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Statement of Academic Integrity

I certify that I am the author of the work contained in this dissertation and that it represents my original research and conclusions. I pledge that apart from my committee, faculty, and other authorized support personnel and resources, I have received no assistance in developing the research, analysis, conclusions, or text contained in this document, nor has anyone written or provided any element of this work to me.

Signed:

Lakeisha D. Maddrey-Lashley

Date

HOOD COLLEGE



The Perceptions of Elementary Principals on Promoting Positive Staff Morale

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Hood College
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree
Doctor of Organizational Leadership

by
Lakeisha D. Maddrey-Lashley

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation:

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The Perceptions of Elementary Principals on Promoting Positive Staff Morale

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ABSTRACT

Elementary principals influence organizational behavior and school climate through their actions and behaviors. The leader's style can have a lasting impact on staff morale. Employee morale refers to an employee's sense of psychological safety, purpose, and confidence in the future. Research has shown that school leaders influence staff morale and positive school climate through their interactions with the people in the organization and their decision-making processes. This qualitative phenomenological study extrapolated the lived experiences of elementary principals who had maintained or accomplished a positive school climate over time. This study was designed to answer the following questions: (1) What are the elementary principals' perceptions of the actions a leader takes to promote positive staff morale? and (2) What critical life experiences do elementary principals believe impacted their leadership actions that improved staff morale? A phenomenological approach using interviews, surveys, and focus groups was used to understand the essence of the lived experiences and perceptions of elementary school principals in relation to how they have maintained or promoted a positive staff morale and school climate over time. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data were collected virtually. The criterion sample consisted of 33 elementary school principals who had been identified as having a positive school climate by a district survey. In all data collection sources, principals consistently referenced actions they took to promote a positive staff morale that centered around common ideals and concepts. The following six themes emerged from triangulation of the data: (a) Serve them, relate to them, (b) Collaborate and engage, (c) Be

authentic; (d) Be visible and accessible; (e) Learn the school culture; and (f) Embrace your lived experiences. The lived experiences of the elementary school principals in this study served as a resource to help other school leaders take similar actions to promote a positive staff morale.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Organizations, such as schools, are filled with people who have their own perceptions, attitudes, ideas, aspirations, and sense of purpose. The perceptions of the members in an organization cultivates their morale and the school's climate. Evidence has long showed that school climate influences attitudes and behaviors of the educational team as well as the behavioral and social skills of the students (Collins & Parson, 2010; Flay, 2000; Patton et al., 2006).

Positive Organizational Behavior

Positive organizational behavior (POB) is the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capabilities. Positive organizational behavior (POB) includes characteristics of confidence (or self-efficacy), hope, optimism, and resilience that can be developed among leaders and followers alike (Luthans, 2002; Luthans & Avolio, 2009; Luthans & Youssef, 2007). POB has been used to measure, develop, and effectively managed performance in the workplace (Gardner & Schermerhorn, 2004). It is noteworthy that the actions and approaches of principals influence positive perceptions from their staff. The effect of elementary school principals' positive organizational behaviors with staff in the workplace often is referred to as organizational climate. The organizational climate of a school is observed and experienced by each member of the school and is depicted by the social and professional interactions with the administration (Duff, 2013). It is important for the actions, interactions, and approaches of school principals to positively influence their team's perceptions. Leaders who take actions aligned to authentic leadership theory and servant leadership theory influence their

followers in a positive way within the organization. The positive perceptions of the leaders' behaviors and interactions become the staff's positive morale.

Staff Morale and School Climate

In the school context, staff morale has been described as an individual perception of the energy, cohesion, cooperation, and enthusiasm experienced by teachers in their school (Hart et al., 2000). Staff morale is essential to effectiveness of schools. In this study, principals of schools with positive staff morale shared the actions and interactions that they believe contributed to their positive staff morale. The study used positive organizational behaviors (POB) along with authentic leadership theory and servant leadership theory to examine alignment of the various lived experiences of the study's participants. Staff perceptions about their leader's behaviors to promote a positive school climate are important. Leadership style and actions can impact school climate based on the leadership behaviors that allow or distract from teachers getting their basic needs met and meeting their highest potential. Maslow's idea of self-actualization speaks to the idea of people reaching their highest potential. In a school, the principal leads for school development and programming to support growth and address the needs of the staff. The staff should perceive their leader as invested in their goals and development. Positive professional relationships are demonstrated by the desire to help each other by respecting professional competence and by supplying strong social support to colleagues, which, in turn, displays a commitment to students (Blum et al., 2002; Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Hoy & Hoy, 2003). Improving school climate for staff may positively impact the environment for students. According to Peterson (1999), teachers in schools with positive cultures feel supported and are inspired to learn, grow, take risks, and work together. Moreover, research has concluded that

school climate has a significant impact on student achievement and social-emotional health as well as teacher job satisfaction and retention (Jackson, 2018).

Authentic Leaders and Staff Morale

Authentic leaders promote positive organizational behaviors by leading with purpose, values, and integrity. They build enduring organizations, motivate their employees to provide superior customer services and create long-term values for shareholders (George, 2003).

The authentic leader is confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, moral/ethical, future-oriented, and gives priority to developing followers to be leaders. “The authentic leader is true to him/herself and exhibits behavior that positively transforms or develops followers into leaders themselves” (Luthans & Avolio, 2003, p. 243). A central message of authentic leadership theory is for leaders to be true to themselves in all things. It is also essential for leaders to be true to others. Given that this theory is relatively new, there is limited empirical support for it.

