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Parental Perceptions of School Climate and
Middle School Students' Performance

Graduate Thesis/Project

Submitted to the Faculty

Of the School Psychology Program

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By

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Parental Perceptions of School Climate and

Middle School Students' Performance

Christine DeMart

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CHAPTER ONE

Overview of Study

This research study explored the relationship between parental perceptions of school climate and middle school students' academic and social success. In particular, this study investigated what specific school climate factors may have the greatest impact on students' academic achievement, disciplinary referrals, and school attendance.

School climate is an important concept that has been studied extensively because of its significant impact upon students, teachers, and the larger community surrounding the school. Schools provide both protective and risk factors for children's development, including children's ability to meet academic and social demands within both the school and outside environments (Esposito, 1999). A positive school climate can act as an influential protective factor for students, while a more negative or divisive school climate can serve as a risk factor for children's overall success. Research has shown that as school staff takes steps to improve the climate of the school, the academic and social outcomes for children improve (Esposito, 1999). For example, researchers, Stevens and Sanchez (1999) identified school climate as a variable that is both a characteristic of effective schools, and is positively associated with academic effectiveness and achievement, including higher grades, engagement in material, and aspirations.

A strong and supportive school climate can also provide a protective factor for students' psychosocial development. Researchers have discovered that students have a more positive self-concept and improved behavior, including higher attendance, when the climate of the school is perceived to be positive (Hoy & Hannum, 1997). Further, schools that consistently demonstrate an emphasis on improving or maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships between members decrease the level of antisocial behaviors and improve the opportunities for all students to

achieve success. Thus, the study of school climate is a relevant undertaking due to school climate acting as an important determinant of a child's school success, including increasing students' engagement with material, furthering students' aspirations, and decreasing those behaviors that may interfere with effective learning. Success in school serves as a protective factor for students and is an important precursor to success in life overall.

This study explored specific school climate factors that combine to form the overall construct of school climate. Researchers have discovered that certain school climate factors have consistently been identified as significant or salient characteristics of schools. These factors must be firmly in place in order for the school to be considered healthy or effective. Esposito (1999) discovered that teacher-student relationships significantly predicted school adjustment for students in kindergarten through second grade. Other researchers echoed these findings, determining that self-critical adolescents who perceived their school as an orderly place where all are treated fairly, and where student-to-student and teacher-to-student relationships are positive, did not show the same increases in internalizing and externalizing problems as self-critical youth who held negative perceptions of school climate (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001). Parent involvement is another critical school climate factor that significantly contributes to the overall ratings of global school climate. Researchers have consistently found that increased levels of parental involvement predict many successful outcomes for students, including increased achievement levels, increased career aspirations, and decreased antisocial behaviors (Hill et al., 2004). Even such factors as the condition of the school building can have either a negative or positive effect upon student outcomes, particularly when building conditions are insufficient for fostering student growth and learning. Thus, many components of school climate have strong relationships with student outcomes.

However, these aforementioned studies did not specifically explore the relationship between parental perceptions of school climate factors and student performance outcomes at the middle school level, and thus school climate variables that were found to be important in the previous studies, which analyzed elementary and high schools, may not be as predictive of trends at the middle school level. The middle school years are very important for a child's overall development and success, as this is a time in which students enter into puberty and begin to make critical and even life-changing choices. Students begin to form values and attitudes that will largely direct their behavior through the rest of their education, and even into adulthood. How students fare in middle school predicts how they function as high schoolers, and negative perceptions of school climate during the middle years could potentially thwart their chances to achieve the necessary skills for a successful transition into high school. Thus, the current study set out to explore the formative middle school years and uncover school climate variables that have the greatest impact on academic and social outcomes for students.

This research project investigated the relationship between school climate and student outcomes from a parental perspective, rather than from the student or teacher viewpoint. Parents are a valuable source of information, particularly about their child's education, because of the close ties between parents and the school community. Family-school connections are fostered through parent-teacher associations, classroom volunteering, and through parental assistance with homework (Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002). Increased parental involvement within the schools may improve school performance by reducing problem behaviors that interfere with learning, as parents are highly aware of school rules and regulations, and have more frequent contact with teachers or other administrators (Hill et al., 2004). Haynes, Comer, and Hamilton-Lee (1989) found that the climate of schools is considerably enhanced when parents are included

in the planning and organization of school activities and contribute to important decisions about significant school events.

Involving parents in collaboration and decision-making processes in schools allows them to become stakeholders in an environment that has a powerful impact upon the lives of their children. Parents often provide valuable and useful information about their students' school, which can then be used to improve learning environments, physical variables and interpersonal characteristics. Thus, it is important to discern the important factors of school climate, whether they may be ecological or cultural variables, according to parental perceptions. How do parents perceive their son or daughter's school?

There are many questions left unanswered by the current research regarding the relationship between parents and school climate. Research clearly shows that parent involvement in the schools as well as parent perceptions of school climate is extremely important, at least at the elementary and high school levels. However, there is little evidence regarding what specific school climate variables are most important to parents at the middle school level. In addition, current research has also provided few answers regarding the impact of parental perceptions of school climate and resultant academic success at the middle school level. A vast majority of this reviewed research regarding school climate was conducted at the high school level in order to obtain measures of school climate from the students themselves. Thus, this project explored these areas, and attempted to provide answers for questions that still exist, surveying parents of 6th through 8th graders from a western New York school district. Parents who agreed to participate were administered the Yale Child Study School Development Program School Climate Survey – Parent Version (Emmons, Haynes, & Comer, 2002). Each completed parent survey was linked to school performance information, including grades, attendance, and

disciplinary referrals in order to obtain more information regarding what school climate factors have the greatest impact upon student outcomes.

Definition of Terms

School Climate: The perceptions of the physical and psychological school environment, including relationships between and among administrators, teachers, parents, and the community at large. The definition of school climate also includes instructional and extracurricular management, the condition of the school buildings and grounds, and the encouragement of the development of academic and social values among students. School climate further includes the collaborative decision-making process between parents, staff and students, and the frequency of parent participation in school activities.

Parent: A student's biological mother or father, stepmother or father, or any adult, who lives with the child and serves as the child's primary caregiver and supporter.

Externalizing Behaviors: A pattern of under controlled behavior accompanied by a lack of self-control, physical aggression, defiance, non-compliance, and disorderly conduct.

Internalizing Behaviors: Over controlled behaviors that tend to inhibit a person's behaviors and interactions with peers.

Delimitations

This study did not study the relationship between student or teacher perceptions of school climate and resultant student outcomes.

This study did not include parents of students in the western New York school district in Grades K-5. Only parents of 6th, 7th and 8th grade students were included in the study.

This study only explored a correlational link between school climate and academic achievement, attendance and disciplinary referrals, and not a causal relationship.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

School climate is often considered the heart and soul of a school. It can enrich the lives of students, teachers and parents, just as easily as it can negatively impact their school experiences. The relationship between school climate and family involvement is extremely important to examine due to its reciprocal nature. In a positive school climate that encourages family involvement, parents' perceptions of school improve. Due to the importance of these concepts, school climate and parent and school connections, a great deal of research has been directed toward the exploration of these variables and will be reviewed and summarized in the following work.

What is School Climate?

School climate is a concept that has been variously defined and examined from multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives. School climate can be thought of as the "personality" of the school (Anderson, 1982). Definitions also include overall organizational climate in which the climate is the set of internal characteristics that distinguishes one school from another and influences the behavior of its members. A healthy school might be thought of as one in which the technical, managerial, and institutional levels are in harmony, and the school is meeting its basic needs while coping with disruptive external forces (Hoy & Hannum, 1997). Definitions can also focus on the relationships between students and teachers, and teachers and administrators, and the various behaviors accompanying these associations. Researchers Kuperminc, Leadbeater, Emmons, and Blatt (1997) purport that school climate research has begun to focus its definition on the organizational behavior of teacher and principals, as well as the degree of shared values among members of the school. Haynes, Emmons, and Ben-Avie

(1997) define school climate as “the quality and consistency of interpersonal interactions within the school community that influence children’s cognitive, social and psychological development” (p. 322). These interactions include those among staff, between staff and students, as well as the links between home and school.

