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Running Head: STUDENT AND PARENT PERCEPTIONS

Parent Perceptions of School Climate and its Impact on their Child's School Performance

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Abstract

This study compared the relationship of student and parent perceptions of school climate to the student's academic performance and school problem behaviors (disciplinary referrals, unexcused absences, and tardiness). A sample of students (n=531), grades 7-12, completed the School Climate Survey (Haynes et al., 1996). Additional information was obtained regarding each student's academic performance and school problem behaviors. A randomly selected sample of parents were sent the School Climate Survey, Parent Edition and were asked to voluntarily return them (n=45). Correlation results found no significant relationship between parent and student perceptions of school climate. A significant relationship was found between Parent Involvement and academic performance and also between Achievement Motivation and academic performance and school problem behaviors. The Multiple Regression analyses that were conducted indicated that Parent Involvement, disciplinary referrals, and tardiness best predicted their child's academic performance. .

The effect of education on students has been an area of interest to many looking to find what causes children in some schools of similar demographics to excel while others are failing. Researchers have turned to school climate as one of the factors in these events (Anderson, 1982). Students' behavior in school is predominantly a function of the social and cultural characteristics of the social system of the school (West, 1985). School climate has been an area of interest that has been researched since the early 60's. This research has stemmed from the early works of business researchers who focused on the situational characteristics, that impact individual behavior (Anderson, 1982). Studies have linked school climate to academic performance (Hoy & Sabo, 1998), antisocial behavior (McEvoy & Welker, 2000), victimization (Buckley, Storino, & Sebastaini, 2003), and school violence (Hernandez & Seem, 2004). A variety of different factors affect the climate of a school which in turn affects students' behaviors and attitudes (Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997). School climate is measured by questioning how people who are involved with the school, perceive it. These perceptions include those of students, staff, and parents (Roach & Kratochwill, 2004).

Defining School Climate

School climate has been found to be related to a number of different factors, all of which play an important role in the social, behavioral, and intellectual development of students in school. In order to understand the different role that school climate can play in the lives of the students, teachers, and parents, one must first understand what school climate is.

There is a vast array of definitions of school climate. As gained from an overview of the literature, the definition can be best viewed as being the atmosphere of the school

that is sensed when one enters the building and understood further as more time is spent within the school. Haynes et al. (1997) stated that “School climate refers to the quality and consistency of interpersonal interactions within the school community that influence children’s cognitive, social, and psychological development. These interactions include those among staff, between staff and students, among students, and between home and school” (p. 322). Welsh (2000) also incorporated the interactions of students and teachers in his definition; “The climate of a school includes the unwritten beliefs, values, and attitudes that become the style of interaction between students, teachers, and administrators. School climate sets the parameters of acceptable behavior among all school actors, and it assigns individual and institutional responsibility for school safety” (p. 89).

Peterson and Skiba (2001) define it in a more emotional way “as the feelings that students and staff have about the school environment over a period of time” (p. 167). They further state that these feelings are developed through the way in which one feels about their personal safety at school, how conducive the classroom is to learning, and how suitably the school is ordered. Hoy and Sabo (1998) refer to school climate as the “personality” of the school and like personalities, school climates also differ from person to person or school to school.

Throughout the literature various definitions of school climate can be found based on the researcher’s opinion as to what he/she truly believes school climate represents. These beliefs, however, mostly come from personal experience rather than from empirical evidence (Anderson, 1982). Due to this concern, Tagiuri (1968) created a taxonomy for school climate to categorize its different aspects. The taxonomy includes:

ecology- the physical materials in the school; milieu- the characteristics of the individuals in the school; social system- the rules that govern how people interact within the school; and culture- the norms and values held by those within the school. Together these components form all the various definitions of school climate (as cited in Anderson, 1982).

Components of School Climate

School climate is composed of countless numbers of variables that interact in a variety of ways that affect child development (Esposito, 1999). These components are complex and varied. They can extend from the noise in the cafeteria to the physical configuration of the building to the interactions between students and teachers (Freiberg, 1998).

Derived from research on past empirical studies, Haynes et al. (1997) found 15 factors that comprise a healthy and supportive school climate:

1. Achievement Motivation, which is how well students believe that they can learn and how much they are disposed to learning.
2. Collaborative Decision Making, which is having staff, students, and parents all engage in the decision making in the school.
3. Equity and Fairness, which is treating everyone in the school equally, regardless of race or ethnicity.
4. General School Climate, which is how well students, staff, and parents interact with each other and feelings of trust and respect existing within the school community.
5. Order and Discipline, which is how suitable the students' behavior is at school.

6. Parent Involvement, which is how often the parent chooses to participate in school activities.
7. School-Community Relations, which is how supportive and concerned the community is with what is happening within the school.
8. Staff Dedication to Student Learning, which is the energy the teachers put into making sure that students are learning.
9. Staff Expectations, which is the expectations of the staff that their students will excel academically and continue on to lead a successful life.
10. Leadership, which is how well the principle guides the school and generates a positive school climate.
11. School Building, which is how well maintained the school building is.
12. Sharing of Resources, which is equal availability of all of the school's resources, activities, and equipment for all students.
13. Caring and Sensitivity, which is how much the principle shows that he/she is concerned about the staff, students, and parents and thinks about what they need.
14. Student Interpersonal Relations, which is how much students care about, rely on, and value each other.
15. Student-Teacher Relations, which is the amount of care, trust, and respect that the students and teachers have for each other.

