, Principal Tim stated that "relationships drive everything" and "you can't have one without the other." He emphasized that relationships between teachers and students are fostered when the teachers are curious about their students and find value in their individuality. His school utilized corporate learning structures, class meetings, and check-in/check-out systems for students who need additional supports and integrated interpersonal skills into academic subjects to help foster a positive community. On the other hand, Principal Savannah described her positive community in more elusive terms, relating it to a feeling that people have when they walk into her building. She also described her positive community as dependent on the collaboration between staff members and students. Principal Amanda also described a positive climate in affective terms using the terms *joy* and *excitement*. She continued, "I can probably literally give examples of every teacher here that we have and give

examples of positive teacher-student interactions that I've seen even this morning." Additionally, she acknowledged that positive relationships were grounded in clear connections between the teacher and student along with flexibility related to each student's unique situation. More specifically, Principal Leslie shared that a school with "positive working and encouraging relationships" will be felt throughout the climate of the school and that the intentionality piece is important when building a positive climate.

Throughout the school year, Principal Patricia's staff participated in expos, concerts, positive school-home communication, and morning meetings to support and celebrate the relationships that occur in her highly desirable community school. By the same token, Principal Boyd had the expectation that every person who entered his building would feel celebrated. This feeling, he explained, came with intentional practices and focus on the larger goal of ensuring that students were educated in an environment that was welcoming, comfortable, and safe.

All of the principals agreed that positive teacher-student relationships and a positive school climate were like two sides of the same coin. Principal Christine stated, "I feel like they go hand in hand," and Principal Cierra said, "You can't have one without the other." She also believed that if the teachers were not actively forming positive relationships with their students, they would seek out positive relationships with other adults in the building. If students did not feel connected to their teacher, she continued, it would result in negative effects in the form of student complaints, change in affect, and disengagement from the learning process. Principal Christopher touched on the engagement piece by acknowledging that student engagement fosters a positive climate. He went on to report that a positive school climate exists when students feel safe and

heard and “when teachers are creating learning environments where students’ needs are being met and addressed—not just academics, but emotionally as well.”

The collected and analyzed data supported the notion that relationships are an integral component of a positive school climate. In most cases, principals reported that one cannot exist without the other. However, based on the principal interviews, these positive relationships and positive school climates exist because of their expressed expectations guided by their vision. Additionally, when principals had a vision and could inspire the staff members to participate in this vision through modeling, support, and increased knowledge, the resultant effect was that students experience a sense of psychological safety.

Subtheme 2: Establishing Consistent Expectations That Lead to Psychological Safety and Positive Student Outcomes

Eight of the 13 principals interviewed mentioned the importance of students feeling safe in the school environment. The notion of safety was associated with both positive teacher-student relationships and a positive school climate. For instance, Principal Christine conveyed several different strategies her school used in the process of promoting positive relationships. One structure she embraced was her PBIS system. Her school focused on the idea of respect and what it should look like in different areas of the school. She emphasized that this system not only established expectations for how students should treat others, but also allowed students to learn how they should expect to be treated. Using the system in this way taught students that there were clear expectations for the way students should relate to their teachers as well as clear expectations for how teachers should relate to students. Likewise, Principal Cierra used the PBIS system to

teach and foster positive interactions in the school setting. She went on to explain that her idea of a positive relationship was when "students know what to do and they know what not to do, and what's going to happen if they choose one versus the other." Further, in Principal Andrew's school, consistent schoolwide expectations were key in his positive environment. He stated that all of the students knew the expectations and relayed how it impacted the students and school in a positive manner.

Many principals reported on how school climate, students' sense of belonging, and positive teacher-student relationships were connected to student outcomes. Specifically, Principal Christopher stated that a positive school climate is one that has "low disciplinary infractions, low turnover rate with teachers, and a low number of retentions." Moreover, Principal Andrew, who considered positive relationships and school climate to be synonymous, stated that a "school that has a positive school environment, for testing and assessments, we see scores being quite high." He said that suspension rates also reflect how students feel about the school environment. Principal Francine also mentioned low discipline referrals as an indicator of a positive school environment in addition to school attendance. She explained that if students experience positive relationships with their teachers at school, then they will want to come to school. On a similar note, Principal Christine stated that a positive school community is one in which students want to be there. She also mentioned that in her experience, a positive school community is also reflected in test scores and performance data. She continued to explain that in her previous school, she had teachers who were resistant to forming positive relationships with their students, and they typically had lower performance scores than the teachers who built relationships with their students.

In brief, all of the principals shared through their responses to interview questions their idea of a positive school climate in addition to ways they worked to promote this type of environment. Strongly connected to this positive environment was a student's sense of safety, which was expressed to be both part of a positive teacher-student relationship as well as a positive school climate. Additionally, clear expectations and student guidelines helped to increase students' sense of psychological safety by creating a sense of respect for all members of the community. Furthermore, principals acknowledged and provided examples of the ways in which positive relationships and positive school climates impacted student outcomes.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present the information collected in relation to the overarching themes, subthemes, and research questions in order to address the gap found in the empirical research during the literature review. In alignment with a basic qualitative design, the results of the study were offered utilizing rich, thick descriptions designed to provide the reader with a perspective lens similar to the participants' lived experience (Creswell, 2013). Thirteen elementary school principals served as participants for this study, and their experience ranged from 1 to 14 years, with the median of 6 years. The data were read, coded using both deductive and inductive coding, and analyzed using an iterative process, while memoing served to maintain research objectivity.

This study focused on two research questions and two subquestions designed to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships, structures present for ensuring students have access to positive-

teacher relationships and a sense of belonging to the school community, as well as principals' perceptions of how positive teacher-student relationships contribute to a positive school climate. Six themes emerged, with a total of 15 subthemes. Chapter 5 addresses the interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations resulting from the data.

CHAPTER 5:

INTERPRETATIONS. CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several decades have passed since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was signed into law by President Johnson in 1965 in an effort to provide greater equity for all students receiving public education services. Fast forward to the latest iteration of ESEA, otherwise known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, which continued efforts to protect the rights of all public school students to receive a quality education. As a result of ESSA, state departments of education were mandated to report on student progress from one nonacademic indicator of school quality in addition to reporting on student academic measures. School climate is among several nonacademic indicators that states are able to choose from as a measure of school quality. This study focused on the school climate indicator connected to positive teacher-student relationships and transformational leadership behaviors. The extant literature supports the connection between a positive school climate and positive teacher-student relationships as it relates to student growth and learning, as well as the principals' role in creating and maintaining a safe and positive school climate (Buckley et al., 2017; Cohen, 2006; DePaoli et al., 2017; Kostyo et al., 2018; Payne, 2018). Nevertheless, there was a lack of empirical evidence regarding the role of the elementary school principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships.

Responding to this gap in the literature, this study sought to more clearly determine the role of the elementary school principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships and understand the specific structures principals put in place to facilitate positive teacher-student relationships and students' positive sense of belonging

to the school community. Two research questions and two subquestions were designed to address the gap found in the literature and to add to the body of knowledge regarding the principal's role in promoting positive teacher-student relationships as a component of a positive school climate:

RQ1: What is the role of the elementary school principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships?

SQ1a: What structures do elementary principals put in place to ensure that all students have access to positive teacher-student relationships?

SQ1b: What structures do elementary principals put in place to ensure that all students feel a positive sense of belonging to the school community?

RQ2: How do elementary school principals perceive the contribution of positive teacher-student relationships to a positive school climate?

Information garnered from the study aligns with the three key concepts from the conceptual framework, including positive teacher-student relationships, positive school climate, and students' feelings of belonging. Although these key concepts were defined in earlier chapters, a simple review of each definition follows. The first concept, positive teacher-student relationships, was defined by Wentzel (2009) as consisting of academic as well as emotional supports provided by the teacher to the student. Second, the definition of a positive school climate from the U.S. Department of Education (2016) utilized in this study is a climate that "reflects attention to fostering social and physical safety, providing support that enables students and staff to realize high behavioral and academic standards as well as encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community" (p. 1). Lastly, the concept of

students' sense of belonging is central to this study because it is connected to positive teacher-student relationships and a positive school climate, which in turn affects students' growth and learning. Students' sense of belonging, also linked to psychological safety, is defined as feelings that exist regarding interpersonal risk-taking within a particular environment (Berg et al., 2017; Cantor et al., 2019; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Myers, 2014). The review of these defining factors serves to place the study results in the context of the conceptual framework and the research questions posed in relation to the gap in the literature.