Thus, there does not seem to be one simple, all-encompassing definition of school climate. However, the conceptualization of this term has evolved over time to include characteristics involving a positive atmosphere for learning and achieving, maintenance of school grounds, disciplinary actions, perceptions of acceptable behavior, interpersonal relationships, morale, and a positive instructional atmosphere (Griffith, 2000; Lehr & Christensen, 2002). Simply put, school climate characterizes the social and educational atmosphere of the school and refers to the “feel” of a school (Tableman & Herron, 2004).

School Climate Variables

Anderson (1982), in her comprehensive review of school climate literature, pinpointed four components that comprise the construct of school climate. The first component is ecological variables, or the physical or material attributes of the school that are external to participants. These include cleanliness, lighting, equipment, school size, and classroom size. These variables can be important in promoting both teacher and student satisfaction. Griffith (1997), in his study examining school climate’s relation to socio-demographic and school structural characteristics, found that student satisfaction was moderately and positively related to broader school attributes, including the quality of school facilities. In terms of classroom and overall school size, Bulach and Williams (2002) discovered that there is a significant negative correlation between school size and the school’s culture and climate. With increasing school size, the faculty and students have diminished opportunities for interaction with each other.

Opportunities to talk to each other, know each other's names, and learn about each others' interests are less likely to occur. An increase in depersonalization does not allow a general sense of trust or openness to develop, subsequently impacting the general atmosphere of the school in a negative manner.

The second component of school climate includes milieu variables. These variables represent characteristics of individuals in the school, such as teacher demographic characteristics, satisfaction, teacher morale, student morale, and student body demographic characteristics (Lehr & Christenson, 2002). School climate perceptions can also be positively or negatively related to these characteristics. Generally, teachers and students who have a higher level of morale tend to contribute more positively to the overall environment or "personality" of the school. They are more interested and excited to be there, and thus promote these positive feelings.

Anderson's (1982) third set of variables comprising school climate are the social system variables. These variables concern rules of operating and interacting in the school, including administrative organization, instructional programming, ability grouping, administrator-teacher rapport, communication, and teacher-student relationships. These social variables are also related to opportunity for student participation, teacher-teacher relationships, and community-school relationships, including parent involvement. An extensive body of research exists that supports the growing importance of these variables in relation to positive perceptions of school climate (Anderson, 1982). For instance, Kuperminc et al. (1997) defined school climate as the quality and frequency of students' perceived interactions with adults and other students. This definition demonstrates the increasing importance of social variables within the larger concept of school climate.

The fourth component of school climate is related to cultural variables that reflect the norms, belief systems, and variables of different groups within the school. These include teacher commitment, peer norms, expectations, and clear goals. A study examining teachers' absenteeism in primary schools and teachers' sense of efficacy found that teachers were less absent in schools in which the principal played a central role in school decision-making (Imants & Van Zoelen, 1995). Thus, certain belief systems exist inherently within a school, and these belief systems can have a positive or negative impact upon other factors, including teacher or student attendance. Culture variables of school climate also include the amount of emphasis placed on achievement motivation within the school's environment. Hoy and Hannum (1997) found that a "healthy" middle school is a place where teachers see students as serious and diligent in their learning. In other words, high academic emphasis is considered to be an integral part of the definition of an effective and highly functioning school. Just as definitions of school climate consistently incorporate achievement motivation, school climate can have a powerful effect on the actual achievement level of students.

Importance of School Climate

A positive school climate which places an emphasis on healthy interactions, and is committed to the well-being of the students, teachers, and community, is an essential component of an effective school. The study of school climate examines school factors that influence students' success, including how school staff can support and develop students' capacity for success (Lehr & Christenson, 2002). School climate has been consistently identified as a variable that is a characteristic of effective schools, and is positively associated with academic effectiveness and achievement, including higher grades, engagement in material, and aspirations (Stevens & Sanchez, 1999; Tableman & Herron, 2004). Griffith (2000), in his study of the

relation of consensus among students and parents regarding their perceptions of the school environment, found significant and positive relations of student and parent evaluations of the school to school-level student outcomes, including academic performance. Buckley, Storino, and Sebastiani (2003) found that students' perceptions of school climate significantly predicted GPA across gender and ethnicity, with perception of school support functioning as the key school climate factor. Thus, the amount of support that students perceive receiving from adults within the school has a strong and positive impact upon both academic achievement and perceptions of school climate. Hoy and Hannum (1997) support these findings through their own research examining the relationship between school "health" and student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics in a sample of middle schools. The researchers found that most dimensions of what constitutes a "healthy" school, including collegial leadership, teacher affiliation, and academic emphasis, were positively associated with student achievement.

Other factors, including a student's background and motivation level, may have an influence on perceptions of positive school climate and academic achievement. Many explanations of low academic performance by inner-city students have focused on social or academic disadvantages that accrue from a "culture of poverty" and from membership in minority groups (Haynes et al., 1997). Hood (2004) examined the relationship between parent perceptions of parental involvement in the schools and student academic achievement and found a significant difference between races. White parents appeared to have more positive perceptions of their total involvement in schools as compared to Black parents. Also, parents without a high school degree had less positive perceptions of their total involvement than those parents within other educational levels. Griffith (1997) also found that socio-demographic characteristics of a school's student population were negative predictors of the school's social

environment. Thus, those in minority groups as well as those members of lower socioeconomic groups tend to rate the overall school environment in a more negative light. Results regarding minority race and lower socioeconomic groups have been previously linked to less effective parent-school interactions and increased risk for student academic failure (Stockard & Mayberry, as cited in Griffith, 1997). More generally, members of minority groups have tended to exhibit less academic achievement, which may be related to the effectiveness of the interactions between the school and home, and overall perceptions of school climate.

The nature of the school environment also has a strong influence on the way students develop and learn, including students' psychosocial development. Much research has documented that students will have more positive self-concepts and improved behavior, including higher attendance, when the climate of a school is perceived to be positive (Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Kuperminc et al., 1997). Frequently, the link between school climate and student outcomes is relatively direct, in that a positive school climate is directly related to healthy social-emotional behaviors. This is particularly important for youngsters in middle school, who are currently preoccupied with issues of self-concept or self-definition (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001). Researchers, examining school climate and individual differences in vulnerability to psychopathology in middle school students, discovered several important findings related to the fit between a school's social setting and the developmental needs of adolescents. Self-critical youth who perceived their school as an orderly place where all are treated fairly, and where student-to-student and teacher-to-student relationships are positive, did not show the same increases in internalizing and externalizing problems as self-critical youth with negative perceptions of school climate (Kuperminc et al., 2001). In a study examining school climate and the difficulties in the social adjustment of middle school students, researchers

found that school climate perceptions accounted for independent variance in all multi-informant (self, teacher) assessments of boys' externalizing and internalizing problems after accounting for demographic and risk variables. For girls, school climate perceptions were independently associated only with self-reported externalizing problems, and explained little variance. Thus, for boys, a supportive school climate may facilitate their adjustment. Yet boys are more likely than girls to report and to be seen by teachers as having externalizing problems, and to be disciplined at school for these problems. This heightened surveillance of behavior may lead boys to greater awareness of the potentially positive or negative impact of school environment on their lives. Boys with negative school climate perceptions may be those who are more subject to discipline (Kuperminc et al., 1997).

Externalizing behaviors, also defined as antisocial behaviors, are related to the climate of the school (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). These authors support the view that affirming interpersonal relationships and opportunities for all to achieve mastery can increase achievement levels and reduce antisocial behaviors. The transformation toward academic achievement and pro-social behaviors begins with a systematic change in the way members of the school population relate to one another. Authors purport that school leaders must eliminate coercive practices, as well as change the demand level, including increasing student opportunities for success. Thus, the overall display of antisocial or externalizing behaviors can often be reduced by eliminating those negative influences that limit students' positive perceptions of the school. Schools that consistently demonstrate an emphasis on improving or maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships between members decrease the level of antisocial behaviors and improve the opportunities for all to achieve success (McEvoy & Welker).

