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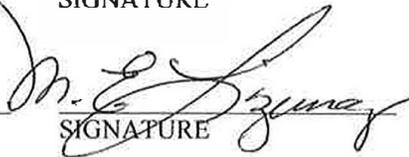
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Running head: PRINCIPALS AND THEIR IMPACT ON SCHOOL CLIMATE

Principals and their Impact on School Climate

by  
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## **Abstract**

School principals hold the responsibility of ensuring the climate throughout the school. Leaders from Title I schools have shown improvements in their schools by effectively implementing specific strategies within their schools. Responses from three school principals who received the Title I Academic Achievement Award in the 2013-14 school year, were taken and compared to view the similarities of the best practices they integrated at their school sites. Analyses looked at the experience the leaders had, building trust and cohesion among the staff, best practices, identifying teacher leaders, and embracing change in schools. Findings suggest that collaboration and communication are the main factors that drive the improvement of school climate. Further studies include receiving information from teacher leaders and students.

*Keywords:* school principals, climate, student achievement, collaboration, leadership  
best practices

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**List of Abbreviations**

API	Academic Performance Index
AYP	Adequate Yearly Progress
ELA	English Language Arts
GLAD	Guided Language Acquisition Design
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
PD	Professional Development
PLCs	Professional learning communities
RTI	Response to Intervention
SED	Socioeconomically disadvantaged
SES	Socioeconomic status

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

School leaders today have a crucial role in education. The expectations for improving test results and staying current with laws and regulations creates many challenges, especially with regards to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Principals are responsible for the climate of their schools and for ensuring that the needs for education are being met. Many strategies can be used to help develop a positive school climate, and school principals are central to the actions that directly shape the school climate (Price, 2012). As leaders are usually more experienced, they develop a greater understanding and can implement the most appropriate strategies to achieve results. Several factors contribute to a positive school climate, as established by the school principal. Research has shown that principals who are especially influential over a school's organizational climate are able to create an environment built on trust, cooperation, and collaboration (Price, 2012).

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have an impact on school climate, while gathering teachers and staff together to discuss, collaborate, and assess the efficiency of their practices. If schools that implement PLCs lead to increased student learning, we need to learn how they emerge and develop (Huffman, Hipp, Pankake, & Moller, 2001). The success of a school centers on the actions and influences of strong instructional leaders who are communicators, resource providers, visible, and act as instructional resources. Effective principals nurture, empower, and provide opportunities for teachers to assume their shared leadership roles.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to identify the strategies and best practices for gaining the California Title I Academic Achievement Award, which are used by school principals to influence school climate and enhance the quality of education for students. This research will help build on leadership approaches and finest practices for principals who intend to influence the school climate and instruction.

**Preview of the Literature**

Identifying the qualities that principals bring to the team, can help others understand how they will achieve the desired standard for positively affecting school climate and enhancing education for all students. The role of the school principal is to enhance the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, create a common climate of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, hold together the various pieces of the organization in a productive inter-relationship, and hold individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result (Fullan, 2001). “Principals arguably are the most important players affecting the character and consequence of teachers’ school-site professional communities. Principals are culture-makers” (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 47).

**Preview of the Methodology**

This study is qualitative as it includes collected data from participant interviews. Decades of research have determined that principal leadership can have a significant, if indirect, effect on student learning (Klar & Brewer, 2013). The interviews focused on the perceptions of principals and other stakeholders on their schools, and their strengths, challenges, current levels of instructional capacity, strategies used to enhance student

achievement, and the contribution of the principals to those strategies (Klar & Brewer, 2013).

This study digs deeper into the lived experiences of school principals to hear their own stories, and discuss their leadership skills that have contributed to the success of their school.

The main participants in this study are school principals from Title I schools in California.

All of the participating principals work in a variety of environments from urban to rural settings and have different educational backgrounds and experience. The principals are instructional leaders in their schools, which have large populations of low achieving students in California's highest poverty schools. To receive the Academic Achievement Award in the 2013-14 school year, the schools had to meet the following criteria:

- Receive Title 1 funds in both 2011-12 and 2012-13
- At least 40% of the students were classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED) in 2011-12 and 2012-13
- Made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in either 2012 or 2013
- Not identified in Program Improvement year 3 and beyond 2012-13
- Not identified in Program Improvement year 3 and beyond 2013-14

The school must also meet the following school-wide Academic Performance Index (API) criteria:

- Elementary school above 812
- Middle school above 798
- High school above 761

Schools must meet their school-wide API target and the API targets for all numerically significant subgroups in both 2011-12 and 2012-13. Schools with a school-wide

Growth API greater than or equal to 800 could not have a declining API score. Schools with a school-wide Growth API less than 800 must have doubled their school-wide target.

In addition to the school-wide API criteria, schools must also meet the following API criteria for their numerically significant SED subgroup in both 2011-12 and 2012-13:

Schools with an SED Growth API greater than or equal to 800 could not have a declining SED score. Schools with an SED Growth API less than 800 must have doubled their SED target, cannot have any reported testing irregularities in 2011-13, and cannot have any API flags in 2011-12 or 2012-13. Based on this criteria, there were 109 schools that received the award in the state of California. The three school principals were chosen based on the area in which the researcher lived.

### **Research Question**

The research question for this study is:

- How do strong leadership qualities and strategies affect school climate for student achievement?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is important in education because it will identify leadership strategies that influence the school climate for improving student achievement. This study also contributes to a greater understanding of the role of school principals as leaders.

### **Summary of Chapter 1**

Today's principals need to be both instructional and learning leaders, and focus on the achievements of all students. This chapter introduced the study, described its purpose, previewed the literature and methodology, and indicated its importance. Chapter 2 presents a

literature review of leadership qualities and strategies used in schools to bolster student achievement.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

### Need for School Leadership Strategies

As the 21st century continues to unfold, strong leadership in schools is needed now more than ever. Principals need to be effective leaders, using their best practices in areas like building trust/relationships, implementing change, collaboration, reflection, and shared leadership within the school community. As Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss (2010) noted, the notion that it is not the practices themselves but the manner in which leaders apply these practices in concert with their unique environment determines the degree to which they influence student learning. Working collaboratively with a purpose has been shown to be a great method for developing trust and cohesion among teachers and to improve student success (Price, 2012). Principals are responsible for the climate of the school and for ensuring that all the needs are met. Strong leadership strategies are intended to shape school processes that mediate the effects of leadership on student achievement.