Everyone within the school affects the climate. The climate is not only affected by students, staff, and parents, but also the community and all of the support staff that work within the school. This includes cafeteria staff, bus drivers, custodians, and office

workers. Therefore, when the school climate is investigated it is important to consider all of these people and how they affect the school (Freiberg, 1998).

It is also important to consider the school's surrounding community that the school exists within. Certain community factors might affect school climate. One factor which seems to have a tremendous effect on school climate is poverty. If a school exists in an area devastated by poverty this will affect the amount of funding the school receives and the resources that it can make available. It also shapes the characteristics of some of the students who will be attending the school, the kind of faculty that will work there and how long they will stay, and how involved the parents are. Also one must consider that the children who attend the school must travel through the community to get to school each day. This may expose the students to risks, which may cause them to carry weapons or engage in aggressive behavior (Welsh, 2000). On the opposite side of the spectrum, schools that feel more pressure from the community are more likely to perform better academically (Hoy & Sabo, 1998).

Importance of School Climate

Not only are there a variety of components that comprise school climate, but also a variety of variables that are affected by school climate. West (1985) stated, "In the context of the school social system, students come to perceive the role definitions, the norms, expectations, values and beliefs that others have for them, and they behave accordingly" (p. 454). Numerous studies have been completed to consider the importance of school climate and how it affects students. Some of the main factors that have been correlated with school climate are academic achievement (Hoy & Sabo, 1998),

student behavior (McEvoy & Welker, 2000), school violence (Hernandez & Seem, 2004), victimization (Buckley et al., 2003), and suspension (Haynes et al., 1997).

Academic achievement and social development.

Many studies have examined the impact of school climate on student's academic achievement. In studying middle schools, Hoy and Sabo (1998) found there to be a significant and positive relationship between school climate and academic achievement. In describing school climate, Hoy and Sabo used a health metaphor to capture the nature of the interactions within the school. Therefore, when a school climate is presumed to be open and healthy, it means there is a harmony among the different relationships within the building that are linked with better academic success. Specific elements of school climate that were associated with academic success were Academic Emphasis, Teacher Affiliation, and Resource Support.

Although academic achievement is a commonly studied outcome variable, social development, as well, is considered to be a worthy educational outcome. A study by Schmitt, Sacco, Ramey, Ramey and Chan (1999) looked at students whose parents were unemployed and school climate as predictors of academic achievement and social progress. Parent unemployment was studied because it affects the environment in which the child is living which in turn affects the child. Their results indicated that school climate, as rated by the teachers, has a moderate effect on student's academic achievement and social development. They also found that children whose parents were unemployed were not performing as well in school as those children whose parents were employed.

Esposito (1999) studied the association amid parent's perception of school climate and urban, minority, low-income children's academic and social development. This population was utilized due to the consistently low academic achievement and poor social skills that many of these children demonstrate. Also, many of these schools contain the lowest ratings of school climate. She found that overall school climate was related to children's academic success and social development. In particular, children's social skills were related to school climate, specifically, cooperation in Kindergarten and 1st grade, and assertiveness in second grade. A strong relationship was also found between school climate and school adjustment. One of the most significant findings was that parents' perception of student-teacher relations contributes to their perception of school climate almost as much as their child's history of adjustment. Lastly, it was found that there was not a significant difference between parent's and teacher's perceptions of school climate. This finding suggests that parents do have information about the school, indicating that the parents are involved with their child's school. This is not a typical finding for an urban setting, and may be explained by the sample involving all parents of children who attended Head Start their preschool year. That experience may have caused them to become more involved in their children's schooling.

Buckley et al. (2003) completed a study that looked at not only the relationship between school climate and academic achievement but also between school climate and victimization. This study involved middle school students in a rural district. Overall it was found that perception of school climate is a significant predictor of academic achievement. Those who had a more positive perception of school climate had a higher GPA. It was also found that certain perceptions of school climate were associated with

victimization. Overall, students who viewed their school as less safe, less well-maintained, and less supportive than other students experienced more victimization.

Antisocial behavior and psychopathology.

McEvoy and Welker (2000) state “both antisocial behavior and academic failure are context specific; each occurs within a climate in which conditions can be identified that reasonably predict problematic behavior and can be modified to reduce such behavior” (p. 130). It is argued that effective school climates have a direct effect on higher academic performance and prosocial behavior.

McEvoy and Welker (2000) state that a number of factors go into creating a negative school climate that increases the level of violence and decreases academic success. One of these factors is tracking, where low-achieving students are placed into “ability groups” that have low expectations for their academic success. They also found that standardized testing can place a negative stigma on the school if they have low levels of success, which in turn creates a negative school climate. It is suspected that this might cause students’ academic success to plummet even further and encourages antisocial behavior. Also, teachers in these schools, which are often urban, begin to adopt dispirited attitudes towards students and parents (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Security devices such as video cameras and metal detectors can also negatively affect school climate (Peterson & Skiba, 2001). Further, schools characterized by low levels of attendance by students and teachers, low levels of commitment by teachers, and high occurrence of student and teacher mobility which leads to feelings of estrangement, often have low levels of academic performance and high levels of antisocial behavior (McEvoy & Welker, 2000).

Welsh (2000) surveyed students at 11 different schools and found that all of the schools differed significantly on measures of school climate. It was also found that perceptions of school climate were significantly related to victimization, safety, avoidance, offending, and misconduct. Findings further indicate that school climate encompasses the effects of community characteristics (poverty, residential stability, and crime rate) on school disorder.