This chapter begins with an overview that provides a brief response to each of the research questions and subquestions. Next, each research question is discussed in detail and connected to the broader perspective of the current research. The chapter continues by discussing the implications of the findings for theory, practice, and further research. The chapter closes with a brief conclusion.

Study Overview

A basic qualitative interpretive design was chosen as the most appropriate method to gather detailed responses to the research questions. Thirteen elementary school principals from across the state of Virginia participated in the research study. Principals engaged in structured interviews via the teleconferencing tool Zoom. The live transcription feature from Zoom was used to produce a transcription of each interview. The data were reviewed iteratively, coded and analyzed using the MAXQDA software system, and analyzed for themes by hand using a color-coded system. Six themes emerged from the data and were aligned with the two research questions and two

subquestions addressing the gap in the literature. The six themes representing the collected data were as follows:

1. Elementary principals incorporate intentionality with daily practice to promote positive teacher-student relationships.
2. The work of relationship building is a continuous process for principals.
3. Principals work in conjunction with staff members to create a caring climate.
4. Principals demonstrate passion and commitment to the work of positive relationships in elementary schools.
5. Principals inspire big change through small moments.
6. Principals who focus on relationship building inspire a collective vision for a positive school climate.

To summarize the collective evidence connected to Research Question 1, principals expressed that their role in promoting positive teacher-student relationships included providing clear and communicated expectations to staff members, modeling expectations with students and staff members, incorporating a morning meeting time into the daily schedule, and facilitating schoolwide collaborations. Regarding Subquestion 1a, principals indicated that they incorporated the structures of teacher support, positive school contacts, and a daily morning meeting to ensure all students had access to positive-teacher relationships. Regarding Subquestion 1b, principals utilized the structures of student greetings, student celebrations, and talking directly with students to ensure students felt a sense of belonging to the school community. Research Question 2 sought to determine the principals' perception of the contribution of positive teacher-student relationships to a positive school climate. In response to this question, principals

overwhelmingly agreed that these two concepts were symbiotic, meaning one cannot exist without the other.

Discussion of Research Questions

Research Question 1: What is the Role of the Elementary School Principal in Promoting Positive Teacher-Student Relationships?

Discussion of Research Findings

The results from the data related to Research Question 1 suggest that principals have a clear role in promoting positive teacher-student relationships. Interview participants provided examples of how these processes were exhibited in their buildings. These examples are associated with the overarching themes of incorporating intentionality with daily practice to promote positive teacher-student relationships (Theme 1), relationship building as a continuous process for principals (Theme 2), and working in conjunction with staff members to create a caring climate (Theme 3).

Principals communicated that their primary role in promoting positive teacher-student relationships was to establish explicit communication surrounding their expectations for teachers to engage in these types of relationships with their students. As a result, expectations were conveyed to new and returning teachers during preservice week prior to the beginning of school. They were also reiterated throughout the year during faculty meetings, instructional leadership team meetings, professional leadership community team meetings, private conversations between the principal and teacher when needed, and employee reviews.

The second role of the principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships revealed through the collected data was the presence of intentional practices of the principals to model the expected behaviors with both teachers and students. The practice of modeling was prevalent in most participants' responses. Principals subsequently shared that it was important for the teachers to feel what it was like to experience positive working relationships so that they would understand the importance of creating similar experiences with their students. Similarly, other principals described instances where they intentionally modeled the expected behavior in front of staff members with the knowledge that the staff members were actively observing the interactions between principal and student.

The next category that arose from the participant interviews with regard to the role of the principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships was connected to established guidelines around the classroom morning meeting. Principals shared that the morning meeting time helped teachers get to know their students on a more personal level. This additional information allowed teachers to build a deeper bond with their students and set the stage for positive teacher-student relationships.

Lastly, the collaborative efforts of school members connected to Theme 3 was prevalent in the data and centered on principals working with their staff members to create a caring climate. Principals recognized that although they served as the leader of the school building, they were in fact only one individual. Consequently, principals acknowledged that their real influence stemmed from forming relationships with their staff members, providing clear expectations surrounding an overarching vision, and supporting staff members in their efforts to actualize the collective vision. All of the

principals interviewed for this study recognized and celebrated the collective efforts of their staff members in working toward creating a school climate whereby students could grow and learn in a safe and loving environment.

Research Findings Connected to Current Research

Positive relationships are integral for humans to thrive, and principals are in a position to ensure that all students under their care experience positive relationships and a sense of safety and belonging within a climate that supports the continuation of these feelings. The scientific community provides brain-based research on the importance of students having access to positive relationships in the educational setting (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Center on the Developing Child, 2016; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Our human brains are wired to form bonds with other human beings for the purpose of human growth and development (Schore, 1996). Although the interdisciplinary literature supporting the benefits of positive relationships are well established and continuously expanding, elementary principals can best serve their students through the understanding of how the autonomic nervous system affects students' focus and attention, as well as memory and overall cognitive function (Hammond, 2015; Jensen, 2009; Sousa, 2006; Van der Kolk, 2014). School leaders should continue to expand their knowledge regarding the interplay between students' growth and learning and the physiological aspects of education. Additional information can be found at the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

The research findings for this study are congruent with the extant literature regarding principals' responsibility to convey their expectations to staff members and establish positive conditions for learning (Braun et al., 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009; Quick & Normore, 2004). Principals reported setting clear expectations for their staff members. Setting clear expectations regarding positive teacher-student relationships is critical because these relationships help to establish a positive and healthy school climate (Cohen et al., 2009; Sergiovanni, 1991).

In addition to communicating their expectations, principals also modeled this behavior for staff members. This type of leadership behavior is an important process in inspiring others to act in accordance with collective values, which is characteristic of transformational leadership. More importantly, principals must not only champion the values, but actively demonstrate the behavior they want to see in the school (Lucas & Valentine, 2002; Marks & Printy, 2003; Murphy, 2007). Moreover, modeling the behavior they expect to see in the school reflective of the vision they have defined serves to provide crystal clear guidelines for teachers to follow (Lucas & Valentine, 2002).

Another research finding garnered from this study revealed principals' reliance on the morning meeting structure to promote positive relationships between teachers and students. The morning meeting, facilitated by teachers and supported by principals, is a way to create positive and caring learning environments, which in turn support students' social, emotional, and academic growth (Allen-Hughes, 2013; Kriete & Davis, 2017). Additionally, principals shared during their interviews that the morning meeting was a structure that allowed greater teacher-to-student and peer-to-peer collaboration and relationship building. Relationships fostered during morning meeting time not only

supported the classroom environment, but also served to contribute to a positive school community (Allen-Hughes, 2013).

The last overarching structure related to principals' intentionality for all students to have access to positive teacher-student relationships consisted of the collaborative efforts of all staff members working toward a collective vision. This notion is supported in the current research connected to transformational leadership theory. More specifically, the transformational leadership practice of inspirational motivation works to align the efforts of all members of the organization toward achieving a collective vision (Leithwood, 1992). Principals who participated in this study reported that once they established and communicated the vision regarding positive teacher-student relationships, they relied on the staff members to help achieve the vision. According to the work of Burns (1978), transformational leadership is founded on the interpersonal relationships between the leader and organizational members. This concept is reflected in the responses from the principals who stated that they first established positive relationships with their staff members before expecting to see positive relationships between the teacher and student.

Subquestion 1a: What Structures Do Elementary Principals Put in Place to Ensure That All Students Have Access to Positive Teacher-Student Relationships?

Discussion of Research Findings

Principals must remain committed to the work of building positive relationships in their school to ensure that all students have access to these types of connections. The data explored in Themes 4 and 5 in Chapter 4 outlined the varied ways in which principals demonstrated this continuous commitment. For most principals, this

commitment revealed itself through continued support for teachers in the form of improving teachers' relationship skills and efficacy through professional development, use of district support, and book studies. Several principals indicated that although they created and communicated their expectations surrounding positive teacher-student relationships, they recognized that some teachers required additional knowledge and skills to fulfill the expectations. Professional development was mostly ongoing throughout the year, but also occurred through in-the-moment conversations between the principal and teacher to correct behavior misaligned with schoolwide expectations.