Leaders often rise to the occasion and soon after return to the role of a follower, just as a teacher would help parents enter the auditorium in an organized manner, and then return to his/her place in the assembly. “No single leadership behavior can be used habitually and universally without reference to the human context” (Bell & Smith, 2010). In other words, a leader observes a situation and pays attention to the basic themes while adapting his or her own actions accordingly. In general, people have ideas of how things should be and what can be done, but the leader’s plan on getting there, and his or her influence of the school culture, determines whether or not the vision gets carried out. Numerous authors (Bond, 2011; Sahin, 2011; Zimmerman, 2011) indicate that leaders tend to have a common feature that allows them to be successful – being reflective in their practice. In addition to being reflective,

successful school leaders tend to share ideas and strategies that were effective or not effective.

Many decades of research have determined that principal leadership can have a significant effect on student learning (Klar & Brewer, 2013). For example, Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) and Leithwood and Riehl (2005) expanded on earlier research to develop four core categories of practice for successful school leadership: 1) setting direction, 2) developing people, 3) redesigning the organization, and 4) managing the instructional program. These categories reflect significant bodies of research on both transformational and instructional leadership, and the core values are being implemented in similar ways by school principals today to improve student achievement.

According to Whitaker (2013), great principals listen to their best teachers in the school to ensure that their decisions are in the best interest of student achievement. The teachers' acceptance is an important step towards implementing any change in the school. Great principals listen to the advice of teachers to keep the focus on developing superior students. "The most effective principals have the confidence to seek input in advance and the feedback after the fact" (Whitaker, 2013, p. 83) and they are aware of the ideas and opinions of their top teachers. Principals should recognize that the best teachers in their schools are valuable influences for keeping up grade levels, and supporting their team, their department, and the entire school while following the same protocols for success. To maintain a productive atmosphere at school, principals should listen to the opinions of teachers with regards to current trends in their school. If a teacher becomes uncomfortable about an issue, they would be expected to make changes, and the leaders should be aware of this. When a

teacher wants to make a change, it should be done in a positive way, without interfering with the vision and climate of the school.

Newman, King, and Youngs (2000) concluded that *school capacity* is the key to success in schools. The capacity has five components: 1) teachers' knowledge, 2) skills and dispositions, 3) professional community, 4) program coherence, 5) technical resources and principal leadership. The knowledge, skills, and dispositions of teachers as individuals is important and can make a difference for classrooms. Professional development and training is not sufficient when it happens individually or in small groups; thus, leading to the need for developing PLCs. Program coherence is defined as "the extent to which the school's programs for student and staff learning are coordinated, focused on clear learning goals and sustained over a period of time" (Newman, King, & Youngs, 2000, p. 5). Another aspect of school capacity are the technical resources. Instructional improvement requires additional resources in the form of materials, equipment, space, time, and access to new ideas and expertise. Successful schools are much better at addressing their resource needs. Quality leadership explains how the role of the principal is to ensure that the above listed strategies improve as time goes on. Moreover, the job of school principals is to enhance the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creating a common climate of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, holding together the various pieces of the organization in productive inter-relationships, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result (Fullan, 2001).

### **Reflection**

A strategy that could benefit principals of different levels of experience, is that of reflection. Reflective practice dates back to John Dewey, who proposed that individuals

should reflect upon their professional actions and consequences (Bond, 2011). When familiar routines present themselves, professionals draw on a barrel of knowledge and often act without conscious reflection. Some situations; however, have an element of surprise that require professionals to either reflect on their actions by pausing to consider the situation, or reflect in action, by reflecting at that moment. “Reflection-in-action is an immediate process that occurs in the context of action without after-the-fact analysis” (Bond, 2011, p. 10).

School principals are regularly confronted with situations that require an immediate response, often with the eyes of others on them. Reflection-in-action is a process that can be beneficial to all professionals inside and outside the educational field. The process occurs without the luxury of time for carefully weighing the underlying factors in a situation. Experienced principals are said to be better decision makers because many experiences tend to repeat themselves or the principals are able to reflect at the moment. Within reflections, school principals use strategies such as scanning non-verbal cues, acknowledging the comments of a disruptive person, engaging others, asking questions to further understand the issue, or use delays to table the issue for another time (Bond, 2011). By reflecting on the concepts of improvement, leaders can develop a professional learning plan that includes aspects related to attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. Principals, in their first year or tenth year, can benefit from using the reflection-in-action theory to make decisions in the moment, to benefit the school and its participants (Zimmerman, 2011; Bond, 2011; Sahin, 2011). According to Bond (2011), what principals reflect on during unanticipated events, how they choose to respond based on their reflections, and why they select certain actions over others, are crucial behaviors in effective decision making.

As Bond (2011) stated, when you reflect on who you are as a leader you can then think about how you should respond to difficult situations. Leaders develop values that they want the school to embrace such as dignity and humility. Protecting the dignity of staff members, especially individuals who speak out in anger, is an added technique or strategy used by principals. Humility is generally thought to be a modest view of one's importance and is another strategy that principals use.