Kupermic, Leadbeater, and Blatt (2001) acknowledged that positive perceptions of school climate are related with fewer emotional and behavioral problems, higher self-esteem, and superior academic achievement. Therefore, a positive school climate is important for those most at risk of academic, emotional, and behavioral problems. In the Kupermic et al. study, it was found that less internalizing and externalizing problems were associated with a more positive student perception of school climate. It was also found that a positive perception of school climate was a protective factor from internalizing and externalizing problems for self-critical students.

School violence.

Recent past events, such as the school massacre that occurred in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999, have brought school violence to the attention of the general public. Not all antisocial behavior is violent, it can also be students harassing others, bullying, or stealing (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). School violence, in any form, can create a climate of fear and emotional turmoil which creates a negative school climate and also disrupts student's educational development (Hernandez & Seem, 2004). As seen in previous studies many students experience victimization and violence in schools. When schools do not properly respond to antisocial conduct it has negative repercussions and

affects the educational experience of all the students in general (McEvoy & Welker, 2000).

Hernandez and Seem (2004) have identified the necessary aspects that comprise a safe school climate. They state that this is important because the climate of a school is exceedingly important in the educational aim of the school and a negative school climate is not conducive to learning. From past research they were able to generate factors which comprise a safe school. They are context, psychosocial variables, and school behaviors. All of these components are closely related and tend to have some overlap. Context mainly focuses on the atmosphere and relationships within a school and community. Psychosocial variables include: having a clear definition of violence to determine if it exists within a school; having clear behavioral expectations; and having high academic expectations. As stated earlier, academic success leads to a more positive school climate (Buckley et al., 2003). Other psychosocial variables include: respect for differences; students possessing an internal locus of control; celebrating rituals and traditions; reinforcing students for taking a stand; positive peer relations; high levels of communication; high perceptions of school safety; and a sense of school connectedness. Lastly, there needs to be positive role models and a positive school context to influence the behavior of the members of the school. A safe school environment is an important part of creating a positive school climate, because an unsafe school environment only leads to a negative school climate (Hernandez & Seem, 2004).

Additional factors.

Haynes et al. (1997) surveyed students and found that students are concerned about what is happening in their schools and feel that improvements are necessary in

certain areas. The students felt that suspension was used to commonly as a disciplinary measure. Past research has shown that school climate is more significantly related to student suspension even more so than student's attitudes and behaviors (Haynes et al., 1997). Using suspension and expulsion as behavioral consequences may in fact unintentionally reinforce a student's disruptive diversion from aversive conditions. In addition, suspending a student makes it more difficult for students to establish a bond with school that is necessary for a positive school climate (McEvoy & Welker, 2000).

The students also reported their school climate is described by elevated levels of distrust and disrespect between the teachers and the students. The students felt that the teachers did not care about their personal problems and therefore, do not feel able to share their perceptions and feelings with school personnel (Haynes et al., 1997). This climate is not favorable for the mental well-being of students and staff in the school. It can lead to higher dropout rates and more discipline problems, which leads to a negative school climate (Anderson, 1982).

Shortt and Thayer (1999) emphasize the importance of block scheduling in improving school climate. Block scheduling cuts down on unsupervised transition periods and creates a more peaceful atmosphere. Through a survey sent to principals they found that block scheduling was related to a decline in office disciplinary referrals, fewer fights, improved teacher mood, and higher teacher attendance rates. All of these factors seem to increase signs of a more positive school climate.

Murray (1997) studied the impact that school uniforms had on middle school students' perceptions of school climate. He found that students, who were required to wear uniforms, rated their school climate more positively. The students who wore

uniforms also responded significantly higher to the scales of student behavior values, guidance, and parent and community-school relationships. This finding indicated that these factors were important in achieving a more positive school climate.

Measurement Scales

There is a wide variety of measures available to determine the climate of a school. Some of these measures include formal surveys (Roach & Kratochwill, 2004), informal surveys (Bulach, 2001), and interviews (Ellsberry, 1999; Freiberg, 1998). Among these different measures surveys are most often used to assess school climate.

Informal surveys.

There are two forms of surveys, formal and informal. An informal survey is quick and easy, however, much time is needed to analyze the data that yields qualitative information. Forms of informal surveys may include having teachers finish incomplete sentences about the school, counting the number of times negative and positive things are reported about the school, having teachers and students write down their expectations about the school (Bulach, 2001).

Freiberg (1998) reported a study that was conducted with students transitioning into middle or high school. An informal survey was used where children were asked to write down their greatest concerns about moving onto the middle school or high school. The teachers received these survey results and were able to make proper plans of action to account for the concerns of their new students, to help promote a more positive school climate.

Formal surveys.

Formal surveys present exhaustive information about the school's positive and negative assets. Quantitative information is provided that can be compared to measure how affective a plan is to improve a school's climate (Bulach, 2001). The various definitions that are used to describe school climate often stem from the school climate scale that is being used to assess the school climate. These scales each have different factors that they measure. The majority of these scales are similar and their measures often overlap. Formal surveys completed by students, teachers, and parents are the most common forms of school climate measurement (Roach & Kratochwill, 2004).

One of the most widely used formal surveys is The Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE). The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) organized this CASE in 1982. The CASE school climate survey is administered to students (grades 6-12), teachers, and parents. It has 55 items that pertain to 10 dimensions of school climate (Roach & Kratochwill, 2004).

The Effective School Battery (ESB) developed by Gottfredson (1991) measures students and teachers perceptions of school climate. It consists of 31 items for students (grades 7-12) that pertain to 6 dimensions of school climate and 61 items for teachers that also pertain to 6 different dimensions of school climate (Lehr & Christenson, 2002).