Additionally, two other collective structures were identified using the MAXQDA software. The responses on this topic were prolific, and a total of 71 coded segments from 13 documents were coded under the 'Structures for Positive Teacher-Student Relationship' code. From these 71 coded segments, positive school-home contacts and morning meetings were reported by six principals as structures to support positive teacher-student relationships. Another three principals described using specific relationship building systems such as a check-in/check-out program or the 2 by 10 strategy, whereby staff members were assigned to connect with identified students on a daily basis for a specified amount of time. In addition, three other principals, Christine, Patricia, and Christopher, relied on their school counselors to provide support regarding students' access to positive teacher-student relationships. Also, Principal Francine and Principal Boyd explained that they ensured their school was staffed with individuals able to foster positive relationships with students. In sum, the data did not reveal a wide collective patterns of structures implemented by school staff to ensure that all students had access to positive teacher-student relationships. Rather, outside of teacher support,

positive contacts, and the morning meeting, principals depended on the efficacy of their schoolwide expectations and the teachers' effort for these relationships to occur.

When asked to define teacher-student relationships that were positive, all of the principals' concepts included the emotional piece, while only two principals touched on the academic component of these relationships. The majority of the principals included in their definition intentionality and effort on the teachers' part in getting to know their students and providing them with emotional support, which is similar to the definition of positive teacher relationships from Birch and Ladd (1997), but missing the academic support as defined by Wentzel (2009). Generally, principals were very clear on their schoolwide expectations for positive teacher-student relationships to take place in their schools. However, the data demonstrated wide variability in the actual structures created for these relationships to occur outside of the structures of teacher support, positive first contacts, and morning meetings.

Overall, the data lacked clear-cut collective patterns of structures in response to the first subquestion: What structures do elementary principals put in place to ensure that all students have access to positive teacher-student relationships? However, principals mentioned using morning meeting, positive family contacts, staffing decisions, use of guidance counselors, and the collective effort of the entire staff to ensure student access to positive teacher-student relationships. Undergirding this subquestion were the responses related to the role of the principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships.

Research Findings Connected to Current Research

The data from this study suggested that although principals created and communicated clear guidelines surrounding positive teacher-student relationships, as well as modeled these interactions, teachers still required additional skills training to improve their knowledge on how to form positive relationships with their students. CASEL is an organization focused on integrating the social and emotional aspect of learning into schools from prekindergarten through grade 12. One of CASELs five competency areas of social and emotional learning (SEL) is relationship skills. CASEL recognizes that to move toward competency in the area of relationship skills, children require positive role models. Both teachers and principals have the responsibility to foster students' social and emotional skills through their own interactions with students as they move throughout the school day. In a guide to schoolwide SEL, CASEL defined schoolwide SEL as a caring and equitable environment focused on providing opportunities for social, emotional, and academic growth. The guide also outlined how school principals can work toward achieving schoolwide SEL by providing staff professional development, developing organizational structures founded on trust and collaboration, and modeling what it looks like to engage in positive relationships with staff, students, and families.

The next structure utilized by school principals to promote positive teacher-student relationships involved positive family contacts. Positive first contacts, where teachers learn about families and students and can begin to infuse that information into conversations to form relationships with their students, was a structure put in place by six principals. Some of those principals required their teachers to make positive contacts once each semester. Principals who did not specifically mention positive phone calls

home did indicate that open communication with families was fundamental to forming positive relationships with students. This method of open communication with families is supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as a way to improve community relations and support healthy relationships between families, educators, and children. Further, the notion of positive home-school contacts is supported in the research literature as a method to support students and families. The outcome of these contacts between the school and families has the capacity to result in increased student motivation, improved teacher-student relationships, and greater student and family buy-in to the school's vision (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Pianta & Walsh, 1996). For these school-home connections to occur, the principal must be intentional about the expectations surrounding these processes and have the ability to communicate these expectations in an effective manner for positive change to occur (Roffey, 2007).

Lastly, the use of the morning meeting structure was previously mentioned in response to the extant literature as a method to improve relationships within the school community. Principals from this study shared that not only was this time an important part of the school day, but they had to intentionally adjust the master schedule to protect this time. Also, principals in some schools utilized staff members from the district SEL department to provide professional development for teachers to improve their skills to effectively facilitate a daily morning meeting.

Subquestion 1b: What Structures Do Elementary Principals Put in Place to Ensure That All Students Feel a Positive Sense of Belonging to the School Community?

Discussion of Research Findings Connected to Current Research

In response to the Research Subquestion 1b and related to the data presented in Theme 5 in Chapter 4, the data revealed three common categories: greeting students upon arrival, providing treats/celebrations, and talking directly with the students. School principals are in a position to lead the effort to create climates through which students feel connected to the school community through a positive sense of belonging (McGiboney, 2016). Principals from this study conveyed through their answers that providing students with a sense of belonging was initiated in the relationships they and their teachers established with their students. This idea is reflected in the current literature highlighting positive relationships as the underlying factor for students to feel a sense of belonging to the school (Ibrahim & Zataari, 2019).

The daily morning greeting of students was a structure endorsed by eight of the 13 school principals from this study as a process for students to feel a sense of belonging as they entered the school building and classrooms. This process emerged from the data as an important way for students to feel a positive sense of belonging to the school community. In essence, developing relationships with students and between teachers and students through processes such as a daily morning greeting ritual is a way for principals to promote a healthy school climate (Harbegger, 2008). Daily morning greetings to students also affect students' overall feelings about coming to school, which in turn produces added benefits for learning (Cook et al., 2018). In addition to morning greeting,

principals from this study indicated that treats and celebrations were used to ensure that students felt a sense of belonging to their school community.

In some schools, treats were provided to students to serve as physical tokens of meeting schoolwide expectations as well as tokens of inclusion in the community. In other schools, celebrations were used as a means to publicly recognize students for their accomplishments in the school environment. Principals reported that both of these practices served to promote a student's sense of connectedness to the school community. More specifically, when principals publicly celebrated students' successes, they highlighted the connection between the academic, social, and emotional aspect of school (Niemi & Hotulainen, 2016). Principals revealed that they celebrated students for a wide variety of accomplishments, to include student of the month, quarterly awards for academic success, and demonstration of positive citizenship traits. Celebrations not only focused on student achievement and growth, but also on engaging families as a way to connect with the whole family and to partner with them for the benefit of the child.

Although there was wide variability in the principals' responses with respect to how they ensured that students felt a sense of belonging in their schools, there was alignment in the data that principals wanted, or rather insisted, that all of their students felt special. This message was clear based on the following statements principals made during the interviews when asked how they facilitated students' sense of belonging in their schools:

> We are a school where we know our students, we show our students, and we grow our students to be the best. —Principal Francine

> You can't judge them for being different than you. You can't judge them for having different values than you have. They have to feel that, so that perception that they have affects how they feel like they belong or not. You know, whether

> you are doing things or not, it's almost irrelevant. It's how they feel about what you're doing is what's more relevant. —Principal Tim
>
> Those are kind of my three big words with them. I want your kids to feel valued, seen, and heard. —Principal Mason
>
> Ultimately what we're really shooting for is for every child that enters this building, and honestly every person who enters this building, to feel celebrated. I think oftentimes you hear schools talk about, you know, we want every kid to feel safe, but you know really, that is such a basic level of acceptance. Trying to get students to feel celebrated, to feel comfortable, to want to come to school every day is our main goal. —Principal Boyd
>
> My expectation is that we do right by kids. If my expectations are too high, you should really request to transfer. —Principal Carissa

During the principal interviews, it was evident that principals' affect changed when they described their processes for ensuring students felt a sense of belonging to the school community. They were very passionate in the way they described their vision for students in their care to experience a sense of belonging, and it seemed that meeting students' emotional needs was a number one priority of these principals.