### **Change**

Fullan (2001) and other scholars have concluded "that change cannot be managed. It can be understood and perhaps led, but it cannot be controlled" (p. 33). The best way to manage change is to allow it to happen. Five aspects help school principals to understand change when it occurs in their schools. The leader who takes on the greatest number of innovations is not the winner, and pacesetters must learn the difference between competing in a change marathon and developing the commitment to solve complex problems. The second component is that it is not sufficient to have the best ideas without having others buy into them. School leaders need to recognize the weaknesses and strengths in their approach with their ideas at hand. The third component is to appreciate the implementation dip, which is "literally a dip in performance and confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and new understandings" (Fullan, 2001, p. 40). Effective leaders have the right kinds of sensitivity to implementation. They know that change is a process, not an event, and they understand that when people are going through change they experience two kinds of problems: a social-psychological fear of change, and the lack of technical skills to make the change work. The fourth component is to redefine resistance, where the leader identifies his or her personality style and combines all the elements that might not fit together, to be

effective. Leaders should have good ideas and present them well, while at the same time, seek and listen to doubters. They must also build good relationships even with those who may not trust them. The fifth and final component is that a checklist is never used, only the idea of complexity. Clearly, a single recipe book does not exist on being a leader, and no step-by-step process can tell school principals how they should lead. According to Fullan (2001), it will be more productive to develop one's own mind-set through the five core components of leadership because one is more likely to internalize what makes for effective leadership in complex times. At the end of the day, leaders are expected to come up with solutions even though all parties might not concur. According to Fullan (2001), leaders in a culture of change require a quality that all long-term effective leaders have, the capacity to resist focusing on short-term gains at the expense of deeper reform, when the gains are steady but not necessarily dramatic. In other words, schools should not focus immediately on boosting the student test scores, but rather, gradually increasing the scores over five years.

“Principals lead their schools through learning, beginning with their own learning” (Zimmerman, 2011, p. 109). Principals need to recognize when their attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs are helping or hindering their own professional learning and effective change initiatives in their schools. Some principals have noticed that people can accept new procedures or policies if they have a positive attitude towards change (Rhodes, Camic, Milburn, & Lowe, 2009). School leaders must comprehend and appreciate the need for change in their schools as their interest in maintaining the status quo will take precedence over their willingness to accept or lead change. The acceptance of change can be affected by perceived threats to their expertise or proven abilities and by their belief that they lack knowledge or skills for successfully implementing the change. To accept the challenge of

change, one must be in a situation to develop the skills for embracing change. Once a plan is developed, principals can implement and make changes for themselves before expecting their faculty and staff to make the changes. “Learning will most likely occur through a combination of concrete experiences, reflections, and developing a theory regarding what was experienced” (Zimmerman, 2011 p. 112). Leaders who are effective change agents guide the school collaboratively to develop and articulate a shared vision, to learn collectively, to share personally and professionally, and to engage in meaningful long-range planning that provides support for teachers and students (Huffman & Jacobson, 2010). Research has shown that assertions for a substantive change initiative requires support from both administrators and teachers, rather than just the principal alone (Marzano, 2003).

### **Working Collaboratively**

Building a sense of community in school leads to a shared vision and positive changes in the school culture to better serve students (Boyer, 1995; Fullan, 1997). Collaborative leadership is vital as the successful learning communities develop the capacity to include all stakeholders (students, teachers, families, and community members). Shared vision and an emphasis on community are key components to PLCs, because they create learning organizations that enhance the collective capacity of people to create and pursue overall visions and enhance the importance of teamwork (Huffman & Jacobson, 2010).

Besides the PLC approach, another strategy for promoting community in schools came from the Director of School Development Program at Yale University, James Comer (1997). His program structured the school so that students were supported by teachers and the overall environment was child-friendly. The core processes of the learning communities, to help solidify the organizational climate in schools, included:

1. Capability refers to the capacity for dialogue in an organization
2. In healthy communities, mutual commitment provides clear opportunities for diverse contributions
3. Continuity is essential for the survival of a community, and community members must learn how to build bridges that link the past with the present
4. Collaboration supports interdependence by creating a web of multiple constituencies and stakeholders who work to achieve a shared vision
5. The democratic organization is guided by a positive conscience that embodies common principles, ethics, and values

Brown (1994) and her colleagues identified six core processes that are fundamental for creating and sustaining organizations (i.e., communities): capability, commitment, contribution, continuity, collaboration, and conscience. To build a strong organizational culture, the professional learning community model emphasizes incorporating these core processes into the curriculum and the administrative system of schools. While effective schools include professional learning community concepts in their institutional culture, the actions may not prove entirely successful over time. Instructional leaders are the vital piece for school improvement.

According to Huffman et al. (2001), the term “professional learning community” has been defined in various ways by researchers in the field of education. A variety of theories have been developed to describe what professional learning communities look like, with regards to the relevant frame of work. Astuto, Clark, Read, McGree, and Fernandez (1993) defined a PLC as the school’s professional staff members who continuously seek to find answers through inquiry and act on their learning to improve student learning. According to

Mitchell and Sackney (2001), educators collaboratively analyze current practices, experiment with new practices, and assess the relationship between practice and the effects within the community context. Senge (1990) stated that a PLC looks like an entity having a conscious vision and purpose, and it is continually developing the capacities to shape the future. Louis, Kruse, and Marks (1996) defined PLC as a cultural climate that enhances professional development and collective inquiry, and supports risk taking among teachers. Calderon (1998) also stated that a context in which the collective synergy, imagination, spirit, inspiration, and continuous learning of teachers is used to improve the “craft” of teaching. For example, they are “places in which teachers participate in decision making, have a shared sense of purpose, engage in collaborative work, and accept joint responsibility for outcomes of their work” (Lambert, 1998, p. 11). These definitions have a common theme in their use of words like collaborative, shared sense of purpose, and relationship with practice, which are all driven by student learning.

Dufour and Marzano (2011) stated that a PLC is an “ongoing process which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 22). This definition can be applied to all classrooms large or small. The more teachers prepare, collaborate, and implement together, the more students will improve. Three main ideas drive PLCs: the fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure that all students learn at high levels; if we, as educators, are to help all students learn, our collaborative and collective effort must be to meet the needs of every student; and educators must be results orientated to know if students are learning and to respond appropriately to their needs (Dufour & Marzano, 2011). The first main idea suggests that educators are thinking about questions that will get students thinking at higher levels by

asking questions that pertain to how the students are learning and how they might apply their skills to other content areas. Second, when teachers work together, they must stay focused and organized and demonstrate an accountability for how the needs are being met. Finally, the third main idea explains how teachers must develop SMART (strategically aligned, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and timed) goals to prove that their strategies are improving student achievement.