Another commonly used survey is the Organizational Health Inventory (OHI) and Organizational Climate Descriptive Questionnaire (OCDQ) both of which were developed by Hoy and his colleagues. Both surveys have separate instructions for use with elementary, middle and high school students. The scales of the different age groups measure roughly the same thing, but are sensitive to differences among these age groups. The three separate OHI measures contain 37-45 questions for teachers and administrators

about their perception of the organizational health of their school. The three different OCDQ measures contain 34-50 items about behavior in their school, depending on the age group being examined. These two scales are only for teachers and administrators (Roach & Kratochwill, 2004).

The School Climate Survey produced by Haynes et al. (1997) is intended to assess dimensions of school climate. The survey can be administered to students (elementary through high school), staff, and parents. There are 53 items for student in elementary and middle school, 55 items for students in high school, 79 items for school staff, and 55 items on the parent survey. For all the students there are 9 different dimensions of school climate, for staff there are 10 dimensions, and 8 dimensions for parents (Lehr & Christenson, 2002).

Lastly, there is the School Level Environment Questionnaire (SLEQ, Fischer & Fraser, 1991). It was intended to determine teachers' perceptions of the current psychological dimensions of the school environment. There is also another form of the SLEQ which is designed to measure ideal views of the educational environment. Each form consists of 56 items that pertain to 8 dimensions for elementary and secondary school teachers (Lehr & Christenson, 2002).

Interviews.

An additional way in which one can collect information on school climate is through interviews. Some choose to use an interview format because an interviewer is able to ask for elaboration, explanation, and specific examples to support beliefs. It also helps in being able to observe the body language of the interviewee. Through an interviewing process it possible to not only give the school the negative attributes that

were found within it, but to also highlight the positive qualities identified (Ellsberry, 1999).

In a study examined by Freiberg (1998), entrance and exit interviews were conducted with the students to measure their perception of school climate. Students that were either entering into high school or graduating from high school were each asked four questions relating to their view of school climate.

Further Areas of Research

All of the previously mentioned factors come together to comprise school climate. These components are all very important in determining the climate of a school, but one of the most important factors that can affect the assessment of the school climate is who is perceiving it. Different people from different viewpoints will each see the school climate in a different way. These different perspectives can be grouped into three main viewpoints: the student, the teacher, and the parent. It is important when considering school climate to equally consider each perception present. Owens (1987) stated “though one may argue that perceptions themselves are not objective reflections of ‘reality’ (but may be influenced by subjective factors), the point is that whatever people in the organization perceive as their experience is the reality to be described” (p.298) (as cited in Welsh, 2000).

Different studies have looked at different perspectives of school climate. Buckley et al. (2003); Hoy and Sabo (1997); Kuperminc et al. (2000); Murray (1997); and Welsh (2000) all studied the affects of students’ perceptions of school climate. Schmitt et al. (1999) studied teacher’s perceptions of school climate. Lastly, Esposito (1999) studied parent’s perceptions of school climate.

While it is important for studies to focus on the different perspectives of school climate, it is also important to compare those perspectives. Few studies have compared student's perceptions of school climate with parent's perceptions of school climate. Further, no studies have compared students' and parents' perceptions of school climate with the students' academic achievement and school problem behavior.

Griffith (2000) conducted a study that compared students' and parents' perceptions of school climate along different dimensions. He found that there was consensus between the students' and parents' perceptions of school climate and that this consensus was significantly and positively related to their assessment of the school climate. He also found that there was significantly less parent and student consensus in school that were more racially and ethnically diverse, but school size was not found to be a factor. Parent and student consensus on perception of school climate was associated with better academic achievement and greater parent involvement.

Griffith's (2000) study compares students' and parents' perceptions of school climate. It also looks at how this comparison relates to the students' academic achievement. It does not, however, consider the effects of student and parent perceptions of school climate with the students' school problem behaviors. Also, the purpose of Griffith's (2000) study was to evaluate the effects of group consensus overall, not strictly how student and parent perceptions of school climate were related. The survey that was used was not specifically a school climate survey, but rather a survey derived by Griffith to assess the certain aspects that he was interested in. Finally, the school district in which the study was conducted had high national standing which limits generalizability.

This study addressed the following questions: Which factors of parents' perceptions of school climate can help to describe the students' individual differences in academic performance and school problem behavior? Do the same factors apply equally across grade level and gender? Specifically, the following relationships are sought: There will be positive relations between student academic performance and parents' perceptions of: student-teacher relations, achievement motivation, and parent involvement. Parent perceptions of school climate will be negatively related to the amount of behavior problems their child has been reported to have engaged in at school.

Methodology

Participants

This study took place in a rural junior high and high school with 531 student participants, grades 7-12, in the North East. In a previous study (April, 2004) these students completed the Middle School Student Climate Survey and the High School Student Climate Survey, depending on their grade level (Haynes et al., 1997). The subjects in this study consisted of the parents of the students in 8th-12th grade who were previously administered the School Climate Surveys. Approximately 350 Parent School Climate Surveys were sent to a randomly selected group of the participating students' parents. From this randomly selected group, 45 out of 350 parents returned the survey. Thus, this sample consisted of the 45 parents and their son or daughter's previously administered School Climate Surveys.