The final category that aligned to the structures principals put in place to ensure that all students feel a positive sense of belonging to the school community was direct communication with students. Principals from this study offered that it was important to them to talk directly with their students as a way to facilitate students' sense of belonging. The notion that open communication is one way to promote students' sense of belonging is supported by the literature and aligns with the definition of belonging contributed by Baumeister and Leary (1995). Daily ongoing conversation is key here because the need for belonging indicates that relationships must be bidirectional and enduring (Over, 2016). Principals also shared that these ongoing daily conversations with students presented an opportunity for them to evaluate the health of the school climate through the perspective of the student. Additionally, principals emphasized that

reciprocal conversations were important, and the more they opened up about appropriate topics with the students, the more students were willing to open up and share with them.

Although the data garnered from the interviews did not reveal a pattern in responses for the following practice, two principals acknowledged that staff attendance at after-school activities was something that they expected and modeled themselves. Even though attendance at these extracurricular activities was sometimes challenging, the principals and staff members would show up at students' ball games, swim meets, and dance recitals. Encouraging teachers to take an active interest in students' lives outside of school was something they believed contributed to students' feelings of belonging. Considering all the information from the interviews, the results of the data in relationship to Research Subquestion 1b—What structures do elementary principals put in place to ensure that all students feel a positive sense of belonging to the school community?—garnered the three categories of student greetings, student celebrations, and talking directly to students.

Research Question 2: How Do Elementary School Principals Perceive the Contribution of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships to a Positive School Climate?

Discussion of Research Findings

The final research question, which aligned with Theme 6 in Chapter 4, sought to answer the question: How do elementary principals perceive the contribution of positive teacher-student relationships to a positive school climate? To place this question in context, this study utilized the U.S. Department of Education (2016) definition of school climate as one that "reflects attention to fostering social and physical safety, providing

support that enables students and staff to realize high behavioral and academic standards as well as encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community" (p. 1). Most principals interviewed described a positive school climate as one that elicits a particular feeling of excitement, energy, warmth, and joy. They also mentioned smiles from students and staff members, open communication, and all staff members pitching in to accomplish a particular goal as indicators of a positive school climate. However, a limited number of principals suggested that quantitative metrics such as high attendance rates, student out-of-zone transfers, low discipline infractions, low teacher turnover, and high student performance were also indicators of a positive school climate.

With regard to their perceptions of how positive teacher-student relationships contributed to a positive school climate, principals' responses were overwhelmingly similar in that they either found these notions to be synonymous or responded that they must coexist with one another. Principal Andrew maintained, "Everyone knows the expectation. You can actually see how . . . teachers building those relationships with the students increases the school environment." Overall, principals were quick to share their responses regarding this research question. It was not a question they had to take time to ponder. Moreover, their collective responses were in alignment with the research and the conceptual framework of this study indicating that positive relationships contribute to a positive school climate.

Research Findings Connected to Current Research

Students' perception of relationship quality with their teacher has a significant bearing on their sense of psychological safety, sense of belonging to the school

community, socioemotional and academic outcomes, and ultimately the climate of the school (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Berman, 2018; Berkowitz, Moore, et al., 2017; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Principals in this study communicated that they were responsible for establishing and modeling the expectations for positive teacher-student relationships, and the teachers were responsible for actively establishing positive relationships with their students. However, it was the school climate that indicated the depth and quality of these relationships. This notion is highlighted by their stance that a positive school climate cannot exist without the underlying support of positive relationships occurring within the school. Further, due to the confluence between the quality of teacher-student relationships and the environment in which they occur, a policy brief from the Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development entitled *A Policy Agenda in Support of How Learning Happens* encouraged school systems to choose school climate as an indicator for accountability purposes under ESSA. More importantly, even if schools choose not to include school climate measures as an additional indicator under ESSA, they should still consider collecting data on school climate health precisely because it will inform school leaders as to the quality of relationships that are occurring within the school, which have a bearing on all student outcomes (Devany & Berg, 2016).

Although varying means are available for schools to measure school climate quality, the National School Climate Center developed the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) to inform school leaders about the health of their school climate garnered from perceptions of students, parents/guardians, and school staff members. The CSCI provides information on 13 dimensions of school climate relating to

five broad categories: safety, teaching and learning, social media, institutional environment, and interpersonal relationships. School leaders intending to improve their school climate can utilize this information to build a school climate improvement plan based on the perceptions of all relevant stakeholders.

Overall, although participants from this study engaged in practices to promote positive teacher-student relationships and indicated that these relationships served as the foundation of a positive school climate, only one principal discussed conducting a school climate survey. According to the recommendations from the National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments (2020), school climate measurement is an essential part of continuous school improvement and student growth and learning. It stands to reason that if the principals interviewed for this study did not conduct formal school climate surveys with their stakeholders, they would not have all of the information required to initiate change toward a more positive school climate. As a result, even though the principals observed the connection between positive teacher-student relationships and a positive school climate and claimed that their school's climate was positive, conducting a formal climate survey with all stakeholders would better inform these principals in making school improvements that reflected the voices of the collective.

Summary

In the final analysis of the data, information garnered from the principal interviews provided clear patterns of alignment regarding their role in promoting positive teacher-student relationships (Research Question 1). As the patterns from the interviews emerged, the principals' statements surrounding the importance of modeling were

surprising yet understandable, as leading by example was included in the conceptual framework of this study as a transformational leadership behavior affecting organizational change. The participants in the study clearly demonstrated transformational leadership behaviors through establishing and communicating a clear vision, leading the way, and implementing procedures that align with the collective vision. This was reflected in the three categories that emerged from the data to include communicating expectations regarding positive teacher-student relationships, modeling positive relationships, and providing support for improved positive relationships, in addition to establishing expectations around a daily morning meeting.

Implications for Theory

The two theories undergirding this study were the theory of belonging and transformational leadership theory. The first theoretical lens of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) hypothesized belonging as fundamental to human existence, emphasizing that "human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). In accordance with the extant literature, a student's sense of belonging is facilitated by the quality of the relationship that exists between the teacher and the student. This relationship, in turn, promotes the student's academic, social, and emotional growth (Cantor et al., 2019; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Wessels, 2015).

Research Subquestion 1b sought to identify what structures elementary principals put in place to ensure that all students felt a positive sense of belonging. The three categories that emerged from the participants' responses were morning greeting,

celebrations, and talking directly with the students. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), for an individual to fulfill the pervasive need for belonging, he or she must experience frequent interactions and perceive that the interactions are based on the concept of mutuality. The first category of engaging in the practice of a daily morning greeting would satisfy students' feelings of belonging if each and every student experienced the daily greeting. This experience would certainly be heightened and more fulfilling in those schools where the principal knew the names of all of the students in the school. Of course, if this practice turned into a cursory task as opposed to a true human-to-human greeting, it would seem that the experience of the feeling of belonging to the school community would diminish. This idea was echoed in Principal Amanda's assertion, "We're going to do all we can do to develop a safe, healthy, loving relationship—and genuine, because it can't be a fake relationship; they'll know it." Most certainly, a superficial "good morning, sweetheart" would be much less meaningful to a student than "Good morning, Alterak. How was your football game this weekend?"

In a subsequent study, for those principals engaging in the practice of morning greeting for the purpose of instilling a sense of belonging in their students, I would probe further by asking, how exactly do you greet your students? I would also ask whether students have a chance to answer back, or if the greetings are only one way as students pass by. Lastly, I would ask if principals were merely tossing a good morning in the air as students walked past or if they were really looking directly at students when they greeted them. This level of greeting is similar to the one Principal Carissa described when she shared, "I go around every single morning. I stand out at parent pick-up to greet kids and I look at their facial expressions. I believe that the eyes tell so much more than anything

else, definitely with the masks that we're wearing now, but I go and make connections with those kiddos."

Treats and celebrations—the second category for Research Subquestion 1b, whereby principals described acknowledging students for citizenship and academic achievement, giving tokens of appreciation, and holding community gatherings—appeared to be somewhat transactional in nature. With regard to achievement, the data recognize the academic and social benefit of experiencing a sense of belonging (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). However, the data from the literature review do not support the notion of public acknowledgment and transactional gifts as promoting a sense of belonging. The data suggest that feelings of belonging are elicited by caring relationships within an environment, and no evidence suggests that these same feelings would be present by receiving gifts or being recognized. Contrarily, it may depend on the relationships that exist between the person handing out the gifts or tokens of appreciation and the person receiving them.