PLCs are forms of continuous collaboration and extensive research that drives continuous improvement. According to a national survey, 67% of teachers and 78% of principals agree that greater collaboration among educators “would have a major impact on improving student achievement” (Markow & Pieters, 2010, p. 9). Although the schools and teachers agree that PLCs work and produce results in learners, they can be difficult to transform and implement in cultures where people are individualized and tend to work in isolation.

Since school leaders are held accountable for improving school performance, they must demonstrate accountability for the teachers by developing their capacity to meet new expectations. Dufour and Marzano (2011) listed seven keys to implementing a collaborative community among teachers and staff for student achievement. The first area is to organize staff into meaningful teams. A team of teachers working together to achieve a common goal is exemplary for accountability. The second area is to provide teams with time for collaborating. Most authors find that when teachers work together, even for just one hour a week, we can expect gains in student achievement. As long as meeting times are set by the team, the tone will be set for everyone to be on the same page. The third area is to provide supportive structures that help groups become teams. For example, teams are more effective

when they clarify expectations about how they will work together, with the agreements being translated into collective commitments, and which are then used to monitor the working relationship on an ongoing basis (Garmston & Wellman, 1999; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Katzenbach & Smith, 2003; Lencioni, 2005; Patterson et al., 2008). Fourth, leaders must clarify the work that the teams are to accomplish. Teams are more effective when all members are clear about the opportunities they have for working together, their commitments for their objectives, and how they will measure and attain their goals. In addition, team norms and SMART goals must be established. The fifth area is that school leaders must monitor the work of teams and provide direction and support as needed. As school leaders receive deadlines for their goals, they must let the relevant teacher groups know when they need to submit their finished work; thus, the teams will be able to develop suitable work timelines. Using deadlines helps to make the work clear, so that teachers and staff will know what to expect and how to work together to attain the goals. The sixth area is to avoid shortcuts in the collaborative team process. In other words, leaders should not make assumptions that teacher groups know how to discuss matters effectively, or use the process of building shared knowledge and collaborative dialogues to function as a high performing team. The final area for creating a collaborative culture in a PLC is to celebrate short-term wins, and confront those who do not contribute to their teams (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). School leaders must notify any staff members who are exceeding expectations or who need assistance to meet the levels of the team.

Similarly, Huffman, Hipp, Pankake, and Moller (2001) reviewed five dimensions of PLCs that guided their research. The first dimension explains how to create a supportive and shared leadership environment by having school administrators participate democratically

with teachers in sharing power and decision making. Second, the staff should share their visions for school improvement that focus on student learning and care, with a consistent reference to the staff's work. The third dimension is the staff's collective learning and application of that learning to create high-level intellectual tasks for students and to develop appropriate solutions. Fourth, school conditions should support the staff's work as a professional learning organization. Lastly, teachers should share their personal practice with review and feedback to one another in regards to their instructional strategies to increase their individual and organizational capacity (Huffman, Hipp, Pankake, & Moller, 2001).

### **Shared Decision Making**

“One of the most critical differences between effective principals and other principals is where they place their focus when they make tough decisions. The best principals base every decision on their best teachers” (Whitaker, 2012, p. 81). As described by Joseph Blase and Peggy Kirby (2000), those who work with students on a day-to-day basis, and teachers, must be involved in substantive decisions regarding changes that affect their day-to-day lives. Principals make decisions by using teams comprised of their best teacher leaders, while knowing the best options for improving student achievement. “Influence is not limited to those in formal leader roles within an organization; all organization members have the potential to influence decisions and people within the organization” (Jackson, 2012, p. 879).

Strong instructional influences have a positive effect on school improvement (Sahin, 2011) and instructional influence is a vital component for overall school improvement. Some practice that will assist in this area include: developing a comprehensive professional development plan, enhancing cooperation and communication within the school and community, constructing a positive environment that is conducive to teaching and learning,

and giving principals authority by having them introduce and manage change (Mushaandja, 2013; Sahin, 2013). These practices can further school improvement and help principals achieve success for their institution.

School improvement will always be an area of concern for school districts especially since the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Principal leadership is a component that seems to have a large impact on school improvement. According to Sebastian and Allensworth (2012), the guidance of principal leadership for classroom instruction and student learning depends on a few questions: In what ways is leadership in schools related to instruction and learning? Which mechanisms seems to be the most important for instructional improvement? and Do school leaders have differential effects on individual teachers within their schools or on the faculty as a whole?

Strong leadership strategies are intended to shape school processes that mediate the effects of leadership on student achievement. Studies on school leadership have pointed to a wide array of school strategies through which leadership can effect student learning (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). When the professional capacity of staff comes to mind, teachers should be interacting frequently and their actions should follow the norms developed by the team and be focused on teaching and learning. Professional aptitude can also be examined by principals incorporating structured professional development opportunities for teachers and staff. When parents and the community are involved in the students' academic career, they can influence student achievement. Their involvement demonstrates that they are a prime resource for school improvement initiatives, from enhancing safety in and around schools, to assuring more consistent and effective homework sessions. The school climate refers to what happens daily between teachers, students, school personnel, and parents, from

the time they arrive until dismissal. When the atmosphere is mutual, positive, and respectful, students can engage in learning and be held to high expectations in the classroom.

Ultimately, the quality of instruction students receive matters for their learning.

Studies examining the effects of principal leadership on student learning assume that classroom instruction is a critical mediating factor. Principals may affect it directly, by working with teachers in classrooms, or indirectly, through their efforts to improve professional capacity, parent involvement, or school climate (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012, p. 630).

### **Trust**

Another important ability to develop as a leader is to build strong relationships with team members. Leaders can use some techniques to establish these partnerships, and leaders and team members must have trust and truth embedded in their communication. Successful leaders and a triumphant organization depend on the relationships built with others (Bell & Smith, 2010).

The development of individuals is not sufficient, and new relationships are crucial providing that they help to establish greater program consistency and use of additional resources. The role of school principals is to foster greater relationships in the organization to get better results (Fullan, 2001). Since the role of the leader is to ensure that the organization develops relationships that will produce desirable results, relationships within the school are indeed powerful, when given direction. An important strategy used by principals is to be aware and conscious of the contexts that lead to culturally responsive relationships in the ethics of community (Klar & Brewer, 2013).