A positive versus negative school climate may also impact the level and degree of bullying behaviors present in educational settings, particularly within the middle school environment, where bullying behaviors tend to swell. Researchers Unnever and Cornell (2004) explored bullying behaviors and school climate by examining factors that influenced a middle school student's decision to report being bullied at school. Researchers investigated chronicity and type of bullying, as well as school climate variables and familial, demographic and attitudinal factors and discovered that reporting of bullying incidents increased with the chronicity of the victimization. In addition, reporting was more frequent in girls and among lower grade students. Most important, students who perceived their school climate as tolerant of bullying behavior, and students who described their parents as using coercive discipline were likely to report being bullied (Unnever & Cornell). Along the same lines, several researchers went further to examine specific individual and school-level school predictors, including numerous school climate variables, of externalizing behaviors in middle school students (Reis, Trockel, & Mulhall, 2007). Researchers investigated aggressive behavior in male and female middle school students, defining aggression as the number of instances the student reported hitting other people, acting mean toward another, or getting into a fight with another person. Specific individual factors included measures of problem-solving abilities, quality of family and peer interactions, and perceptions of school climate. At the school level, eight measures of school climate were utilized, including culturally sensitive education, student inclusion in policy/decision-making, emphasis on understanding over memorization, clear and consistent discipline, and teacher recognition of positive behavior, social support from teachers, and education on coping with stress. At the individual level, researchers found that effective problem-solving strategies were most predictive of lower levels of aggression (Reis et al.).

However, within the larger school-wide level, student inclusion in policy-making, culturally sensitive education and teaching that emphasized understanding over memorization, were significant predictors of decreased levels of aggression (Reis et al.). In other words, including students in vital school-wide decision-making processes, utilizing a culturally sensitive curriculum that emphasizes unique human differences, and teaching that stresses understanding rather than rote learning encourages students to view others in a more positive light, seek appropriate assistance during conflicts, and utilize effective coping skills.

Schools with a healthy environment also decrease the level of student and teacher absenteeism, as these populations feel more “connected” or involved. Imants and Van Zoelen (1995) discovered that collegial relations and leadership style were positively correlated to high absenteeism. Collegial relations refer to the interpersonal relationships or closeness between staff members, including the principal’s confidence in teachers. Leadership style refers to the restrictive versus open or nondirective behaviors of leadership toward the rest of the school staff. These research findings seem to contradict the notion that teachers with healthier interpersonal relations would tend to exhibit lower absentee behaviors. However, researchers noted that in a familial and informal school climate, there may be higher degree of tolerance regarding teachers’ reporting absences. Thus, a supportive versus authoritarian leadership style may promote more positive perceptions of school climate, while at the same time, increasing teacher absenteeism as teachers feel less pressure in missing school.

School leadership plays an integral role in helping form or shape a school’s culture, climate and general “feel.” One particular first-year principal, who published an autoethnography of her experiences, noted that a more positive school climate was the key variable in confronting many of the challenges apparent in her school (Pepper & Thomas, 2002).

She noted the negative effects that an authoritarian leadership could have on the school climate, the morale of the students and staff, and overall success of the school. Thus, the principal began to transform the principal's position from one focusing on an authoritarian style of leadership to a collaborative problem-solving approach, and began including parents, teachers, community members and students in decision-making processes. As a result, Pepper noted that the school had become a more caring and positive place (Pepper & Thomas). Thus, a collegial and caring leadership style can lead to healthier interactions, greater involvement of parents and community members, and an affirmative school climate.

A positive school climate, and its capacity to lower teacher absenteeism and fewer instances of internalizing and externalizing behaviors, might be thought of as leading to an enhanced sense of school community, or students' feelings of belonging within their education environment. The culture or climate of the school as a whole can play a distinctive role in shaping students' experiences, particularly a democratic school climate in which students are given some level of personal choice and a voice in decisions that may affect them. Vieno, Perkins, Smith and Santinello (2005) set out to explore individual and school-level predictors of sense of school community among adolescents within three different levels (student, class, school). Researchers found that the perception of a democratic school climate significantly predicted school sense of community at the student, class and school levels. Researchers also found that parenting styles and the relationships between students and teachers played an important role in developing a strong sense of community. Essentially, strategies that actively nurture respectful, supportive and fair relationships between students, parents and teachers create a more positive attitude toward education (Vieno et al.).

Measures of School Climate

Assessment of school climate is extremely important for the development of practices or measures intended to improve the school learning environment. Instruments designed to assess school climate should provide a picture of the “health” of the school as a whole (Lehr & Christensen, 2002). Information about school climate can be gathered from multiple sources, including students, teachers, and parents, allowing school officials to learn more about the school’s particular strengths and weaknesses. There are two basic types of climate measures: indirect and direct (Freiberg & Stein, 1999). Indirect measures include those where data collection does not require direct interactions with individuals, and minimizes or eliminates the need to insert the data collector into the lives of teachers, students or parents. These types of measures encompass existing data sources, including teacher or school records of attendance, disciplinary referrals, or even visits to the nurse’s office. Direct measures are those in which someone, generally the data collector, is required to go forward and interact with others to collect climate data. The use of surveys, classroom observations, interviews, video taping, and student drawings are considered direct measures (Freiberg & Stein).

Researchers place considerable effort and energy into utilizing direct measures of school climate with both students and teachers, as they are able to provide a first-hand account of the “personality” or the qualities of the school that help each individual feel personal worth and importance. School climate surveys are used most often in gaining information about the school’s environment, as it is a quick and easy method of obtaining useful information from a large number of people within a relatively short period of time. Researchers often utilize self-report measures, such as the School Climate Survey, as it directly assesses student perceptions of achievement motivation, fairness, and student – teacher relations (Kuperminc et al., 1997).

Teachers are also able to provide self-report measures that include their personal reactions to school climate issues. They are often asked to give information in relation to other, more indirect measures of school or classroom climate, including the presence of internalizing or externalizing behaviors in their students, or even the amount of control teachers perceive students to maintain (Anderson, 1982).

The perceptions of school climate from those outside of the school environment are also extremely important, as perceptions can often have as great an impact as reality (Stevens & Sanchez, 1999). The perceptions of parents are a key component in creating an atmosphere where teachers can teach, students can learn and parents can take an active role in the education of their children. Parents are considered to be an integral part of the overall picture of school climate because of the amount of influence they have within their children, and how this influence could impact the school as a whole. Thus, many researchers seek out parents and utilize direct measures, including surveys, in order to gain an additional perspective regarding the overall learning environment of their child's school (Griffith, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). When parents are given the opportunity to both report their perceptions of their son or daughter's school as well as assist in planning and organizing school activities, they essentially become stakeholders within the schooling process (Stevens & Sanchez, 1999). Griffith (2000) discovered that there are strong relations between student and parent evaluations of the school and student outcomes. Students will have increased achievement levels when students and parents share positive perceptions of the school's environment. Thus, parental measures are considered a valid method of assessing school climate, and are particularly important due to the significant effect that they have within student outcomes and school climate as a whole.