The third category that emerged in relation to Subquestion 1b was talking directly to students. Principals described several instances where they took the time to have open and honest conversations with students. These conversations are in line with the type of relationships outlined in the literature as supporting a sense of belonging and fulfilling the condition for the perception of mutuality combined with positive human interaction. When principals take the time to share information about their own lives and in turn ask students about their lives, this interaction creates a sense of belonging. Additionally, students feel a greater sense of belonging connected to student voice and choice when

they are asked their opinions about school processes, as they were in the two schools that engaged in student surveys and biweekly principal talks (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009).

Overall, the principals offered many examples demonstrating how they provided students opportunities to feel a sense of belonging. These examples were connected with creating space for students to develop positive relationships within the school setting. It is important to note that only two of the 13 principals shared that they either survey or ask students directly how they feel about school. In future research, I would delve further into this topic by asking principals how they know that students feel a sense of belonging to the school community. Since a sense of belonging is considered a fundamental basic need, I would challenge principals to consider this concept a foundational part of the success of their students, invest considerable resources in ensuring that all students feel a sense of belonging, and have resources available for those who respond that they do not feel connected to the school community.

The second theory undergirding this work was transformational leadership theory. This theory, based on the work of Bass (1999), focuses on the leadership behaviors of inspiring staff members to work to achieve the collective vision. Of the four components or dimensions of transformational leadership—idealized influence, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation—this study focused on inspirational motivation because of its emphasis on clearly articulating expectations and motivating staff members to work collectively toward accomplishing the organizational vision (Northouse, 2010).

The specific transformational leadership behaviors aligned with this study as listed in the conceptual framework (Figure 1.1) were inspirational motivation, facilitate

and communicate a collective vision, establish guidelines and lead by example, and design and implement structures, procedures, and policy aligned with a collective vision. Due to the nature of the study in determining the role of elementary principals in promoting positive teacher-student relationships, this study presupposed that the principals interviewed would demonstrate at least some of the transformational leadership skills. These skills, it would seem, would be extremely beneficial in realizing a collective vision of all students having access to positive teacher-student relationships (Research Subquestion 1a) and feeling a sense of belonging to the school community (Research Subquestion 1b).

One of the conclusions from this study related to the concept of transformational leadership is that every participant conveyed strong and clear opinions about students' sense of belonging and positive teacher-student relationships, yet their responses lacked easily identifiable structures to achieve those outcomes. Although the leadership characteristic of inspirational motivation is an important component of organizational change, leaders must also incorporate specific guidelines and structures for change to occur. This notion was explored in Theme 2, which focused on the continuous process for principals to engage in the work of relationship building. In sum, participants reported more clearly outlined processes and actionable steps to use to address diminished relationships between teachers and students than to promote positive relationships. It was almost as if the reactive path through the teacher performance review process was more clearly delineated than the proactive path outlining clear rules of engagement between teachers and students.

The available literature defines a proactive leader as "generating and enacting self-initiated and future-focused leading actions that are persistently sustained to bring changes toward the environment" (Wu & Wang, 2011, p. 8). In effect, the research on proactive leadership emphasizes a leader's ability to make continuous improvements through planning and action toward achieving the organizational goal. As schools and school systems expand their knowledge surrounding the importance of SEL related to student growth and learning, it will be critical for principals to focus on proactive leadership measures such as continued professional development around the topic of promoting positive teacher-student relationships rather than relying on punitive measures to react to situations whereby teachers are unable or unwilling to connect with their students in a positive manner. Another proactive leadership move to promote positive teacher-student relationships involves fostering teachers' level of social-emotional competence so they are better able to form positive relationships with students and foster their sense of belonging (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). The intentional practices surrounding consistent professional learning for teachers are addressed below in the revised conceptual framework in response to the research findings from this study.

Review of the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study established a relationship between the leadership behaviors of the principal and all students having access to positive teacher-student relationships, to include a sense of psychological safety. Additionally, the framework connected positive teacher-student relationships and psychological safety to the outcomes of students' sense of belonging, a positive school climate, and student

growth and learning. The findings from this study supported the interrelatedness of these individual concepts and are discussed below.

The top part of the conceptual framework outlines the transformational leadership behaviors of school principals, which were reflected in the responses of the principals. The leadership behaviors included inspirational motivation, facilitate and communicate a collective vision, establish guidelines and lead by example, and design and implement structures, procedures, and policy aligned with a collective vision. A transformational leader is one who is able to motivate staff members to embrace and make consistent efforts to move in the direction of a collective goal (Schaubroeck et al., 2007). Further, principals interviewed in this study were very explicit on how their schools rallied together to ensure that students had access to positive teacher-student relationships. They felt that the processes they put in place, which were followed by staff members, created a safe space for learning where students felt they belonged. All of the principals were able to express how they established guidelines for positive teacher-student relationships and led by example through the modeling of expectations and behaviors for teachers and with students. In fact, many of the principals, 7 out of 13, acknowledged the importance of modeling the expected behaviors for staff members. Their responses indicated that it is far more effective to inspire and motivate staff members through modeling than through mandates. Expectations and guidelines related to positive teacher-student relationships were also conveyed to teachers during in-service week prior to the beginning of school, during faculty meetings and professional development sessions, during brainstorming sessions resulting from book studies, and in conversations as well as the performance review process.

In the middle of the conceptual framework figure is the notion that all students experience positive teacher-student relationships and a sense of psychology safety resulting from the intentional practices of the school leader. Principals in this study expressed that they believed all of their students had opportunities to form positive relationships with their teachers. Additionally, all of the principals reported on the many ways in which they created and communicated to staff members expectations around positive teacher-student relationships. Psychological safety, "the degree to which individuals feel comfortable taking positive interpersonal risks," was not a phrase specifically used by any of the principals interviewed (Wanless, 2016, p. 6). However, principals did mention the importance of their students feeling safe in their schools. This sense of safety was related to students feeling like they could open up and share with their teacher, principal, and peers. Principals set up this teacher-led structure for sharing during morning meeting time, where psychological safety in classrooms could be established. Additionally, principals explained that they were also ever present in the hallways and classrooms where they could have open and honest conversations with students. Overall, the structures, procedures, and policies most prevalent in the data from this study to promote positive teacher-student relationships consisted of morning meeting, student daily greeting, and positive first contacts.

The next part of the framework represented the resultant effects from students having access to positive teacher-student relationships and feelings of psychological safety. These three interrelated effects include student growth and learning, positive school climate, and students' sense of belonging. Information garnered from this study supported the connection between these concepts. Principals discussed the idea that in

their experience, relationships must come first before any growth and learning occur. One principal recounted a story about a student who performed higher than her academic acuity on a state test simply because she wanted to make her teacher proud. Nel Noddings (1988) summed up this phenomenon based on her ethics of care work focused on education, stating that students will strive for greater accomplishment when it involves people they love and trust. In terms of the relationship between positive teacher-student relationships, psychological safety, and students' sense of belonging, principals gave examples of processes designed to support both positive relationships and students' feelings of belonging to the school community. Students' sense of belonging was manifested by creating a learning environment with a sense of relatedness peer to teacher and peer to peer (Neimi & Hotlainen, 2015). Additionally, students' feelings of belonging, grounded in positive teacher-student relationships, have the capability to benefit students in both the academic and the socioemotional aspects of school (Battistich et al., 1997; Goodenow, 1993; Neimi & Hotlainen, 2015). As mentioned in a previous chapter, "Education occurs not in the mind of the student or the actions of the teacher, but in the relational space that connects them" (Crownover & Jones, 2016, p. 20). Principals ultimately have agency over this space, whether referring to the intimate space between the teacher and student, the mental space of feeling psychologically safe, the communal space in the classroom where students feel a sense of belonging, or the larger all-encompassing space of the school climate felt by all who inhabit the space.

One interesting aspect that surfaced from the data that was absent in the original conceptual framework was the procedures and processes in place for principals to correct teacher behavior that did not reflect the school's collective vision. All of the principals

were able to convey how they would work with noncompliant teachers or had done so in the past. Principals shared instances where having a simple conversation with a teacher, or suggesting that they try a specific technique to connect with a student on a deeper emotional level, would be sufficient and result in an improved relationship between the teacher and student. In other cases, principals reported that they had to involve human resources or put teachers on observational plans; in a few cases, teachers ended up resigning from their position because they were unable or unwilling to buy in to the vision of positive teacher-student relationships.