Instruments

The students who were in 7th and 8th grade were administered the Middle School Student Climate Survey, Revised Version. This survey consists of 37 items on a three-point scale: Agree=3, Not Sure=2, and Disagree=1. Previous research using these scales, conducted by the Yale Child Study team, has treated them as interval level. This measure assesses students' perceptions of six dimensions of school climate including: (a) Fairness, (b) Order and Discipline, (c) Parent Involvement, (d) Sharing of Resources, (e) Student Interpersonal Relations, and (f) Student-Teacher Relations. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to measure the internal consistency, which ranges from $\alpha = .62$ -.90.

The students in grades 9-12 were administered the High School Student Climate Survey, Revised Version. This survey consists of 42 items on a five-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree=5, Agree=4, Not Sure=3, Disagree=2, Strongly Disagree=1. This scale also was treated as interval level. This measure assesses students' perceptions of six dimensions of school climate including (a) Sharing of Resources, (b) Order and Discipline, (c) Parent Involvement, (d) School Building, (e) Student Interpersonal Relations, and (f) Student-Teacher Relations. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to measure the internal consistency, which ranges from $\alpha = .67-.90$.

The randomly selected parents were sent the Parent School Climate Survey, Revised Version. The responses for this survey are coded on a five-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree=5, Agree=4, Not Sure=3, Disagree=2, Strongly Disagree=1. This scale was also treated as interval level. This measure contains 41 items that assess parents' perceptions of their child's school environment on eight different dimensions of school climate including (a) Academic Focus, (b) Achievement Motivation, (c) Principal Caring and Sensitivity, (d) Collaborative Decision Making, (e) Parent Involvement, (f) School Building, (g) School-Community Relations, and (h) Student-Teacher Relations. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to measure the internal consistency, which ranges from $\alpha = .67-.93$.

For the school performance statistics, archival data was collected from the student's files at the school district. Past grades, disciplinary referrals, unexcused absences, and tardies were gathered.

Procedure

Data was collected from the high school and middle school students in May of 2004. Questionnaires were group administered in classes of approximately 20-25 students. A member of the research team explained the procedure to each teacher that was to administer the survey. Team members continuously checked in with each classroom during the procedure to ensure that it was properly being administered and completed. Upon completion the research team collected all materials from each classroom.

To sustain confidentiality each survey that was sent to a parent had their child's student ID number written on them. This was used to compare the parent survey to the child survey while maintaining anonymity. The surveys were returned in self-addressed, stamped envelopes.

Academic grades, number of tardies, number of unexcused absences, and number of disciplinary referrals were also collected from the school on each student who previously completed the School Climate Survey. This information was gained from the school's records on each student. For disciplinary referrals, number of absences, and tardies, the number of times the student was recorded as engaging in these activities throughout the school year was documented. Grades were obtained for each academic class the student participated in and could range from 0-100. This information was paired with each survey completed, by using the students ID number so that the student would remain anonymous.

Analyses

Analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 11.0 (SPSS 11.0). A variety of different statistical processes were used including: (a) descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency) to illustrate the sample's characteristics; (b) Correlations between parent perceptions of school climate factors and academic success, school problem behavior, and student perceptions' of school climate; (c) and Multiple Regressions to examine the interactions of parents' perceptions of school climate on both academic performance and school problem behavior. Separate analyses by gender and grade level could not be conducted due to the low return rate.

Results

Descriptive Statistics for School Climate Variables

Descriptive statistics were run for each school climate variable for each individual scale. The parents were separated into two groups, parents of junior high school students and parents of high school students, according to the grade their child was in when the students were administered the School Climate Survey (Haynes et al., 1997). The students were also separated into two different groups, junior high school (7th-8th) and high school (9th-12th), also depending on the grade the student was in when they were administered the School Climate Survey (Haynes et al., 1997).

Table 1 ranks the mean scores for each of the eight dimensions of school climate for the parents of junior high students and the six dimensions of school climate for the students in junior high school. The results indicate that among parents of junior high school students, the means of the school climate factors ranged from 3.66-4.44, with Achievement Motivation being the highest and Academic Focus the lowest. This denotes, when looking at what the coding stands for, that the mean scores of each factor falls between the higher end of “Not Sure” to the higher end of “Agree”, showing favorable perceptions of the school’s climate.

Also displayed in Table 1, are the ranked mean scores for each dimension of school climate as perceived by the junior high school student. The results indicate that the means of the junior high students ranged from 1.67-2.49. This signifies that the mean scores of junior high students on each factor falls between the high end of “Disagree” to in between “Not Sure” and “Agree.” These ratings show neutral perceptions of the junior

high school climate by the students, with the highest ranked factor being Student-Teacher Relations and the lowest factor being Parent Involvement.

Table 2 ranks the mean scores of each of the eight dimensions of school climate for the parents of high school (H.S.) students and the six dimensions of school climate for high school students. The results reveal that among parents of high school students, the mean scores for the eight factors ranged from 3.57-4.37 on a 5 point Likert scale. This indicates that parents of these high school students mean perception of school climate ranges from “Not Sure” to “Average.” The highest ranked mean factor for parents of high school students was School Building and the lowest factor was Collaborative Decision-Making.

Table 2 also shows the descriptive statistics for the high school students who completed the survey. These results show that on a 5-point Likert scale the mean scores for the six school climate factors range from 2.44-3.60, indicating that the high school students’ perceptions of their school climate ranged from “Disagree” to “Not Sure” on the six factors measured. Student-Teacher Relations was found to have the highest mean score while Parent Involvement was found to have the lowest mean score for the six factors measured.

Correlations

The results for the correlations between parents’ perceptions of school climate and student achievement and problem behaviors are shown in Table 3. All assumptions were met for the correlations calculated. The results indicate that significant correlations were found.