Importance of Middle School Years

The middle school years, particularly sixth, seventh and eighth grades, bridge the gap between the supportive and nurturing elementary years and the adult world of high school. Consequently, these intermediate years fulfill a multitude of functions for students as they prepare to transition toward a more mature, less structured high school setting. At the middle level, students are beginning to form values, attitudes and habits that will direct their behavior as high schoolers. Middle schools that enhance the growth of adolescents as learners, ethical citizens and self-sufficient young people create far greater opportunities for success for students at the high school level and beyond (National Middle School Association, 2003). Students at this age undergo rapid physical and emotional changes that affect the way they act toward themselves and others and how they view the world. At this age, parents are still the primary sources of values and emotional and physical support, but increasingly, students' desire for peer acceptance and a need to belong to particular social groups lead to shifting allegiance from adults to peers (National Middle School Association). Therefore, middle schools have the important task of reaching a delicate balance to promote students' independence while providing these students with the necessary moral direction and skills needed to be successful as high schoolers. Less successful middle schools could lead to more negative perceptions of school climate for students, who in turn, may become less invested in acquiring the skills needed for high school.

Transitional challenges may include a sharp increase in school truancies, absences and drop-out rates. In a study examining school transitions, researchers reported a 76% increase in student truancies between 8th and 9th grades, the most common transition point from the middle to the high school level (Garrison, 2006). Truancies and drop-outs may result from a number of factors, including less academic, social, and behavioral supports at the upper grade levels.

Students are expected to be more independent and self-sufficient. The diminishing support levels may be particularly difficult for students with learning disabilities or emotional disturbances, who benefit from the structure and intense academic/behavioral supports at the elementary and middle school levels (Wagner et al., 2006). While students may find there are less academic resources at the high school level, at the same time, student motivation levels toward academics decrease as they enter into the high school years. Researchers discovered that students experienced a continued decline in intrinsic and extrinsic motivation toward academics from 8th grade until 10th grade (Otis, Groudet, Frederick, & Pelletier, 2005). Students were generally less motivated toward school and more interested and invested toward social and sports activities, attaching more importance to these engagements as compared to their academics. Students who demonstrate minimal level of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation toward academics may be more inclined to drop-out of school to pursue these nonacademic, leisure activities.

The prevalence, type, and severity of bullying can also have a positive versus negative impact upon the transition from middle to high school and future outcomes for both the victims and perpetrators. Bullying is an extremely prevalent and serious problem across the United States, particularly during the middle school years when students begin placing a strong emphasis on forming peer groups. Hoover, Oliver and Hazler (1993) studied students aged 12 through 18 and found that 75% of students were bullied at least once and 14% of students suffered trauma from the incidents. A disproportionately high number of bullies underachieve in school and later perform below potential in employment settings (Carney and Merrell, 2001). Victims of bullying often experience a number of psychosocial disturbances, including depression, anxiety, and for girls, eating disorders. Additionally, victims also suffer chronic absenteeism, decreased academic performance, loneliness, feelings of abandonment and

increased suicidal ideation (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Victims of bullying are more reluctant to attend school because most bullying tends to take place on school grounds. The combination of puberty, an increased emphasis on forming cliques and other peer groups, and a middle school with minimal interventions directed toward bullying can create breeding grounds for aggressive and negative maltreatment of students. This harassment in turn creates a group of students who generally fear and dislike school.

Hence, middle schools must often rise to the task of instilling necessary skills within students in order to promote the successful transition into high school and beyond. These skills might include teaching students to seek out and build academic and social support systems for themselves to rely upon during the high school years. This might include encouraging students to become involved in clubs, sports, or community-based organizations. In addition, successful middle schools must place an emphasis on academics in such a way as to keep the students interested in completing their school-work, and recognizing the link between academics and attainment of personal goals down the road (National Middle School Association, 2003). Middle schools intent on upholding a successful transition to high school also maintain a healthy and positive school climate in which tolerance and diversity are valued and evidence-based programs to combat bullying are in place (Ma, 2002). Many middle schools, in their efforts to promote positive school climate and decrease bullying, fail to pay enough attention to the important role of parental involvement. One researcher discovered that parental involvement was a significant strategy to reduce bullying in schools, particularly in the early grades of middle schools. The same researcher also found that a strong focus on academics improved the school climate, which in turn served to reduce bullying behaviors (Ma). Hence, achieving success during the middle school years is imperative for students as they prepare to enter into the more independent and

self-sufficient high school environment. Negative perceptions of school climate that students may possess at the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade level may directly reflect upon the success of their middle school and may thwart their achievement of the necessary skills to thrive.

Relationship between School and Parents

Current research reveals that there are many different types of relationships between schools and parents, and ways in which parents and schools connect. Parents play a critical role in both their children's academic success and social-emotional development (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004). Most often, parents enter into a relationship with the school and with teachers and administrators through direct involvement in some aspect of the educational process. More and more, increasing parental school involvement has been an important part of local and state government initiatives due to the positive outcomes related to close associations between parents and schools (Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002). There are several types of specific family-school connections that have been described in the literature, including simple behaviors such as parental homework help that encourages parent-child interactions. Schools often provide general strategies that families use to support effective homework practices within the home. School-family connections are also demonstrated through a supportive home environment, including the supervision and structure that parents provide their children outside of school to support their education. Family-school connections are fostered through direct interactions in school events or activities as well. This may include participation in parent-teacher organizations, school advisory boards, and volunteering in the classroom. Finally, parents are also often involved in school reform, including advocating for change and participating in the development of improvement plans (Jordan et al.). These actions by parents

allow for them to become directly involved with many aspects that comprise school climate, and gives them the opportunity to effect positive change within the overall school environment.

Just as schools are increasing their efforts to reach out to the community, parents are also attempting to increase their involvement within the schools, though this can often be difficult for parents due to time constraints or economic resources (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Grandmont (as cited in Johnson, Livingston, Schwartz, & Slate, 2000) purported that parent involvement is more indicative of a child's success in school than any other factor. But he recognized that many parents who would like to participate in school activities were too busy, tired, or stressed to do so. Thus, it is a key initiative for schools to find the means to involve parents at a high level, as successful promotion of these parent partnerships is often a hallmark of an effective school (Johnson et al., 2000).

Effects of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is an important predictor of many successful outcomes for children in school. Many researchers have found that parental connections with the school have a positive impact on academic achievement in the areas of reading and mathematics (Jordan et al., 2002). Parent academic involvement may ensure that children and adolescents obtain academic skills and knowledge (Hill et al., 2004). Researchers, Hill et al., wanted to look specifically at how parental involvement is related to achievement and aspirations during adolescence, as students who do well academically tend to have higher aspirations. Researchers utilized a longitudinal model, following 463 adolescents from 7th grade through 11th grade. They discovered that parent academic involvement across the middle and high school years mattered in regards to achievement and career aspirations; however it functioned differently for those from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Specifically, among families with lower parent

education levels, parent academic involvement increased adolescents' educational and career aspirations; however parent academic involvement was not effective in changing school behavior or achievement for these students. Thus, parent academic involvement increases aspirations without improving the prerequisites. Among families with higher parental education, parent academic involvement was positively related to achievement and subsequent career and educational aspirations (Hill et al.).

Even though these findings, as well as results from many other studies, support a relationship between parental involvement and achievement, the direction of this relationship is not always clear. Does parental involvement predict academic achievement, or does achievement predict greater parental involvement? Englund et al. (2004) utilized longitudinal measures in order to gain more information regarding the direction of the relationship between achievement and parental involvement. Researchers examined mothers' education level, quality of instruction, child's IQ, parental involvement, and achievement. They hypothesized that parental expectations of educational attainment would directly affect parent involvement and children's achievement. Researchers found that mothers with higher educational attainment provided more support for their children in problem-solving situations in preschool, had higher expectations of education attainment for their children, and were more involved in their children's school in 1st grade. Parental involvement in 3rd grade had a significant direct effect on achievement in 3rd grade (Englund et al.).

Parent connections with the school can also have a direct impact on children's positive and negative behaviors, including discipline referrals and attendance. Parent academic involvement may improve school performance by reducing behavioral problems that interfere with learning. Through involvement, parents establish relationships with teachers, school

administrators, and other parents, and learn important information about school policies and behavioral expectations (Epstein & Sanders, as cited in Hill et al., 2004). Hill et al. discovered that for families with higher parental educational levels, 7th grade parent academic involvement was not directly related to achievement or aspirations. However, it was associated with fewer school behavior problems at 8th grade. Decreasing the number of behavior problems allows students to increase their opportunities for learning within the classroom. This also facilitates children's social functioning and ability to form meaningful and healthy relationships with others in the school.