These teachers who were unwilling to invest the time to foster these special relationships with their students had a very limited view of the role of the classroom teacher with regard to the social-emotional aspect of learning. One principal described a teacher that he had encountered as having an old-school mentality and regarding positive teacher-student relationships as "all that fuzzy stuff." Principals in this study recognized the importance of teacher training to ensure that teachers had both the skills and the knowledge to form positive relationships with their students. Several principals from one district who were interviewed discussed consistently utilizing the support from their district's SEL department for continued learning on how to support teachers' skills to develop positive relationships with their students. Moreover, CASEL recognizes the skill of being able to establish and maintain positive relationships as one of five competency skills of SEL. In addition, CASEL acknowledges that both school leaders and teachers require increased knowledge to have the skills necessary to meet students' social and emotional needs (DePaoli et al., 2017). In fact, 60% of participants in a national survey of 884 public school principals from pre-K to grade 12 indicated that a lack of teacher

training on how to support students' social and emotional needs was a large barrier to meeting the needs of their students (DePaoli et al., 2017).

Based on this information and the responses from participants in this study, a slight modification in the conceptual framework is warranted. The new framework, shown in Figure 5.1, includes principal and teacher professional development regarding SEL under the transformational leadership behaviors section.

Figure 5.1
Revised Conceptual Framework

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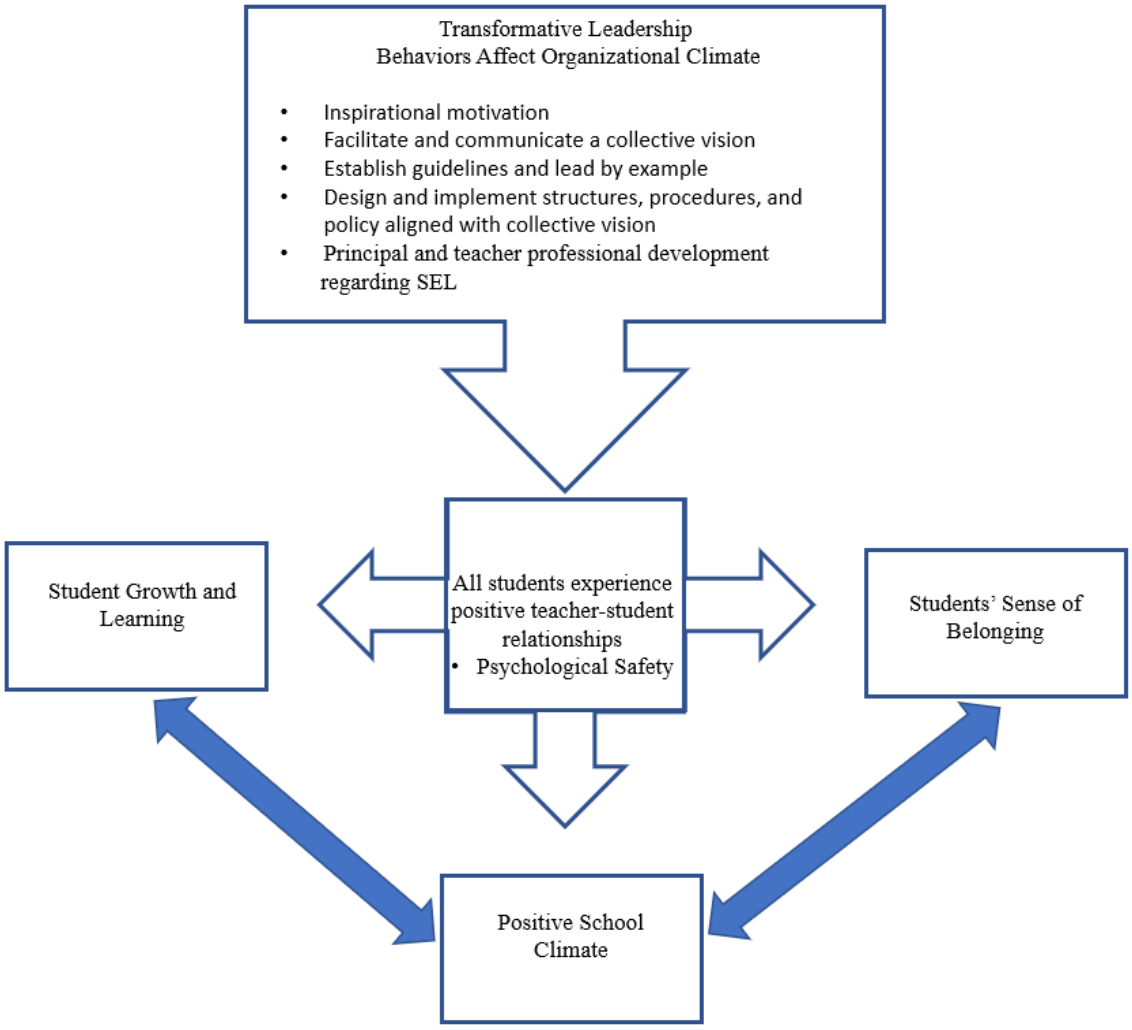

Implications for Policy and Practice

The signing of ESSA into law in 2015 brought about changes to the federal accountability process for all public elementary schools. As a result of ESSA, all public schools are now mandated to include in their annual school improvement plans a nonacademic indicator to measure school quality. This additional metric is also known as the fifth indicator of school quality. Although states have autonomy to choose their fifth indicator, many schools have chosen to report on school attendance rates, student discipline, on-time graduation rates, or measures of school climate. The school principal is directly responsible for creating a positive school climate, and because there is a clear connection between a positive school climate, students' feelings of belonging, and positive teacher-student relationships, the results of this study provide support to schools who choose school climate as their fifth indicator of school quality (Berg et al., 2017; Cantor et al., 2019; Myers, 2014).

Equally important, the findings from this study inform school principals as they work to ensure students meet the SEL standards in their schools. Principals in all 50 states are currently responsible for ensuring their students meet the SEL state standards for preschool, and principals in the states of Illinois, Kansas, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania are responsible for ensuring their students meet the SEL state standards for kindergarten through grade 12. According to the SEL framework designed by CASEL, relationship skills are one of the five SEL competency areas that students need to master in order to experience success in life. The information shared by the participants in this study surrounding the role of the principal in promoting positive teacher-student

relationships can support principals in efforts to improve students' access to positive relationships in school as well as to promote students' sense of belonging.

Even in schools that are working to provide professional development for their teachers, principals reported that they relied on their school counselors, who served as an invaluable resource and integral component in successful implementation of the principal's vision. This information could support a principal's request to the district superintendent for additional funds to support improved teacher training or allocation of additional school counselors to oversee programs that foster positive relationships and psychological safety, feelings of belonging, and an overall positive school climate. In short, the results of this research related to school policy could benefit schools seeking to meet the fifth indicator requirements of ESSA, create opportunities for students to meet state SEL standards, or request additional monetary funds or increased allocations for school counselors.

Implications for Schools

Regarding implications for practice at the school building level, this study has the potential to provide resources for principals seeking improved student outcomes through the practice of engaging in transformational leadership behaviors to promote positive teacher-student relationships. Overarching behaviors associated with transformational leadership are establishing and sharing a collective vision, building a sense of community through relationships and trust, and fostering collaboration among all staff members so that everyone works to achieve organizational goals. In the school setting, these transformational leadership behaviors have the potential to establish equitable learning environments and positively impact students' social, emotional, and academic

achievement (Curby et al., 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Mikki et al., 2016; Sointu et al., 2017).

Principals from this study acknowledged the importance of and need for continued professional development for teachers to improve their skills to meet the social and emotional needs of their students. Aligned with the notion of professional development, principals would also benefit from receiving training as a means to support teachers' efforts. Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) work supported this notion by calling for the implementation of policies as well as interventions to improve teachers' ability to develop positive relationships with their students and increase students' feelings of belonging to the school community. In designing professional development for principals, information from Table 5.1 would prove beneficial to support principals' understanding of and improve their efficacy in leading the effort to promote positive teacher-student relationships as a component of a positive school climate.