Overall, two school climate factors were significantly related to student academic performance. Parent Involvement was related to academic performance ($r = .30$ Social Studies to $r = .50$ Math). Achievement Motivation was related to both academic performance ($r = .36, p < .05$ for Science to $r = .49, p < .01$ for Math) and school problem behavior ($r = .50, p < .01$ for Disciplinary Referrals). It was also found that parent's perception of their child's relationship with their teacher was negatively related to whether their child made it to school on time ($r = .32, p < .05$).

Correlations were also calculated between parent perceptions of school climate and student perceptions of schools climate. No significant results were found through these correlations. Due to the insignificant results, no further analyses were conducted with these variables.

The study then investigated whether parents' perceptions of school climate could predict academic achievement in addition to their child's school problem behavior. All hypothesized variables, which consisted of parent school climate variables and student school performance, were used as a set of potential predictors. A step-wise multiple regression was conducted using overall academic achievement as the dependent variable and parent school climate factors and child problem behaviors as the independent variables. The step-wise multiple regression was conducted with variables that had t -values for beta weights with probabilities less than .05. Results of the step-wise indicated that Parent Involvement (as seen from the parent's perception) along with disciplinary referrals and tardiness best predicted overall academic achievement ($F_{3,31} = 9.18, p < .001$). The results of the multiple regressions are displayed in table 4. Altogether, all three variables accounted for 42% of school achievement.

Due to the return rate, of Parent School Climate Surveys, resulting in a small sample size, analyses could not be completed for gender, racial, socioeconomic, or grade differences. Also, due to the lack of parent responses, no significant correlations were found between parent's perceptions of school climate and student's perceptions of school climate.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how specific student/parent pairs view school climate and if their perceptions of it are related to the child's academic performance and problem behavior. Previous researchers have examined many of the effects school climate can have on students' emotional and academic development; however, few studies have investigated the student/parent dyad and the predictability of parents' perceptions. What made this study unique, was that we looked at how parents' perceptions of school climate were related to the overall school performance of their child. The main outcome of this study supports previous research, which reports positive relationships between parent involvement and their child's academic achievement (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005).

Within regard to correlations between student and parent perceptions of school climate, no significant correlations were found. This was most likely due to the low return rate of parent School Climate Surveys, which resulted in a small sample size. Past research has indicated that students and their parents have similar views with regards to the child's school climate. This agreement between the parent and child was positively related to their evaluation of the school climate (Griffith, 2000).

The first hypothesis, that there would be a positive relation between student academic performance and parents' perceptions of student-teacher relations, was not upheld by our results. These results may have differed if there was a larger sample size to draw from. A negative correlation however, was found between parent perceptions of student-teacher relations and tardiness. Indicating that the more often a student was

tardy, the more negative of a view that parent had of their child's relationship with their teacher.

In this study, a positive relationship was found between student academic performance and parents' perceptions of Achievement Motivation. Achievement Motivation is defined by Haynes et al. (1997), as the extent to which students at the school believe that they can learn and are willing to learn. This concept is very similar to self-efficacy, which is defined as "a student's confidence in his or her ability to overcome challenges to attain specific goals" (Lodewyk & Winne, 2005, p. 4).

Past research has indicated that a student's self-efficacy affects his/her academic motivation, interests, and academic achievement (Bandura et. al, 1996). In addition, parents' self-efficacy has been found to play an important role in their child's self-efficacy and academic achievement (Lynch, 2002). Children's perceptions of their own academic abilities stem from their parents' beliefs and expectations regarding their child's academic performance (Wagner & Phillips, 1992). Bandura et. al (1996) has further found that "Parents' sense of efficacy to promote their children's academic development and the educational aspirations they hold for them enhance their children's beliefs in their own academic efficacy and raise their aspirations" (p. 1207).

The findings, which indicate that higher parental beliefs in a child's Achievement Motivation (self-efficacy) and higher academic performances are significantly related, is in agreement with past findings. Past findings also include, that boys' academic achievement was most affected by their perception of their parents' efficacy for their academic performance. On the other hand, girls' efficacy was more strongly affected by

their perception of their interactions with their parents (Lynch, 2002). A gender comparison could not be completed for our study due to the limited return rate.

When focusing on academic achievement, this study found that parent involvement, discipline and tardiness best predicted the student's academic achievement. All three factors together accounted for 42% of student's academic attainment. Disciplinary referrals alone were found to account for 13% and Tardiness alone was found to account for 6% of the student's academic achievement. These findings support past research which states that less internalizing and externalizing problems are associated with a more positive student perception of school climate (Kupermick et. al, 2001), which is in turn, related to higher academic achievement (Hoy & Sabo, 1998).

Barriga et. al (2002), stated that behavioral and academic problems have a reciprocal influence over each other. Academic achievement has been found to be negatively related to a variety of different problem behaviors, including but not limited to: aggression, antisocial behavior, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, depression, anxiety and negativistic personality traits.

Parent involvement was found to account for 23% of the student's academic achievement. This was the largest factor that was found to affect the students' academic standing. These findings are congruent with past research, which indicates, that regardless of educational background, students whose parents attended school activities had better academic achievement than those whose parents did not attend. These findings are applicable across all grade levels (Sanders, Epstein, & Connors-Tadros, 1999).