Various personalities may not mix well with instructional leaders. According to Bell and Smith (2010), when considering the personality differences, leaders should be cautious and follow a number of specific steps. First, leaders should recognize that one's personality is part of the equation causing the difficulty. Second, any meeting with a team member should be approached with an expectation that one's personality may grind a bit against that of the other person. Finally, one needs to be a personality detective, identifying the differences that could help to explain how a leader can manage his or her winning leadership style and interpersonal relations (Bell & Smith, 2010). "You have everything to gain and nothing to lose as a leader by making the best of a difficult situation" (Bell & Smith, 2010, p. 55).

Rhodes, Camic, Milburn, and Lowe (2009) examined the effectiveness of a collaborative approach for improving school climate that was initiated by university researchers, teachers, and administrators at three middle schools. Teachers formed working groups at each school, identified common problems, and created programs to address the problems and to modify relationships among administrators, teachers, parents, and students, building a new discourse of collaboration (Lavie, 2006). They aimed at determining if the teacher empowerment approach affected the teachers' perceptions of the academic and collegial environment and if those perceptions were mediated by the school climate. The authors reported the importance of attuning to the school's organizational climate. The interventions approach was designed to respond to the particular organizational culture of each school; it met little resistance and received high levels of collaboration and trust.

To build relationships, school principals should portray levels of trust, cooperation, and openness among staff, teachers, and students. The most influential attributes include teaching practices, levels of collaboration, and staff, student, and parent expectations

(Bulach, Malone, & Castleman, 1995; Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007). Although positive school climates are associated with better student outcomes, the efforts of psychologists are often not focused on the broader contextual changes in the school (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998, 2000). More contextualized change strategies, in contrast, attempt to actively engage stakeholders in the process (Gregory, Henry, & Schoeny, 2007; Ingersoll, 1996), with principals and teachers working together to solve problems and achieve common goals (Elmore, 2000; Wagner, Kegan, Lahey, & Lemons, 2005). Collaborative approaches that draw on teacher participation and encourage critical analysis can foster a sense of ownership among the various constituents, and lead to long-term engagement and investment from key stakeholders (Rhodes, Camic, Milburn, & Lowe, 2009).

Nonverbal signals can also be used to reform one's leadership relationships as studies have shown that leaders sometimes put too much trust in their words alone to carry their message to others. Leaders who are adept at using nonverbal messages are seen to be particularly sensitive, caring, and approachable by team members. For instance, if a team member is sitting in a chair, it suggests that it might be a good time to pull up a chair and sit across from them to talk to them. School principals need to be able to develop trust with team members to maintain truthful relationships. Thus, establishing a culture of truthfulness is a high priority for any leader (Bell & Smith, 2010).

The approach of principals to decision making and everyday interactions with teachers can affect the level of trust and collegiality among teachers, and the overall interpersonal climate of the school and student achievement. The perceptions of principal support have been linked to teacher commitment, collegiality, and retention (Rhodes, Camic, Milburn, & Lowe, 2009). Teacher who perceive their principal as being more supportive also

report having a greater willingness to participate in decision making for school policies. Their enthusiasm for such participation is also nurtured when teachers view their input as having an effect (Pankake & Moller, 2007). The importance of the principal-teacher relationships in affecting school climate and teacher satisfaction suggests that principals can improve the perceptions and behaviors of teachers by forging stronger, more trusting ties. As the teacher's perception of the leadership and collective missions improves, they become more effective in the classroom (Rhodes, Camic, Milburn, & Lowe, 2009).

Principals are influential with organizational climate, by fostering trusting, cooperative, and open environments that allow for staff input (Price, 2012). Trust, cooperation, and an open environment generate higher levels of satisfaction, cohesion around school goals, and commitment among faculty. Trust is the bedrock to building and sustaining the organizational relationships (Price, 2012; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). Positive principal-teacher relationships offer a key organizational situation where relational trust can develop from the emotional bonds. Positive school climates are largely understood to be environments where the whole school community prospers. The effects of a positive school climate are clear in that educators prosper when they feel that their efforts are positively affecting students (Price, 2012).

Principals who can genuinely establish a trusting school environment for all school members (i.e., parents, teachers, students, and the community) can become drivers of change (Bryk et al., 2010). With trust, cooperation, and collaboration around unified school goals and programs, coherence can move forward the school improvement ideas and plans, even beyond any disadvantaging barriers. Positive effects can be realized from building and maintaining these trusting school climates among all members of the organization (Bryk et

al., 2010). The individual relationships that are embedded in trust are strongly linked to positive climate outcomes, such as: higher job satisfaction, cohesion, and commitment to the organization (Price, 2012). Leadership flows through the network of roles in the organization, which are the channels that influence an organization, and decentralize the effect of leadership (Jackson, 2012).

### **Summary of Chapter 2**

The literature demonstrates the important skills and practices that are used by principals to their best effect. Effective principals use such strategies as: building trust, reflection, professional learning communities, shared decision making, and change. These skills and practices should be used by principals to have a positive impact on school climate and foster student achievement. Research on leadership indicates how school principals can be effective and achieve student success. In the following chapter, I describe the methodology, design, setting, participants, procedures and instruments used in this study.

### **Chapter 3. Methodology**

The method used for this study relied on qualitative information from interviews with three Title I Academic Achievement Award principals who received the award in the 2013-14 school year. The questions were developed to gather information about the best practices used by principals to affect the school climate. The qualitative data was obtained in face-to-face interviews to understand the reasoning of leaders for implementing their strategies in their schools. The principals gave positive feedback about the purpose of this study and were aware of the importance of their responses to the field of education.