Parent connections with the school are also associated with motivation, social competence, strong peer and adult role models, as well as enhancing students' sense of school community (Jordan et al., 2000; Vieno, Perkins, Smith, & Santinello, 2005). Vieno et al. discovered that greater parental monitoring of adolescents' after-school or leisure time activities and simultaneous lower levels of excessive parental control predicted the school's sense of community at the individual, class, and school-wide levels. Thus, parenting styles was a significant predictor of a sense of community within the students' school. Parents who monitor students' after-school activities while refraining from exerting excessive control over their child's behaviors tend to cultivate a more positive and stronger sense of school community within their child. In addition, emphasis on supportive, respectful relationships between students, parents, and teachers considerably augment students' sense of belonging (Vieno et al.).

Factors Affecting Parental Involvement

Because parental involvement is linked to many positive outcomes, schools are increasing their efforts to involve parents in children's education (Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 1997). Researchers have pinpointed several key factors that influence the level and intensity of

parental involvement in the schools. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, while examining what motivates parents to become involved in their children's education, examined four variables that they believed would motivate parental involvement: (a) what parents believe they should do to help their child succeed in school; (b) what parents believe about the likely effectiveness of their involvement; (c) what parents perceive about the school's invitations to parental involvement; and (d) what parents perceive about the child's invitations to involvement. Researchers found that all four parent variables were positively related to parent decisions about being involved. More specifically, the stronger parents' beliefs that they should be involved in their children's education, the more they chose to be involved. The stronger the parents' beliefs that their involvement would be effective, including making a difference in educational outcomes, the more parents became involved. Parents who believed that parents and schools together are responsible for students' educational outcomes reported the greatest involvement levels (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler).

Other factors that may influence the relationship between parents and the school include family income, parents' education level, ethnic background, marital status, and parent employment (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 1997). Hood (2004) found that white parents appeared to have more positive perceptions of their total involvement than black parents. In addition, parents without a high school education had less positive perceptions of their total involvement than those parents in higher educational levels. Parents who graduated from four-year colleges or universities had the most positive perceptions of their total involvement in the schools.

The social and psychological resources available to parents, including social networks and general coping skills, are also important within parental involvement and parent-school

relationships. Parent perceptions of their child, including their confidence in their child's academic abilities, and the child's receptivity to parental assistance, may too influence the level of involvement of parents within the schools. Thus, parental involvement is directly impacted by a multitude of within-person characteristics, as well as those broader factors related to the family or community (Jordan et al., 2002). Perhaps one of the most important factors that may have an impact on the relationship between parents and the school is the perception of a sense of mutual responsibility between parents and teachers for student educational outcomes. Researchers found that strong teacher efficacy beliefs or beliefs about how effective they are in teaching were related to parent reports of a positive school climate for involvement and a partnership with the school. Thus, parental perceptions of personal involvement within the school, as well as perceptions of overall school climate, are directly related to how comfortable parents feel in becoming involved with teachers and administrators. Negative perceptions of the overall school climate increased when parents did not feel that they were valued as an equal partner in the educational process (Jordan et al.).

School Climate and Parents

As evidenced, parent involvement has been linked to academic achievement and school climate variables. Haynes, Comer and Hamilton-Lee (1989) found that the climate of schools is considerably enhanced when parents are included in the planning and organization of school activities and contribute to important decisions about significant school events. Including parents allows them to become stakeholders in an environment that has such a powerful impact upon the lives of their children. Griffith (2000) supported these findings by measuring parent and student perceptions and discovering that consensus between parents and their children regarding school climate was associated with positive student and parent outcomes, such as

greater student and parent satisfaction with the school, better academic performance, and greater parental involvement. Because of the impact that parents have within the school and their status as a valid and informative source of information, it is extremely important to reach out to parents to learn more about school climate. Griffith found that parent and student perceptions of school climate often match up and successfully predict outcomes. Parents often lend valuable and useful information about their children's school, which can then be used to improve learning environments, physical variables, and interpersonal characteristics. Thus, it is necessary to clearly discern the important factors of school climate, whether they may be ecological or cultural variables, according to parental perceptions. How do parents perceive their son or daughter's school?

Purpose of Study

Research shows that parent involvement in the schools as well as parent perceptions of school climate is extremely important. However, there is little evidence regarding what specific school climate variables are most important to parents. Further, current research has also provided few answers regarding the impact of parental perceptions of school climate and resultant academic success at the middle school level. A vast majority of this reviewed research within school climate was conducted at the high school level in order to obtain self-report measures of school climate from the students themselves. This emphasis placed on the upper grades has left a large gap in research in regards to the lower grades, particularly between the 6th and 8th grades. The middle school years are extremely important and critical to future positive outcomes, and can promote academic success and a successful transition to high school, particularly when there is a high level of parental involvement in the schools (Johnson et al., 2000). Thus, there exists a general gap in the literature regarding what specific school climate

variables, according to parental perceptions, are most influential in increasing academic success and decreasing negative outcomes at the middle school level.

Because of the limited research into what climate factors are most important to parents of middle school students, and which factors promote the highest level of success, this study attempted to identify these variables. This research project focused exclusively on parents of middle school students between the 6th and 8th grades in order to learn more about this age group. Further, the effects that specific school climate variables have on student outcomes were explored. More specifically, this study addressed the following question: what factors of school climate, based on parental perceptions, influence students' academic achievement, discipline and attendance?

CHAPTER THREE

Method

Research Question/Hypotheses

The objectives of study were explored through the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between parents' perceptions of school climate and their children's academic achievement, disciplinary referrals, and attendance?
2. What specific aspects of school climate relate to students' outcomes based on parent perceptions?

It is hypothesized that selected school climate factors based on parental perceptions will be significantly related to the student achievement. The selected school climate factors include parent involvement within the school and student-teacher relationships. It is also hypothesized that parental perceptions of school climate that are positive in nature will be related to higher student performance.

Participants

The sample included approximately 300 parents of students enrolled in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades within a western New York school district. Of the 300 sampled, 43 parents participated in the current study. A participation rate of approximately 14% was achieved. Thirty-nine females and 2 males completed the parent surveys, while the genders on two surveys were left unreported. All participants reported Caucasian as their race.

Instruments

School Climate

School climate, the independent variable, was measured using the Parent Version of the Yale Child Study School Development Program, School Climate Survey (Emmons, Haynes, &

Comer, 2002). This survey measures parental beliefs or opinions about eight variables of school climate. The school climate measure uses 41-items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” The eight school climate scales measured on the School Climate Survey are the following: Academic Focus, or the emphasis that teachers place on student learning and achievement, Achievement Motivation, Principal Caring and Sensitivity, as well as Collaborative Decision-Making, which is defined as the involvement of parents, staff and students in the decisions affecting the school. Other school climate scales measured include Parent Involvement, School Building factors, or the appearance of the school building, as well as School-Community Relations. The eighth variable is Student-Teacher Relations, or the level of caring, respect and trust that exists between students and teachers in the school. Internal consistency estimates are strongest for the Student-Teacher Relations factor (0.93), Principal Caring and Sensitivity (0.92), School Building (0.82), and School-Community Relations (0.82). The School Climate survey was also utilized to obtain demographic information about the parents, including gender, ethnicity, number of children, and level of parental education.

School Performance

Dependent variables included academic achievement, disciplinary referrals, and attendance of the student of each parent participant. Academic achievement, grades, and discipline referrals were measured by a questionnaire utilizing a Likert scale. The first item sought to measure the child’s average grade on the last report card using a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from average grades above 90 (4) to grades below 70 (1). The second item on the questionnaire measured the number of disciplinary referrals accrued since the beginning of the school year, and ranged from zero referrals (1) to more than 5 referrals (4). The third item

sought to determine the child's attendance using a 5-point Likert scale, and ranged from zero missed days of school (1) to more than 8 missed days (5).