Despite these findings, many families are still not involved in their adolescents' educational experience. Parent involvement tends to decrease as students become older

and is emphasized less in secondary schools (Epstein & Hollifield, 1996; Sanders et. al, 1999). Sanders et. al (1999) reported that as students enter grades six through twelve, there is a decline in parent involvement in the following four activities: discussion of homework, discussion of school, help with homework, and attending school events and meetings.

Often times, teachers believe that parents do not want to become involved in their adolescents' education (Epstein & Holifield, 1996). This belief can lead to an obstacle in parent involvement, which is a lack of effective communication. Many times the teachers and parents observe communication differently (Halsey, 2005; Epstein & Hollifield, 1996). This communication barrier is often due to the organization of secondary schools. Students have multiple teachers and teachers have a much larger number of students (Sanders et. al, 1999).

Teachers often need assistance in learning to deal and interact with different parents. Parents have stated that 95% of their communication with their child's school is one-way, with the school telling the parent what they should and should not do with their child. Many times, teachers do not try to make contact with a parent till their child is in trouble, behaviorally or educationally (Jones, 2001). Parents of low socioeconomic status reported that they have very little interaction with the school and when they do, these interactions are often negative and informing them of their child's misconduct or failure (Nweze, 1993). Proper interaction techniques can be accomplished through staff-development trainings or parent-involvement trainings (Jones, 2001).

Some parents, particularly those of students at-risk, may be resistant to involvement in the school (Jones, 2001). These relationships are very important to build

because their home and school lives are so different (Nweze, 1993). Many parents have had negative experiences themselves with school that they prefer to stay away. Others may not be familiar with American culture and may have feelings of alienation and distrust (Jones, 2001; Sanders et. al, 1999).

Traditional means that are used to involve parents, such as, open houses, parent/teacher conferences, and parent associations typically seem to have only been successful with middle class parents. Often times, low socioeconomic parents are hardest to reach due to the difficulty of their lives, in which they often work two jobs (Nweze, 1993). Jones (2001) suggests making house calls as a way to reach out to these hard to contact families. A school in Sacramento pays teachers \$25/hour to go out to their students' homes and interact with their families and suggest ways that they can become involved in their child's learning.

Past research has shown that in order for parent involvement programs to be successful in helping their child prosper in school, they need to be well designed and focused (Jones, 2001). Many parents are not aware of their responsibility to participate in their child's school and it is up to the school to inform and teach them about their crucial role in their child's educational success (Nweze, 1993).

When designing parent activities, schools must accommodate working parents and provide flexible schedules around activities so that all families are able to participate. Research has also shown that parents prefer a less formal relationship with the school staff, which should be taken into consideration when designing parent participation plans (Nweze, 1993).

Finn (1998) found that there are three important types of engagement between a parent and their child that are important for the child's success in school. Finn first mentions the need to organize and monitor the child's time, which can be accomplished through continually checking up on them and being familiar with assignments that are due. Next, Finn stresses the importance of parents discussing school with their children and lastly, it is important for parents to start reading with their child at home at a young age.

A new sociological theory, proposes that families, schools, and communities are most successful when their goals and desires for their children overlap. This means that these three areas work both independently and jointly in an attempt to help their children become successful (Epstein & Hollifield, 1996).

From this theory, Epstein, a leader in the study of the effects of parent involvement, has developed a framework for six types of involvement that can be applied to the school, family, and community. The framework as listed in Warner (2002) reads as follows:

1. Parenting: Assist families in developing the proper child-rearing skills by helping them to understand child and adolescent development and establishing a home that supports the child. Help schools to understand the family where the child is coming from.
2. Communicating: Communication is the key in developing the proper relationship between home and school. Schools need to communicate effectively regarding school functions/programs and student progress.

3. Volunteering: Expand recruitment, training, and the school schedule to include as many families as possible.
4. Learning at Home: Including the family in the child's academic activities. This can be accomplished through interactive homework, which requires the families' participation in the activity or in sharing what the child has learned. This should become a regular assignment in classrooms at least weekly (Jones, 2001).
5. Decision Making: Make efforts to have more families join and participate in school decisions, governance, and other parent groups.
6. Collaborating with the Community: Coordinate resources and services with local agencies and businesses that provide assistance to the community.

Sheldon and Epstein (2005) report, that there are many different goals that can be established within each form of participation. The key is finding what works within the school district to move towards their goal. They also warn that schools cannot expect one form of involvement or one single activity to affect the academic success of the students in the school; rather it involves each type of involvement.

Two recent programs: Action Teams for School, Family, and Community Partnerships and Parent-Teacher Action Research have incorporated these six types of involvement and demonstrated the effectiveness of this framework. The Action Teams for School, Family, and Community Partnerships are composed of an action team that develops and executes a program, which focuses on each of the six types of involvement. The action team develops a three-year outline of their goals and objectives and a more detailed one-year plan. The team is composed of teachers, parents, school psychologists, administrators, and upper level students. Six members of the team head up their own

individual group, which focuses on one the six types of involvement. The action team has even been found to be effective in high schools (Epstein & Hollifield, 1996).

The Parent-Teacher Action Research involves parents, teachers, administrators, and facilitators and focus on at least one form of involvement at a time. The team meets regularly to review their progress towards their goals. In some schools, a part-time facilitator helps to coordinate the program (Epstein & Hollifield, 1996).

In conclusion, this study found that, parents' perceptions of their child's school climate affect their child's academic success and behavioral problems. More specifically, a parent's perception of their child's achievement motivation positively correlates with their child's academic success. Additionally, tardiness, disciplinary referrals and parent involvement were found to account for 42% of student academic achievement. Therefore, it is important to consider a parent's involvement and perceptions of their child, even within a high school setting. As is indicated through past research and this study, parents are a key component to student academic success.