Table 5.1
Recommended Topics and Sequence for Principal Professional Development

1. Expand knowledge of the autonomic nervous system in response to interpersonal relationships to understand the powerful effect of positive interpersonal relationships.
2. Engage in reflective processes regarding emotional intelligence and learn skills to improve emotional intelligence and guide staff members to improve their emotional intelligence.
3. Reflect on implicit biases, understand how implicit biases affect relationships, and learn processes for uncovering and responding to implicit biases in their schools.
4. Learn and practice efficient strategies for relationship building central to establishing a positive school climate.
5. Conduct formal climate surveys to assess and make improvements in all four dimensions of school climate: safety, teaching and learning, relationships, and environment.
6. Collaborate with staff members to establish norms and processes designed to promote positive relationships between staff and students.

Support for Early Career Principals

All but one participant from this study had several years' experience in the role of principal. Based on their stories, explanations, and examples, participants exhibited a level of comfort in their role as principal and appeared very grounded in their expectations and vision for their school. Although Principal Savannah had over a decade of administrative experience, she had just completed her first year as an elementary principal. Being a novice principal, she seemed to lack some of the fortitude that the other principals displayed. Based on this information, novice principals could engage in ongoing professional development to increase their emotional resilience, support their reflective abilities, and work to improve their skills as a building leader.

One way for novice principals to work toward meeting the demands of their role regarding supporting students' academic as well as social and emotional growth is to work alongside a mentor. Just as students benefit when learning occurs within a positive teacher-student relationship, the novice principal can benefit when the relationship with the mentor is positive and supportive. More specifically, novice principals who engage with their mentors through the process of relational mentoring have the opportunity to learn from and contribute to the growth of their mentor in a reciprocal process (Hayes, 2019). Another method for supporting novice principals in meeting the varied needs of students, teachers, and families is to engage in a coaching/feedback cycle focused on receiving feedback from teachers and working with a coach to develop actionable steps resulting from the teacher feedback (Goff et al., 2014). Regardless of the method utilized, novice principals will find meaningful support and guidance from forming relationships

with more experienced principals or principal coaches as they work toward finding their footing, voice, and vision.

Implications for Future Research

Promoting positive teacher-student relationships is one method principals can utilize to establish conditions for learning that include psychological safety and a sense of belonging and that result in a positive school climate (Berg et al., 2017; Payne, 2018). Moreover, these types of relationships have positive effects on students' social connections with peers in addition to increased academic growth and learning (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; O'Connor & McCartney, 2006; Swick et al., 2013; Thompson, 2014; Van der Kolk, 2014). While this study makes clear the connection between the intentional practices of the school principal to provide positive conditions for learning via positive teacher-student relationships, environments that promote psychological safety and a sense of belonging, and a healthy school climate, we need to better understand how to improve the knowledge and skills of our teachers and our administrators.

Only principals from one out of six districts participating in this study mentioned having access to a SEL department to support teacher and administrator professional development. Although principals affirmed that they conducted much of the teacher training related to positive teacher-student relationships, it was unclear what level of training the principals had received. One recommendation for future research in this area is to determine how teachers are being trained and by whom to improve their effectiveness to engage in positive teacher-student relationships, establish

psychologically safe learning environments, and promote students' feelings of belonging within their classrooms.

Another recommendation for future research is to collect information from the unique perspective of students regarding their experiences of positive teacher-student relationships, psychological safety, and sense of belonging to their school community. For such a study, participants should include students from various ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, and disability groups. Further, research should also specifically address students from the most vulnerable situations, those who are not able to effectively articulate their affective needs such as students with disabilities, and those who suffer from traumatic events in their lives. From this research, actionable steps could be enacted to ensure that our most vulnerable students receive our greatest resources of emotional support.

Also recommended is research on principals' efforts to ensure students' social and emotional support associated with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in schools shutting their doors during the spring of 2019. Many students received virtual instruction from home during the next school year and returned to in-person learning beginning in 2021 with social distancing and face-mask mitigation strategies in place. During this time, students throughout the world missed out on important school-supported social and emotional connections with their peers and teachers. It may be a long time until educators fully understand the full cognitive, social, and emotional effects brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, even while this research is being conducted, principals can continue to ensure that their schools are safe spaces filled with positive and friendly staff members through which students can grow and learn.

Conclusion

The theory of belonging (Birch & Ladd, 1997) emphasized that relationships are fundamental to human survival and growth. Central to this theory is the presence of reciprocal relationships. Based on the extant literature and conceptual framework of this study, the transformational leadership behaviors of the principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships that lead to psychological safety pave the way for a positive school climate, students' sense of belonging, and student growth and learning. Although teachers are primarily responsible for student growth and learning, leaders have an important role in facilitating this achievement through expectations and the communication of a clear vision (Leithwood et al., 2004; Seashore Louis et al., 2010). The results of this study supported the conceptual framework by acknowledging the transformational leadership behaviors of the elementary school principals in their efforts to ensure that students experience positive teacher-student relationships and a sense of belonging to the school community while working to maintain a positive school climate. Further, transformational leadership is an important aspect of this study due to the principals' ability to focus the efforts of all staff members toward one collective vision (Schaubroeck et al., 2007).

The process of interviewing 13 principals across six school districts was an exciting endeavor. It was interesting how much the principals had in common in their passion and commitment to their students, families, and school staff. The results from this study both confirmed the extant literature as well as provided questions to prompt future research surrounding students' social and emotional well-being. As a future school leader, I will certainly be able to use many of the processes and suggestions offered by

the research participants to provide my students with access to positive teacher-student relationships and psychological safety and to promote students' sense of belonging as a component of a healthy and positive school climate.

I have experienced immense cognitive and leadership growth throughout the process of writing this dissertation. Above all, the time I have invested in researching the extant literature regarding the topics of this research have provided me with a firm theoretical and research-based foundation for action. I have also gained wisdom through the interview and analytic process, which led me to understand that great change is obtainable in the collective and consistent small moments. Lastly, I will take with me the understanding that although by myself I cannot affect positive change in my school, I can, however, ensure that my expectations and message are clear to staff members and that my actions always reflect my belief that all students deserve positive relationships and positive environments so they can reach their dreams and obtain their desires. I am certain that if we as educators truly believe that the purpose of K-12 education is to provide students with everything they need to realize their highest potential, then ensuring that all students have access to positive teacher-student relationships is one way to achieve this goal (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

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APPENDIX A:

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for meeting with me today, as I certainly appreciate your time. I am currently a doctoral candidate student at George Washington University in the educational administration and policy studies program. My purpose for interviewing you today is to gain an understanding of the role of the elementary school principal in promoting teacher-student relationships as a component of a positive school climate. As an elementary school principal, you would have a unique perspective on this subject. Please note that your identity will be protected and a pseudonym will be used in place of your name. The data that you share with me is confidential and will not be shared. With your permission, I will audio record today's interview so that the information can later be transcribed and analyzed.

We will spend approximately 45 to 60 minutes together to complete the interview, but there is a possibility I may need to schedule an additional follow-up interview with you. I will contact you at a later date to ask if you would like to review the transcripts or interpretations garnered from your interview. Do you have any questions before we begin the interview?

1. My first few questions are about your principalship experience.
    - How many total years have you worked as a principal?
    - How long have you been a principal at this school?
    - Were the other schools you served as principal, elementary schools?
    - If not, what level were those schools?
    - How long were you a principal at each school?
2. In thinking about the relationships that occur between teachers and students in the classroom, how would you describe a teacher-student relationship that is positive in nature? What constitutes a positive teacher-student relationship?
3. Are the positive teacher-student relationships you just described similar to, or different than, the teacher-student relationships at your school? In what ways?
    - Are these interactions observed by you personally, or are they reported to you?
    - In what ways do you handle less-than-ideal teacher-student interactions, meaning relationships that could be described as having conflict?
    - How would you describe variance in teacher-student relationships between different grade levels? What about the variance in teacher-student relationships between students with frequent discipline infractions versus students with infrequent or zero discipline infractions?
    - What structures are there in place to promote teacher-student relationship quality for students with behavior difficulties?
4. What are the schoolwide expectations for the way teachers should relate to students at your school?
    - In what ways do you communicate these expectations to your school staff?

- Were these expectations already part of the school climate when you took over as principal, or did you work to establish these expectations?
    - Who was involved in creating the relational expectations between teachers and students?
    - What information was used to create these expectations?