Procedure

This study was embedded in a larger study that explored both student and parent perceptions of school climate. First, approval for the research project was obtained through Rochester Institute of Technology's Institutional Review Board. The principal investigators then received permission from the school district involved in the study to visit the middle school to create and deliver a message on the morning announcements regarding the current research study. This announcement introduced the study and encouraged students to speak to their parents about participating in the study. A combined consent form was then mailed home to each parent of every 6th, 7th, and 8th grader describing the study, as well as discussing a related school climate study, measuring student's perceptions of school climate. The consent form sought permission for both parents and their children to agree to participate in a study about their perceptions of the climate of a western New York school. Parents and their children who agreed to participate in this study mailed the signed consent form to the principal investigator. Only those parents whose children also agreed to participate were included within the study. Parents, who agreed to participate, were mailed a Yale Child Study School Development Program School Climate Survey and attached questionnaire regarding their child's academic achievement, attendance and discipline referrals. Included in the packet mailed home to parents was a return envelope so that parents could return both the survey and attached questionnaire with ease. Once all of the surveys and questionnaires from both students and parents were returned, the principal investigators assigned a code to each of the linked parent and child surveys and student performance questionnaires. Each linked parent and student school climate survey and

performance questionnaire received a different code consisting of a randomized number and grade of the student. Once codes were assigned to each school climate survey and performance questionnaire, all identifying information was destroyed.

Data Analyses

Data analyses included descriptive statistics measuring the means and standard deviations of school climate scales and student performance measures. In addition, Pearson product-moment correlations were utilized to test for relationships between school climate scales and student performance. A one-way analysis of variance was utilized to examine the relationship between student performance and parental education level. Multiple regression analyses using school performance measures as the dependent variables and school climate scales as the independent variables were also conducted.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Descriptive statistics for the eight examined school climate variables are found in Table 1. There tended to be minimal variation among all the school climate variables. Rank order of the means for the school climate variables resulted in Student-Teacher Relations as first and Academic Focus as last. As can be seen in Table 1, means ranged from 3.10 (Academic Focus) to 3.96 (Student-Teacher Relations), which fall in the “Not Sure” to “Agree” scale range.

To test the hypotheses, several statistical procedures were performed on the data. First, Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated among each of the eight school climate variables and student performance measures. Several significant correlations ($p < .05$) between school climate scales and student performance variables were observed for Student-Teacher Relations and grades ($r = .33, p < .05$) and Principal Caring and grades ($r = .44, p < .05$). These are shown in Table 2.

In order to obtain more information regarding the effect of parental characteristics and their effects on school climate variables and student performance, parental education level was examined. Descriptive statistics of student performance level by parental education level are shown in Table 3. Mean grades for those students of parents who graduated from college and graduate school ($M = 3.59, S.D. = 0.71$ and $M = 3.43, S.D. = 0.80$, respectively) differed significantly from mean grades of the other parental education levels (High School Graduate, Vocational/Technical Training, Some College). Mean attendance ranged from 1.67 (Vocational/Technical Training) to 2.75 (Some College). With regards to discipline referrals, means ranged from 1.25 (High School Graduate) to 2.75 (Some College). In order to further clarify the relationship between the different levels of parental education level and the three

student performance measures, a one-way ANOVA examining grades, discipline, and attendance across the levels of parental education was completed. The examiner hypothesized that parents with higher education levels would have children achieving higher grades in school. As expected, the ANOVA was significant for grades ($F_{4, 37} = 2.98, p < .05$). Thus, there is a general trend between higher levels of parental education leading to higher grades within their middle-school offspring.

In terms of the relationship between school climate variables and parental education levels, parents who attended graduate school gave more favorable ratings to the variables Principal Caring and School-Building than any other parental education level. Descriptive statistics of school climate scales by parent education level are shown in Table 4. Although, the F-tests were non-significant for Principal Caring ($F_{4, 36} = 2.295, p > .05$) and School Building ($F_{4, 37} = 2.149, p > .05$), the results of the descriptive statistics suggest that parents with the highest education level tended to rate the principal as caring and the school grounds as well-maintained. In general, this may suggest that parents who attended college and beyond tend to give more favorable ratings to school climate variables than those who did not

In order to learn more about the relationship between school climate variables and student performance, three separate multiple regression analyses were conducted, in order to predict grades, discipline referrals, and attendance from the climate variables. The entire set of the eight school climate variables were entered simultaneously as a block. The resulting multiple regression analysis was non-significant for grades ($F_{8, 33} = 1.96, p > .05$) and attendance ($F_{8, 33} = 1.00, p > .05$). However, a set of school climate factors to predict discipline did show significance ($F_{8, 33} = 2.375, p < .05$). The resulting multiple regression value ($R = .61$) was significant ($F_{8, 33} = 2.375, p < .05$) and accounted for 36 % of the variance. Table 5 displays the

beta weights and t-values for the school climate scales. Those school climate factors that accounted for 36% of the variance were Academic Focus ($t = 2.304, p < .05$), Achievement Motivation ($t = -2.084, p < .05$), Principal Caring ($t = -2.129, p < .05$), and School-Community Relations ($t = -2.131, p < .05$).

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

Much of the previous research within school climate has tended to focus on the student as a means of reporting on school climate variables. However, this particular study examined parental perceptions of school climate, and more specifically, what factors are most important to parents and have the strongest relationships with student performance at the middle school level. The current study revealed several school climate variables that were positively associated with student achievement. These variables include Student-Teacher Relations and Principal Caring, signifying that the children of parents who rated their child's school as fostering positive and meaningful relationships between students and teachers had significantly higher grades than those students of parents who did not find strong student-teacher relationships within the school. Additionally, parents who saw their child's principal as respectful of teachers, staff, and students, as well as watchful of student needs tended to have children who were academically successful.

These findings support past research within the positive effects of specific school climate variables on student performance. Hoy and Hannum (1997) discovered that strong collegial leadership, academic emphasis, and high teacher affiliation were positively associated with student achievement. Essentially, principals who were friendly, caring, and promoted a structured academic environment, combined with teachers enthusiastic about their workplace, led to higher levels of student achievement in reading, math and writing (Hoy & Hannum). The results from the current research tended to mirror these findings, and may suggest that principals who take into account the opinions and values of their staff and students are able to more readily promote academic achievement in the school. Teachers may feel they have more resources and are more supported in their teaching endeavors. Though principals are not directly involved in

the day-to-day teaching of the students, their relationships, behaviors, and promotion of high standards of teaching can have a direct impact on student learning. Researchers Pepper and Thomas (2002) noted that a principal who avoided authoritarian leadership and instead embraced a collaborative style allowed for a more positive school climate to flourish. This led to greater success and motivation for students and staff.

The current research also demonstrated a relationship between school climate variables and other measures of student performance, namely discipline referrals. Use of the multiple regression analysis provided a clearer picture of the relationship between school climate and performance. Achievement Motivation, Principal Caring and School-Community Relations all tend to lead to lower numbers of disciplinary referrals in middle school students. These findings support previous research into the relationship between internalizing/externalizing behaviors and school climate. Boys in particular, who are most likely to report and to be seen by teachers as having externalizing problems, tend to be disciplined at school for these issues. In addition, boys with negative school climate perceptions are more likely to be subject to discipline (Kuperminc et al., 1997).

On the other hand, the use of the multiple regression analysis revealed that Academic Focus positively predicted the number of discipline referrals. That is, an increase in the emphasis teachers place on learning and achievement tends to result in a greater number of disciplinary referrals. This finding contradicts much of the previous research in this area. Researchers have found that disciplined behavior, motivation, and verbal and nonverbal learning have substantial and consistent relationships with student grades and test scores (McDermott, Mordell, & Stoltfuz, 2001). It might be thought that classroom competency and performance requires self-regulation and control. However, many schools that have a strong focus on

academics may indeed possess higher discipline referrals because these schools tend to have a stricter, more structured environment that does not tolerate minimal disruptions in the form of behavioral outbursts. These schools, including the one examined in this study, have a strong and structured academic environment and support the view that behavioral challenges detract from the academic focus. Thus, an increase in detentions or suspensions to curb the behavior issues may result, allowing classrooms to maintain their academic intensity.