Limitations

It is important to note that there are a few areas that have limited the reliability and validity of these results, the first one being the small sample size. This was due to the return rate of the parent School Climate Surveys. Three hundred and fifty surveys were sent out to a randomly selected group of parents, however, only forty-five surveys were returned. This limited the analyses that could be performed with the data, the significant results that were found, and limits the extent to which the results can be generalized.

Since the return rate was so low, resulting in a small sample size, it should be considered who was most likely to participate in this study. It can be surmised that most parents who responded, were parents who actively participated in their child's education already. As stated earlier, many parents are extremely busy taking care of children or working multiple jobs, so these are the parents who, most likely, do not participate at their child's school and who also did not participate in this study. These families are most likely of lower socioeconomic standing and may represent more single-parent homes. The participants were also likely to be those who had concerns with the school that they wanted to voice or parents who were happy with their child's education and wishing to report that back to the school. All of these deductions could be areas of further research in additional studies.

Another important factor to take into consideration is the population with which this survey was conducted. It was completed within a small school district within Western New York. There are approximately 100 students per grade level, 95% of the students report Caucasian as their race, and 27% of the students are on a free or reduced lunch program. Due to the small sample size, however, we were not able to determine if any of these factors, including gender, correlated with any other factors. Finally, the student data was collected in May of 2004, while the parent data was collected in the winter of 2005. This limits the strength of the results, in that the conditions in the school may have changed within that time period or a significant event may have occurred within this lapse of time, which may have caused either of the results to change. This may be why the parents rated the school climate more favorably than the students did.

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Table 1

A Comparison of Rank Order of Means for Parents and Students School Climate Variables

Parents of Junior High Students				Students in Junior High			
Rank	Scale	M	S.D.	Rank	Scale	M	S.D.
1 st	Achievement Motivation	4.43	.43	1 st	Student-Teacher Relations	2.49	.48
2 nd	School Building	4.39	.44	2 nd	Fairness	2.23	.51
3 rd	Student-Teacher Relations	4.01	.61	3 rd	Sharing of Resources	2.07	.62
4 th	School-Community Relations	3.82	.69	4 th	Student Interpersonal Relations	1.84	.43
5 th	Principal Caring and Sensitivity	3.81	.39	5 th	Order and Discipline	1.72	.35
6 th	Parent Involvement	3.78	.55	6 th	Parent Involvement	1.67	.49
7 th	Collaborative Decision-Making	3.66	.46				
8 th	Academic Focus	3.66	.60				

Note. Judgments for the child middle school version were made on 3-point scales (1 = Disagree, 2 = Not Sure, 3 = Agree) and judgments for the parent version were made on 5-point scales (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Not sure, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree). n = 20.

Table 2

A Comparison of Rank Order of Means for Parents and Students School Climate Variables

Parents of High School Student				High School Students			
Rank	Scale	M	S.D.	Rank	Scale	M	S.D.
1 st	School Building	4.37	.63	1 st	Student-Teacher Relations	3.61	.67
2 nd	Achievement Motivation	4.27	.78	2 nd	School Building	3.47	.64
3 rd	Principal Caring and Sensitivity	4.21	.62	3 rd	Order and Discipline	3.12	.68
4 th	Student-Teacher Relations	4.01	.69	4 th	Student Interpersonal Relations	3.04	.72
5 th	School-Community Relations	3.92	.50	5 th	Sharing of Resources	2.99	.58
6 th	Academic Focus	3.7	.78	6 th	Parent Involvement	2.44	.71
7 th	Parent Involvement	3.57	.69				
8 th	Collaborative Decision-Making	3.57	.49				

Note. Judgments were made on 5-point scales (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Not sure, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree). n=25.

Table 3

Intercorrelations Among School Climate Factors and School Performance Variables

	Variables											
School Climate Scales	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Academic Focus	-											
2. Achievement Motivation	.14	-										
3. Principal Caring And Sensitivity	.62**	-.04	-									
4. Collaborative Decision Making	.43**	-.07	.47**	-								
5. Parent Involvement	-.24	.24	-.35*	-.14	-							
6. School Building	.39**	.19	.35*	.31*	-.08	-						
7. School-Community Relations	.58**	.03	.46**	.34*	-.05	.35*	-					
8. Student-Teacher Relations	.59*	.43**	.39**	.33*	-.09	.39**	.38*	-				
School Performance												
9. Disciplinary Referrals	.11	.50**	.09	.17	-.127	.02	.13	-.05	-			
10. Tardies	-.28	-.26	-.03	-.03	-.04	-.14	-.07	-.32*	.58*	-		
11. Unexcused Absences	-.18	-.08	-.22	.16	.12	-.09	-.08	-.17	.24**	.23**	-	
12. Total Academic Achievement	-.12	.47**	-.28	-.11	.42**	-.08	-.14	.27	-.46**	-.26**	-.24**	-

*p < .05, **p < .01.

n = 45.

Table 4

Regression of Academic Achievement for Students 7-12 Grades on Parent Perceptions of School Climate Scales and Student Behavioral Difficulties

Predicting Overall Academic Achievement

Predictor Variable	R	R change	R ²	R ² change	Beta	t
Parent Involvement	.50		.23	.23-	.43	3.18**
Discipline	.63	.13	.36	.13	.34	-2.45*
Tardy	.69	.06	.42	.06	-.28	-2.07*

*p < .05. **p < .01.

n = 34.