Schools were specifically chosen because they had earned Title I High Academic Achievement Awards for the 2013-14 school year. At the start of each interview, I explained my background and current position, which allowed the participants to be more comfortable in the interview. I answered any of their questions or concerns before beginning the interviews. After they signed the consent form, we began the process. To ensure that the participants remained anonymous, I did not use their names or schools in the collected data. The interviews were recorded, and I noted any nonverbal cues shown by the interviewees. The participants seemed to be relaxed, made eye-contact consistently, and used visuals and hand gestures when they spoke. Each environment was conducive to the particular principal, which allowed them to feel at ease while they spoke. I took a minimum of notes to permit the participants to make eye-contact and to assure them that I was understanding their perspective.

**Design**

This study used an ethnographic case study design, with interviews of three principals from three Title I Academic Achievement Award recipient schools. The ethnographic case study design is appropriate for this study since it looks at the responses from interviewees and compares them with research on the topic at hand (Klar & Brewer, 2013). The qualitative analysis used coding and a comparison to research, noting any commonalities or patterns in the words from the interviewees or in the strategies mentioned by the principals.

**Participants**

The three participants in this study were principals who had received the California Title I Academic Achievement Award for the 2013-14 school year.

**Setting**

The setting was in California, where public law and policy are pushing principals for higher achievement. Title I schools are designated as such because their student bodies are at least 40% low income, which could be a barrier to student achievement. The parents of the students are also notified about changes occurring in the Title I schools, which provides a collaborative approach to improving student achievement. Schools with Title I funding must comply with specific requirements to be recognized for student achievement and to receive a high achieving reward. Teachers also receive professional development to reach the goals of the higher achieving students. This setting is conducive for this study because the principals would be in their schools and would likely feel comfortable to speak about their work.

**Instrument**

The instrument used for this study was a set of open-ended interview questions, including: Tell me your story. How did you become principal of this school? What are the major challenges this school faces or faced? What best practices in your tool kit do you feel have made a significant difference in your school? How do you know who are teacher leaders in your building? What are examples of ways you build trust and cohesion among teachers and staff? What strategies do you use when embracing change in your school? Do you have a leadership team? How was the team formed? How often do you meet with your leadership team about making decisions for the school?

**Procedures**

School principals who received the Title I Academic Achievement Award in the 2013-14 school year were contacted about participating in the study. The principals were given the opportunity to think of questions and concerns they had to discuss with the researcher. Three days before the interviews, the researcher sent a list of questions to the interviewee so the principal would be prepared for the face-to-face interview. During the interview, lasting from 30 to 45 minutes, the researcher recorded the principal's answers to the questions. The researcher thanked each participant for their time and effort in contributing to the field of leadership research. I listened to the recordings of each interview in their entirety before making the transcriptions. After transcribing the interviews, I printed out hard-copies and highlighted keywords throughout the script that were relevant to the literature review. I laid out each of the three transcriptions with the highlighted keywords, side by side to find common patterns, and developed a general chart showing similarities and differences in the three transcriptions. Since the general chart did not illustrate the

importance of the responses, I also developed separate charts with elaborations on the interviewees' responses, organized by question. The separate charts provided me with an idea of how the information could be used by anyone looking for information on best practices to improve school climate and student achievement. Finally, I created another chart that showed the similarities among the three principals.

### **Analysis**

After the data was gathered in the interviews and transcribed, it was coded for common words, practices, and skills. The coded data was analyzed for patterns, similarities, and differences among the principals.

### **Summary of Chapter 3**

This ethnographic case study looked at the responses from interviewed principals and compared them in terms of best practices used by principals to affect school climate and improve student achievement. The data was collected and transcribed for the analysis, which was to develop an understanding of how best practices are used in the schools.

## Chapter 4. Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify the strategies and best practices used by school principals to influence school climate and enhance the quality of education for students in three California Title I Academic Achievement Award schools. The research question was: How do strong leadership qualities and strategies affect school climate and improve student achievement?

### Data Presentation

The data was collected from the interviews with principals with questions that focused on their years of experience, the challenges they faced, the strategies used to enhance student achievement, the methods used to develop a high level of trust and cohesion, and how they achieved academic success in the 2013-14 school year. The research was aimed to understand leadership approaches, finest practices, and the principals' effect on school climate and student achievement. In this chapter, the results of the data analysis are shown.

In the interviews, the following questions were asked:

1. Tell me your story. How did you become principal of this school?
2. What are the major challenges this school faces or faced?
3. What best practices in your tool kit do you feel have made a significant difference in your school?
4. How do you know who are teacher leaders in your building?
5. What are examples of ways you build trust and cohesion among teachers and staff?
6. What strategies do you use when embracing change in your school?
7. How was the leadership team formed?

8. How often do you meet with your leadership team about making decisions for the school?

Tables 1-3 summarize the responses from each principal. Of the three principals, two acquired higher leadership positions outside of their schools. Table 4 shows the similar responses of the three principals.

Table 1. Responses to interview questions School A

Questions (short form)	Responses
Experience/ background	Teacher for 7 years Principal for 7 years Superintendent/Principal/Director current position
Challenges in schools	70% of students were low socio-economic status 90% Spanish-speaking families Low parent education
Best practices	Professional learning communities Professional development Response to intervention Teacher leadership
Identify teacher leaders	Traits of teacher leaders: integrity, character, professionalism, relationship with students Teachers with most gains with student achievement
Building trust and cohesion	Faculty read school improvement books together PLCs and professional development Analyze student data
Embracing change in school	Climate change RTI results Consistently visible on campus
Leadership team formed	Share leadership Intervention
Frequency of meetings	Twice per month

Table 2. Responses to interview questions School B

<b>Questions (short form)</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Experience/ Background	Teacher for 1 year Director for 1 year Principal for 5 years Executive Director of Operations and Instruction current position
Challenges in schools	ELA test scores were low Procedure and routines were loosely followed 83% of students were low socio-economic status
Best practices	PLCs Instructional leadership Teacher leadership GLAD strategies Collaborative decision making
Identify teacher leaders	Listen, observe, interact Leadership style of teacher leader
Building trust and cohesion	Focus on “why we are doing this” Analyze student data Collegiality Accountability
Embracing change in school	Conversations (talk about change) Point of view from colleagues Motivate and encourage
Leadership team formed	1 teacher per grade level Teacher trained on having courageous conversations Consistent teacher leaders
Frequency of meetings	Twice per month