Particularly important results that surfaced from this study involved the relationship between parental education level and student performance. Specifically, parents with higher levels of education, including college and graduate school, tended to have children who achieved higher grades in school as compared to peers whose parents did not attend higher education. Previous research has established the importance of parental involvement as an important predictor of successful outcomes for children. Specific parental factors, such as education levels, have a direct impact on academic achievement. Hill et al. (2004) discovered that among families with higher parental education levels parent academic involvement was positively related to achievement and subsequent career and educational aspirations. Parents with higher levels of education may be sending clear and consistent messages about the importance and long-term effects of achieving high grades in school. They also may be thought of as examples for their children, particularly if the parents are communicating with their children that success and comfort as an adult, as well as the ability to provide for a family, is a direct result of hard-work and diligence during the school years.

Additionally, parents who have higher education levels may provide a more structured home environment for the completion of homework and projects. These parents might also have more adequate resources, a potential result of socioeconomic status, to assist their children at

home with school work. Moreover, highly educated parents may become more directly involved in activities and policy-making within the school. A great deal of previous research has examined this link between socioeconomic status, parent involvement and resultant school outcomes. Hood (2004) discovered that parents without a high school degree had less positive perceptions of their total involvement in the education process than those parents within other education levels. Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, and Weiss (2006), focusing on literacy within low-income families, found that increased school involvement predicted improved child literacy. In addition, researchers found that if family involvement was high, no achievement gap existed in literacy performance between more and less educated mothers. If family involvement was low, however, there was a gap between students with highly educated mothers versus those with lower educations. Thus, parental involvement in schools could actually have a mediating effect on student performance when there is varying levels of parental education.

The results of the present study demonstrate the importance of several key variables in promoting student performance across the middle school level. First, strong student-teacher relationships, as well as high levels of principal caring promote academic achievement. Overall, academic achievement is related to healthy interpersonal dynamics within the school between the staff and students. Students are confident in their abilities to learn from their teachers, and teachers are assured of the ability of students to succeed. Thus, school administrators who place an emphasis on building and maintaining relationships between staff and students, and who select a caring and concerned principal, are more likely to create an open, friendly, and motivating academic environment for students to succeed and grow.

Not only does an emphasis on healthy interpersonal relationships affect academic achievement, but disciplinary referrals, as well. The combination of compassionate principals

and evidence of strong ties between the school and community lead to lower disciplinary referrals for middle school students. Principals who are viewed as more caring and friendly might exhibit a higher level of flexibility and may be more willing to meet with a student one-on-one to discuss potential behavioral issues before they become full-blown concerns. Students who see the principal as caring may have developed stronger and closer relationships with the principal, and thus, are less likely to participate in a negative act that may damage this relationship.

Also, stronger ties between the school and the community serve to decrease the level of discipline within a school. Reinders and Youniss (2006) found that when students were required to participate in community service and volunteer projects, an increase in pro-social behaviors resulted via an increase in positive self-awareness and reported likelihood of future volunteer work. Thus, students who are more involved in their communities tend to decrease negative acts through an increase in positive pro-social behaviors. Consequently, schools that create a climate promoting achievement and student goals, as well as healthy relationships between the school and community, decrease the level of behavioral issues that interfere with a school's overall success.

The implication of the relationship between parental education levels and student achievement is also extremely important to note. A multitude of previous research supports the findings within this particular study that higher levels of parental involvement in schools leads to increased student achievement (Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton – Lee, 1989; Jordan et al., 2002). Higher levels of parental education may lead to parents who naturally want to be more involved within their child's education and schooling due to their own previous successes within the educational process. Parents who have higher education levels are more capable of assisting

their child with schoolwork, more willing to become involved in school projects and initiatives and are more able to provide an academically motivating and supportive home environment. As a result, parents who have higher educational levels could be viewed as being more committed to their child's education, encouraging their children to adopt future goals of attending college. Parents who lack a college or graduate school education may be negatively impacted by socioeconomic challenges, and may have fewer resources to provide a stimulating academic home environment. These parents, too, may place less of an emphasis on the importance of an education, leading to a decrease in achievement motivation and focus within their children.

There are several limitations within the current study. First, the study included a relatively small number of participants. Second, the sample tended to be homogenous, drawn from a relatively non-diverse population in a rural area in western New York. Thus, the lack of a clear relationship between parental education levels and attendance may not be upheld in future testing with a more heterogeneous group, including a more diverse socioeconomic sample. Because so little is known about parental education level and its effect on school climate, one does not know if the results could be replicated. In order to gather more information regarding this important relationship further research should focus on drawing from a larger and more diverse pool of participants.

Hence, further exploration of the relationship between parent variables, such as parental education levels, and school climate and school performance factors, is an important consideration for future research. The current study raises numerous questions regarding personal characteristics of parents, including level of education, income, and specific careers, and how these individual qualities could have a positive or negative effect on specific school climate variables and student performance. Additionally, it might be useful to investigate the

connections between parents and the school, including the ways in which parents tend to connect to schools, and what specific factors affect parental involvement. Finally, longitudinal research exploring the combined effects of student and parent perceptions of school climate and parental characteristics on student performance in high school and admittance to college would be useful. This research could ascertain how the agreement or lack thereof of student and parent perceptions of school climate, as well as personal factors, positively or negatively affects achievement of long-term goals.

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Table 1

Rank Order of Means for Parental School Climate Factors

Rank	School Climate Factor	M.	S.D.
1 st	Student-Teacher Relations	3.96	0.58
2 nd	School-Community Relations	3.93	0.55
3 rd	School Building	3.91	0.75
4 th	Parent Involvement	3.58	0.43
5 th	Collaborative Decision-Making	3.23	0.58
6 th	Principal Caring	3.72	0.62
7 th	Achievement Motivation	3.83	0.84
8 th	Academic Focus	3.10	0.83

Scale values as follows: (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Not Sure, (4) Agree, (5)

Strongly Agree

Table 2

Pearson Intercorrelations of School Climate Factors and Student Performance

	SC 1	SC 2	SC 3	SC 4	SC 5	SC 6	SC 7	SC 8	Grades	Attend.	Discip.
SC 1											
SC 2	.23										
SC 3	.60**	-.24									
SC 4	.19	.30	.05								
SC 5	.47**	.05	.54**	.13							
SC 6	.77**	.05	.69**	.20	.67**						
SC 7	.69**	-.20	.88**	-.01	.52**	.75**					
SC 8	.64**	.04	.68**	.07	.41**	.59**	.68**				
Grades	.33**	-.18	.30	.17	.28	.44**	.28	.09			
Attend.	-.20	-.16	.07	.09	-.01	-.21	.01	-.01	-.04		
Discip.	.07	-.17	.12	-.09	.20	-.09	.04	.24	-.25	.22	

SC 1 = Student-Teacher Relations; SC 2 = School-Community Relations; SC 3 = School Building; SC 4 = Parent Involvement; SC 5 = Collaborative Decision-Making; SC 6 = Principal Caring; SC 7 = Achievement Motivation; SC 8 = Academic Focus

Note. * = $p < 0.05$; ** = $p < 0.01$

Table 3

Student Performance as shown by Level of Parental Education

	Parent Education Level											
	H.S. Grad (n=4)		V/T Training (n=3)		Some College (n=8)		College Grad. (n=17)		Grad. School (n=10)			
	M.	S.D.	M.	S.D.	M.	S.D.	M.	S.D.	M.	S.D.	M.	S.D.
School Performance												
Grades	2.50	0.58	2.67	1.15	3.50	0.76	3.59 ¹	0.71	3.43 ¹	0.80		
Attendance	2.50	1.29	1.67	0.58	2.75	1.16	2.17	1.24	1.80	0.63		
Discipline	1.25	0.50	1.33	0.58	2.75	1.16	2.18	1.24	1.80	0.63		

Grade scale as follows: (4) = grades above 90, (3) = 80-90, (2) = 70-80, (1) = < 70; Disciplinary referral scale as follows: (1) = zero discipline referrals, (2) = 1-2 referrals, (3) = 3-4 referrals, (4) = > 5 referrals; Attendance scale as follows: (1) = zero days missed, (2) = 1-3 days missed, (3) = 3-5 days missed, (4) = 5-7 days missed, (5) = > 8 days missed.