5. How do you facilitate initiatives that serve to ensure your students have access to positive teacher-student relationships?
    - What are some of the indicators that you would use to determine if these structures or programs are effective?
6. How would you describe students' sense of belonging at your school?
7. In what ways do you feel positive teacher-student relationships affect a student's sense of belonging to the school community?
8. How do you facilitate students' sense of belonging at your school?
    - What indicators are used to determine students' feelings of belonging at your school?
    - What indicators are used to determine how students feel about the relationships they have with their teachers?
9. What challenges do you face regarding schoolwide expectations or establishing programs that promote students' sense of belonging and/or positive teacher-student relationships?
    - What is your process for overcoming these obstacles?
10. What do you perceive as the relationship between school climate and teacher-student relationships? How do you think teacher-student relationships contribute to a positive school climate?
    - As the school leader, how do facilitate a positive school climate through positive teacher-student relationships?
11. How would you describe a school that is considered to have a positive climate?
12. How is this description similar or different to the school climate at your school?
    - How has the climate changed at your school since you have taken over the principalship? Were these changes intentional or a byproduct of other changes put into place? How so?
    - How would you describe the climate of your school related to the subject of students' sense of belonging?
13. How is the current state of teacher-student relationships affecting your school climate?
    - If there is a negative impact, how are you addressing this issue?
    - Are you seeing any positive momentum in this area?
14. What expectations are being communicated to the teachers, or what programs are in place that facilitate a positive school climate through positive teacher-student relationships?
    - Who is responsible for the implementation and monitoring of these programs?

- Are the programs currently being implemented contributing to a more positive school climate? Why or why not?

15. What is the process for expanding the capacity for teachers to improve their relationship skills with their students?
    - Is this process a schoolwide initiative or used for specific teachers?
    - How do teachers respond to this process?
    - How do you know if the process is effective?

I have no further questions at this time. Is there any other information you would like to add that might be valuable to the purpose of this study? If so, you can share it now.

Do I have your permission to contact you for content clarification, to share transcribed audio recordings, and/or to share themes/interpretations garnered from this interview? I know your time is valuable, so I thank you again for spending this time with me.

APPENDIX B:

INTERVIEW MATRIX

Research Questions

RQ1: What is the role of the elementary school principal in promoting positive teacher-student relationships?

SQ1a: What structures do elementary principals put in place to ensure that all students have access to positive teacher-student relationships?

SQ1b: What structures do elementary principals put in place to ensure that all students feel a positive sense of belonging to the school community?

RQ2: How do elementary school principals perceive the contribution of positive teacher-student relationships to a positive school climate?

Theory/research question alignment	**Theoretical tenets**	**Interview questions**	**Follow-up/ probes/ possible probes**
Transformational leadership (Establish rapport)	Affective, ethical, value-driven, goal-oriented aspects of leadership (Bass, 1999; Northouse, 2010)	1. My first few questions are about your principalship experience. • How many total years have you worked as a principal? • How long have you been a principal at this school? • Were the other schools you served as principal, elementary schools? • If not, what level were those schools? • How long were you a principal at each school? 2. In thinking about the relationships that occur between teachers and students in the classroom, how would you describe a teacher-student relationship that is positive in nature? What constitutes a positive teacher-student relationship?	• What goals did you want to achieve in education?
Theory of belonging RQ1	Children both require and benefit from a sense of belonging (Osterman, 2000).	3. Are the positive teacher-student relationships you just described similar to, or different than, the teacher-student relationships at your school? In what ways?	• Are these interactions observed by you personally, or are they reported to you? • In what ways do you handle less-than-ideal teacher-student

Theory/research question alignment	Theoretical tenets	Interview questions	Follow-up/ probes/ possible probes
			interactions, meaning relationships that could be described as having conflict? • How would you describe variance in teacher-student relationships between different grade levels? What about the variance in teacher-student relationships between students with frequent discipline infractions versus students with infrequent or zero discipline infractions? • What structures are there in place to promote teacher-student relationship quality for students with behavior difficulties?
Transformational leadership RQ1	Transformational leaders elicit change in an organization (Northouse, 2010). Guided by inspirational motivation, a collective vision and mission pave the way for organizational change (Avolio et al., 1991; Northouse, 2010).	4. What are the schoolwide expectations for the way teachers should relate to students?	• In what ways do you communicate these expectations to your school staff? • Were these expectations already part of the school climate when you took over as principal, or did you work to establish these expectations? o Who was involved in creating the relational expectations between teachers and students? o What information was used to create these expectations?
Transformational leadership RQ1	Transformational leaders utilize interpersonal relationships to	5. How do you facilitate initiatives that serve to ensure your students have access to positive teacher-	• What are some of the indicators that you would use to determine if these structures or

Theory/research question alignment	Theoretical tenets	Interview questions	Follow-up/ probes/ possible probes
	increase the moral value of the organization (Burns, 1978).	student relationships?	programs are effective?
Theory of belonging RQ1	A positive school climate supports students' sense of belonging (Cohen, 2006).	6. How would you describe students' sense of belonging at school? 7. In what ways do you feel positive teacher-student relationships affect a student's sense of belonging to the school community? 8. How do you facilitate students' sense of belonging at your school?	• What indicators are used to determine students' feelings of belonging at your school? • What indicators are used to determine how students feel about the relationships they have with their teachers?
Theory of belonging RQ1	Children's belonging experiences shape their sense of self (Halse, 2018).	9. What challenges do you face regarding schoolwide expectations or establishing programs that promote students' sense of belonging and/or positive teacher-student relationships?	• What is your process for overcoming these obstacles?
Transformational leadership RQ2	Transformational leadership behaviors have a direct impact on the school climate (Myers, 2014). A positive school climate supports a sense of belonging and safety through positive interpersonal relationships (Cantor et al., 2019).	10. What do you perceive as the relationship between school climate and teacher-student relationships? How do you think teacher-student relationships contribute to a positive school climate? 11. How would you describe a school that is considered to have a positive climate? 12. How is this description similar or different to the school climate at your school?	• As a leader, how do you facilitate this relationship? • How has the climate changed at your school since you have taken over the principalship? Were these changes intentional or a byproduct of other changes put into place? How so? • How would you describe the climate of your school related to the subject of students' sense of belonging?
Transformational leadership RQ2	Interpersonal relationships that promote a sense of safety and belonging are central to a healthy school climate (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).	13. How is the current state of teacher-student relationships affecting your school climate?	• If there is a negative impact, how are you addressing this issue? • Are you seeing any positive momentum in this area?

Theory/research question alignment	Theoretical tenets	Interview questions	Follow-up/ probes/ possible probes
Transformational leadership RQ2	Transformational leaders have a significant influence on individual and team behaviors (Bass, 1999).	14. What expectations are being communicated to the teachers, or what programs are in place that facilitate a positive school climate through positive teacher-student relationships?	• Who is responsible for the implementation and monitoring of these programs? • Are the programs currently being implemented contributing to a more positive school climate? Why or why not?
Transformational leadership RQ2	Transformational leaders and followers work toward a shared vision (Bass, 1999; Northouse, 2010).	15. What is the process for expanding the capacity for teachers to improve their relationship skills with their students?	• Is this process a schoolwide initiative or used for specific teachers? • How do teachers respond to this process? • How do you know if the process is effective?

APPENDIX C:

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Date: April 19, 2021
To: Nganga, Christine Wanjiku, EdD
From: The George Washington University Committee on Human Research, Institutional Review Board (IRB), FWA00005945
Subject: **IRB# NCR203213** , *"The Intentional Practices of the Elementary Principal to Promote Positive Teacher-Student Relationships as a Component of a Positive School Climate "*

Exempt Determination Date: April 19, 2021

The request for an exemption determination for the above-referenced study has been completed. The study was determined to be research that is exempt from IRB review under DHHS regulatory **category 2**. The project as described in the application may proceed without further oversight by the OHR.

The exemption determination applies only to the project described in your IRB Application. Any changes that may alter in any way the risks to participants, type of information to be accessed, addition of new populations, or change in PI may not be instituted without submission of a Modification within the iRIS system and further review by the OHR prior to implementation of the changes.

Refer to posted OHR guidance for requirements regarding in-person research interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Questions or concerns regarding the exemption determination made for the study should be directed to the OHR staff at ohrirb@gwu.edu.