Table 3. Responses to interview questions School C

<b>Questions (short form)</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Experience/ Background	Teacher for 7 years Principal for 12 years Assistant Superintendent of Administrative Services current position
Challenges in schools	Diminishing population of students Physical stressor on campus Low socio-economic students Low teacher morale
Best practices	Used stressor to motivate teachers for change Made observations of other schools with similar rankings

	Developed more opportunities for students to get exposure to curriculum GLAD strategies PD for teachers Collaboration Implement new programs
Identify teacher leaders	Sent out survey Interviewed teachers Developed opportunities for teachers to participate in what they excel in
Building trust and cohesion	Open and honest Strategic Focus on “why we are doing this”
Embracing change in school	Implement structure Informed parents of the changes
Leadership team formed	Teachers were chosen by grade level teams Trained how to have courageous conversations
Frequency of meetings	More frequent at the beginning Once per month

Table 4. Similarities among principals

<b>Questions (short form)</b>	<b>School A</b>	<b>School B</b>	<b>School C</b>
Experience/ background	Previous leadership	Previous leadership	Previous leadership
Challenges in schools	Low SES students	Low SES students	Low SES students
Best practices	PLCs, professional development	PLCs, GLAD	PLCs, GLAD, professional development
Identify teacher leaders	Observations	Observations	Survey
Building trust and cohesion	Professional development	Focus on “why”	Focus on “why”
Embracing change in school	Communication about change	Communication about change	Communication about change
Leadership team formed	Shared leadership	Consistent teacher leaders	Chosen among grade level

### **Data Analysis**

The best practices that were implemented included PLCs, and RTIs since the teachers interact with students daily. Each principal implemented consistent PLCs. All three schools used the DuFour model for PLC implementation that assisted with the continuity in how meetings were conducted, how the data was analyzed, and the instructional practices that were going back into the classroom to enhance the students' application of concepts.

Teachers were active collaborators in identifying problems, creating and implementing customized interventions to redress the problems, evaluating intervention effectiveness, and planning for the ongoing use of proven strategies. The teacher empowerment intervention appeared to successfully engage teachers in the change process. Clearly, teachers support best practices for carrying out the plans. The principals' attitudes are especially sensitive to exogenous influences of school climate. One principal stated " I used the stressor of the charter school in our lot as a piece to motivate teachers and staff and let them know if they wanted to work hard to get the diverse population back to the school or do we let the charter school take all the students in the area"(personal communication, school C, principal, 2015).

Because teachers play a major role in the lives of students, they need to feel valued, supported, and listened to. The three principals maintained that they provided support in these areas. One way for doing this was to ensure teacher leadership by empowering the teachers. Professional development that catered to teachers and allowed them to experience what the students would experience was another meaningful way to support the teachers.

Teacher leaders make their schools run successfully, and the characteristics they showed included: professionalism, integrity, respect for other teachers and students, and taking the lead even without being asked to do so. Principals benefit from knowing their

teacher leaders, and can identify them by observing them. By observing their teachers, principals can have a good idea about how they interact with one another in different contexts and realize which teachers would be a good fit for the team.

New principals may face challenges as they try to build trust and cohesion in a school community. All three principals in this study came from different schools before they became school leaders. In some cases, school leaders may teach in a school before becoming the principal, which can result in a conflict of interest in their role as principal. In general, people build trust by communicating, which is how these three leaders gained confidence about the support from their teachers.

“Change can be good or detrimental, to the organization just depends on wiser change with the purpose behind the team and how is that change moving the agenda of the mission of the school, of the district forward” (personal communication, school B, principal, 2015). The way in which leaders present information about change can easily determine how teachers will decide on rejecting or accepting the change. Consistency is another key concept that can help teachers embrace change and join the movement. If school leaders say they will do a task and then follow through with it, the teachers will quickly learn that they are accountable for their actions. Reasonable explanations for change are often the most helpful ways to have facilitators understand their role in improving student achievement.

The leadership team at every school looks different since it is created according to the needs of the school. Whether the team is a share leadership model, a one teacher per grade level, or teachers choosing to be on the leadership team, the structure will look and function according to the needs of students. The frequency of meetings and the layout of things that are discussed should all be geared towards improving the school.

The PLC model is the most common strategy mentioned in this study. School leaders implemented DuFour's model to show that team involvement in student achievement can lead to many possibilities. Dufour and Marzano (2011) stated that the model is an "ongoing process which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 22). This definition can be applied to all classrooms large or small. The more teachers prepare, collaborate, and implement together, the better is the student improvement.

Shared decision making is another way to inform teachers of the items that need to be addressed immediately and the items that may need more time to work on. When the team is involved in making decisions, it brings a sense of responsibility and accountability for the teachers. Principals make decisions by using a team of their best teacher leaders and by knowing their best options for improving student achievement.

Building trust in any work environment is a challenge, especially when student education is a stake. Two of the three leaders believed that if people know "why" they are administering a certain assessment, for example, they will feel more in control of the successful outcome. Trust, cooperation, and an open environment generates higher levels of satisfaction and cohesion around school goals, with greater commitment among faculty. Trust is the bedrock for building and sustaining these organizational relationships (Price, 2012; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). After reading a book together as a faculty, staff and principal at school A were able to talk about the components of the book and the teachings. "From that came out some difficult, fierce conversations, that led to transforming our core values and how we treat each other, how we treat children, and how we hold each other accountable" (personal communication, school A, principal, 2015).

In this study, the leaders trained their teacher leaders for conducting courageous conversations with other teachers. A structure was used for how they spoke to each other in a professional manner. During PLC meetings, teachers should know how to conduct an effective meeting, express differences, while complying with the group norms. Courageous conversations can help principals learn how to build trust with their teachers and staff.

Fullan (2001) and other scholars have concluded “that change cannot be managed. It can be understood and perhaps led, but it cannot be controlled” (p. 33). Since the school principals had a variety of backgrounds, enduring change would seem to be a slow process. The leaders demonstrated patience when they decided to incorporate strategies for change in their schools. They saw the light at the end of the tunnel and persevered until they reached it.