¹ Means with the same superscript differ significantly from others.

Table 4

School Climate Factors as shown by Level of Parental Education

School Climate Factor	Parent Education Level											
	H.S. Grad (n=4)		V/T Training (n=3)		Some College (n=8)		College Grad. (n=17)		Grad. School (n=10)			
	M.	S.D.	M.	S.D.	M.	S.D.	M.	S.D.	M.	S.D.	M.	S.D.
SC 1	3.50	0.44	4.10	0.81	3.94	0.57	3.98	0.56	4.14	0.57		
SC 2	3.80	0.52	4.07	0.81	3.93	0.65	4.07	0.63	3.72	0.36		
SC 3	3.40	0.71	3.67	0.31	3.78	0.60	3.84	0.72	4.46	0.85		
SC 4	3.25	0.20	3.25	0.25	3.60	0.27	3.68	0.51	3.60	0.43		
SC 5	3.13	0.92	3.33	0.52	2.88	0.40	3.22	0.60	3.55	0.47		
SC 6	3.38	0.44	3.19	0.54	3.50	0.56	3.77	0.60	4.11	0.63		
SC 7	3.80	0.91	3.60	0.87	3.48	0.70	3.89	0.75	4.20	1.03		
SC 8	2.63	0.32	2.83	0.58	3.09	0.65	3.22	0.92	3.20	1.03		

SC 1 = Student-Teacher Relations; SC 2 = School-Community Relations; SC 3 = School Building; SC 4 = Parent Involvement; SC 5 = Collaborative Decision-Making; SC 6 = Principal Caring; SC 7 = Achievement Motivation; SC 8 = Academic Focus

Table 5
Beta Weights and T-Values for Multiple Regression Analysis of School Climate Factors Predicting Discipline Referrals

	Beta	t-value	Significance
Academic Focus	.489	2.304	.028*
Achievement Motivation	-.761	-2.084	.045*
Principal Caring	-.599	-2.129	.041*
Collaborative Decision-Making	.335	1.720	.095
Parent Involvement	-.015	-.100	.921
School Building	.298	.924	.362
School – Community Relations	-.377	-2.131	.041*
Student – Teacher Relations	.495	1.891	.067

Note. * = $p < 0.05$

SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEY

Revised Edition
(Parent Version)

This survey is designed to get the opinions of parents concerning the general climate of your child's school. Your input is very important in helping to better understand the issues related to the school climate. Your responses are strictly confidential and you will not be identified in any way. Thank you for taking the time to respond.

DIRECTIONS



- Make your marks dark.
- Erase changes completely
- Correct Marks: ● ●
- Incorrect: ✗ ⊙ ✓ ⊖

PARENT I.D.#

0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7
8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9

SCHOOL I.D.#

0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7
8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9

For the next five questions, please fill in the oval next to the appropriate answer.

1. **Gender**

1 Female

2 Male

2. **Ethnic Background**

1 Black/African-American 2 Latino/Hispanic

3 White/European-American 4 Native American

5 Asian/Pacific Islander 6 Other _____

3. **How many of your children attend this school?**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

4. **What grades are they in at this school?**

K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

5. **What level of education did you complete?**

1 Finished elementary school

2 Some high school

3 Graduated from high school

4 Vocational/Technical Training

5 Some college

6 Graduated from college

7 Graduate School

We want to know how you feel about your child's school. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement by filling in one of the five responses.

SCALE: SA = Strongly Agree A = Agree NS = Not Sure D = Disagree SD = Strongly Disagree

	SA	A	NS	D	SD
1. My child believes that he/she can do well in school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. There are often broken windows or doors in my child's school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. My child trusts the teachers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. The teachers make sure that my child can do his/her work well	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. My child feels that he/she can learn at this school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. The principal of my child's school respects the teachers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. My child is willing to learn at school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. Community members work with staff at my child's school to help improve the school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. We parents believe that the principal will do the best for our children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. Most staff at my child's school are aware of our concerns in the community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. At my child's school, the principal cares about the needs of parents	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. At my child's school, there is little chance for teachers to share their views on school matters	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13. There is good community involvement in my child's school ...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
14. I often visit my child's school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
15. At my child's school, the principal cares about the needs of the children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
16. I usually attend Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings at my child's school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
17. At this school, teachers help my child feel good about himself/herself	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
18. Most students at my child's school enjoy reading	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
19. I do not often attend school activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
20. Teachers at my child's school are respected by the principal ...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

SCALE: SA = Strongly Agree A = Agree NS = Not Sure D = Disagree SD = Strongly Disagree

	SA	A	NS	D	SD
21. My child is respected by the teachers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
22. At my child's school, the principal respects the non-teaching staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
23. My child's school has a high standard of work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
24. At my child's school, all staff members help to make decisions about school matters	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
25. I often help with special school projects (for example: bus trips, fund-raising)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
26. My child's school is kept in good physical condition	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
27. At my child's school, the principal shows consideration for teachers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
28. At my child's school, teachers make sure that the children can write well	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
29. My child does not care about learning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
30. My child's school reaches out to the community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
31. My child's school has a bright and pleasant appearance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
32. The relationship between my child's school and the community is good	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
33. The walls of my child's school are usually in good condition ...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
34. Teachers at my child's school help my child with school problems	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
35. This school is helping my child to develop into a well-adjusted person	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
36. At my child's school, teachers help to make decisions about the school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
37. At my child's school, teachers make sure that the children can read well	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
38. My child's school is usually clean and tidy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
39. At my child's school, the principal alone usually makes decisions concerning the school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

SCALE: SA = Strongly Agree A = Agree NS = Not Sure D = Disagree SD = Strongly Disagree

- | | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 40. At this school, teachers pay attention to my child's feelings ... | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 41. My child likes to go to school | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

COMMENTS:

We appreciate your taking the time to fill out this questionnaire. Thank you.

T 128887

Questionnaire

On the last report card your child's average grade fell between:

>90

80-90

70-80

<70

Since the beginning of the school year the number of disciplinary referrals your child has received is:

0

1-2

3-4

>5

Since the beginning of the school year how many days of school has your child missed?

0

1-3

3-5

5-7

>8

Additional Comments:

June 5, 2006

Hello Parents,

Thank you very much for your interest in participating in the school climate survey for Phelps-Clifton Springs Middle School. Enclosed you will find both the parent version of the survey as well as the student version. As mentioned in the previous letter, the researchers were originally going to enter into the Middle School and administer the surveys to each participating student. However, as we are nearing the end of the school year, it now seems easier for the students to complete these surveys at home.

The parent version of the school climate survey is the **green** form enclosed within, while the student version of this survey is **purple**. Parents, you will also find a separate, brief questionnaire attached to the end of your survey. When both the student and parent surveys are complete, please mail the surveys back to the researchers in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelopes.

Thank you again for your assistance. Your participation will ensure that we can learn more about what it is like to send your children to school at the middle school, as well as learning more about your children's day-to-day experiences as a member of this school. If you would like any further information, please give the researchers a call. You can contact Christine at (585) 259-3448, Jodi at (585) 737-8491 or Dr. Scott Merydith, Chair of School Psychology Department at (585) 475-7980.