### **Interpretation**

The common themes of best practices (Table 4), included communication, PLCs, previous leadership positions, professional development, observations, and focusing on the “why”. All of these practices are purposeful and lead teachers and staff to become focused on student achievement. The patterns also coincided with some of the theories in the coursework on education. Collaboration, communication, and building relationships, were concepts that led to success among school leaders. Each leader had specific organizational skills that further supported their schools’ success. From Tables 1-3, the school principals had similarities that assisted in their schools’ success. Parental involvement and community building strategies also play a part in developing the lives of students. Throughout the interviews, the leaders referred to the importance of keeping an open door policy, and being visible throughout the day, to give faculty and staff members a chance to inform leaders of any questions or comments.

**Summary of Chapter 4**

The data presented in this chapter was coded from the interviews with the principals. The concepts represented best practices used by the three principals who received the Title I Academic Achievement Award in the 2013-14 school year. The interesting part about this study was that even though all three schools were in different environments such as rural, urban and suburban, they still had similarities in their responses. The interviewees gave similar responses to many of the questions. For example, the principals referred to PLCs as one of their best practices, in answering the question: How do strong leadership qualities and strategies affect school climate to improve student achievement? Another strategy or best practice that the principals mentioned was great communication among leaders and staff. The communication was open and comprehensible and both the teachers and leaders understood what needed to be done in order to achieve student success.

In the following chapter, the items discussed were a summary of the findings, interpretation of the findings, implications and limitations of the study and concluding statements.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion and Conclusions**

The literature shows that principals directly influence school climate, when implementing approaches like PLCs, building trust and cohesion among staff, identifying teacher leaders, embracing change, and counting on teacher leaders to carry out the vision of the school and improve student achievement. The strategies used by principals and the way in which they are integrated, may foster a sense of trust by the faculty and staff, who in turn support and believe in their leader's vision.

The principals had diverse backgrounds and experience. Two of the three principals had at least five years of teaching experience and training that had enhanced their instructional practices. The interviews took place at a time shortly after the principals had received their school awards, and thus, they had fresh views about their current best practices.

Because the schools were all Title I schools, they faced similar challenges, especially in terms of motivating students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The principals also analyzed the test scores and identified deficiencies among students, which was a factor that led to motivation.

### **Implications**

This study brought implications to the field of education about the genuine and insightful practices that school principals use to help students achieve success. Aspiring school leaders should consider the practices mentioned in this study to enhance their knowledge about approaches that will work in their schools. Title I schools in general may

benefit from using the tactics discussed in this study. These findings will also build on the literature that is concerned with the attitudes and approaches used by school principals.

### **Limitation**

This study had some limitations in that no teacher leaders were interviewed to obtain their views on best practices used by principals with regards to most of the staff. It would have been helpful to learn about the insights of at least one teacher at each school site from their discussion of the benefits of the principals' approaches. If a follow-up study were conducted, interview questions could be developed to cover the experiences of teacher leaders. The second limitation was that students were not observed and their progress was vital for the achievement award receive by the school. If students were included in this study there would be more information for the examples of what effective student learning looked like.

### **Future Direction**

Based on the study findings, a teacher leader from each site should be designated to express and represent their views on implementing the strategies of the school leader. The topics discussed in this study are applicable for new leaders in education, continuing leaders who may need to revitalize their approach, and teacher leaders who wish to present information to their school leaders about improving student achievement.

### **Conclusion**

Strong leadership skills and using best practices is vital for positively affecting the school climate and improving student achievement. The schools in this study had increased standardized assessment scores, improved teacher morale, experienced strong engagement of

parents and communities, and collaborated among teachers and principals. The research question: How do strong leadership skills and strategies affect the school climate to improve student achievement? elicited similar responses from the principal interviewees. The face-to-face interviewing method used in this study helped to discover how principals can affect the school climate and improve student achievement. The three participants were enthusiastic, passionate, and eager to express their ideas about leading schools to greater success.

The commitment of school principals has a positive influence on school climate and affects student learning (Bryk et al., 2010). The teacher empowerment intervention appears to successfully engage teachers in the change process. Moreover, the importance of principal-teacher relationships has a positive effect on school climate, suggesting that principals can improve their teachers' perceptions and behaviors to forge stronger and more trusting ties (Rhodes, Camic, Milburn, & Lowe, 2009). When teachers react in a positive way to the mission, they are more successful in the classroom and can stimulate greater student achievement. Further research should be done on other Title I schools when implementing the strategies mentioned in this study to see if similar results can be attained in schools that receive the Title I Academic Achievement Award in the future. Further research is also required to understand how principals specifically determine when and how to adapt particular leadership practices across multiple contexts.

A key implication from this study is that good leaders are adept at listening to stakeholders and understanding nuances of the contexts in which they work. Nevertheless, such nuanced understandings and the respect for stakeholders cannot be developed overnight (Fullan, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2010). The principals perform many observations and hold numerous meetings to obtain information and gain knowledge about implementing practices

to improve student achievement. By utilizing the method of interviewing provided more clarity for the researcher develop a concise image of the best practices a school principal provided in order to impact school climate and reach student achievement.

The best educational leaders are in love with the work they do, with the purpose their work serves, and with the people they lead and serve (DuFour, Marzano, 2011). The leaders described in this study took pride in their work to improve student success. They aimed at making the school climate a positive experience for all the members in the building. These leaders were not only driven by their belief in the moral imperative of their work, but also by genuine affection for the people they served through that work. They demonstrated what Fullan (2008) has called the first secret of leadership: love those you are attempting to lead. These leaders gushed with enthusiasm when describing their staff and their students. They view those with whom they work as the solutions to the challenges, and they demonstrated their regard for a commitment to others by creating the conditions to help them succeed. Leaders should lead by example and work with the current issues at hand before implementing any new strategies into the school's policies (DuFour, Marzano, 2011). Great leaders are great learners. To become the best leader, think of learning as the master skill of leadership: Never stop learning about how to become more effective, and translate your learning into action.

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