Walumbwa et al. (2008) demonstrated that authentic leadership is a significant predictor of employee outcomes, including satisfaction. Luthans and Avolio (2003) suggested that authenticity is represented in part by positive psychological capacities (i.e., psychological capital). In contrast, Gardner and colleagues (2005) maintained that authentic relations with followers lead to trust. When school principals used balanced processing, by involving staff in the decision-making and providing them with access to all the information, it helped to establish more trusting relationships among everyone in the school (Gardner et al., 2005). Researchers state that when institutions create an environment that allows students and teachers to feel accepted and valued, people excel, and meaningful learning happens (Hoy & Hoy, 2003). Every interaction between the principal and teacher is an opportunity to build or destroy trust (Cosner, 2009). Authentic relations with followers lead to trust (Gardner et al., 2005). Principals must

establish trust to create a positive school climate and restructure the organization to increase collaboration among teachers. The importance of trust may be overlooked by some principals even though it is generally believed that strong principal leadership is the single most important factor in school effectiveness (Edmonds, 1979; Ontai-Machado, 2016). Trust is normally treated as a perception by followers of an organization's leader or a firm's upper management; however, trust can also be elevated to the level of the group or the climate (Collins & Smith, 2006). In addition, a principal's perceptions of what is needed to promote a positive climate is important. What is even more important is determining if there is a significant relationship between the principal's perceived actions that promote a positive staff morale and authentic leadership and servant leadership behaviors that influence positive school staff morale in elementary schools.

Servant Leadership and Staff Morale

Research on servant leadership includes a growing body of evidence that points to a positive relationship between servant leaders and job satisfactions with followers. Servant leadership theory is a behavioral theory that suggests that, through their servant behaviors, servant leaders influence long-term servant behaviors in their followers. Servant leaders understand how the needs of their staff influence their job satisfaction and behavior. Servant leadership is the act in which a devoted leader collaborates with a follower through the eagerness and manner of serving in such a profound way that the leader and follower lift each other to a greater degree of accord (Frick & Sipe, 2009). Researchers such as Greenleaf (1977), Laub (1999), Spears (1995), and others have created theoretical models to explain the theory and practices of servant leadership. Greenleaf saw the servant leader as a servant first; one who is capable of developing followers as servant leaders. Laub saw servant leaders as leaders who put the needs of those led before their own needs. In addition, servant leadership creates a

framework that includes six servant leadership behaviors: (a) valuing people, (b) building community, (c) developing people, (d) displaying authenticity, (e) sharing leadership, and (f) providing leadership. Servant leaders recognize that each follower has different needs, interests, and desires. The servant leaders take an interest in understanding those unique characteristics of each follower. Servant leaders use their understanding of the followers to focus their behaviors on the wellbeing of the followers and on building the capacity of the followers to benefit the organization. Researchers such as Peterson et al. (1999) concluded that leaders who exemplified servant leadership behaviors were less extraverted, were more agreeable, had a strong sense of themselves, and identified with the organization. Servant leaders often connect emotionally to followers. According to researcher like Greenleaf (1998), servant leadership starts when the leader seeks to cater to the needs of others; through this service, people follow. Servant leaders focus on how to help their followers achieve organizational goals.

There is a relationship between authentic leaders and servant leaders' influence on staff morale and school climate. Servant leaders are both authentic and ethical. They enhance followership through their unique leadership characteristics (Autry, 2001; Greenleaf, 1998).

Statement of Research Problem

The behaviors of elementary school leaders can impact school climate positively or negatively. Thus, principals need to understand the importance of their role in fostering school climate; they must be able to evaluate their current climate and develop a focused plan for improvement (Kohm & Nance, 2007). Teachers' perceptions of their leaders' behaviors within schools impact teachers' perceptions of their work conditions and their morale. Teachers want to work at schools that have a positive school climate. They remain in the profession which benefits student achievement. If connections between certain behaviors of the principal and school

climate exist, those connections could provide information regarding the specific leadership behaviors principals should use in their schools.

School climate is comprised of the attitudes and perceptions of school stakeholders and what they feel. School leaders within an organization have a significant amount of influence on school climate. Identifying the behaviors of principals who have successfully promoted a positive school climate, based on the perceptions of their teachers, may assist future and current principals with adjusting their leadership practices to do the same within their organization.

This phenomenological study explored lived experiences and actions of elementary school principals who have achieved a positive school climate during their leadership. The district provides an annual survey to measure school climate. According to the 2018-2019 district survey on school climate, over 65 of the 133 elementary principals in this district did not have positive staff morale. The district expects school leaders to develop a plan to address any concerns raised by the survey results. However, there is no stockpile of research-based guidance provided by the school district for principals to develop knowledge of the leadership behaviors that positively impact teacher perceptions of their work conditions and morale. Insights gathered from this research can serve as a framework for school leaders to help them lead a positive school climate and increase staff morale.

My School Climate Journey

In May 2016, at the end of my third year as the elementary principal at my current school, the district administered a school climate survey to staff in every school in the district. The survey had a question that asked staff if morale was positive at their school. For 3 consecutive years, my school's climate data showed low staff morale. Each year of the survey's administration, it was completed by 50% or more of the entire staff. Of staff members

completing the survey each year, less than 30% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that staff morale was positive. This was very surprising. The first year, in response to these district data, my supervisor had to present to the Board of Education a rationale for the low score and a plan. During the presentation to the Board of Education, my supervisor mentioned the survey data for our school was surprising. Based on my supervisor's input, typically a school with low staff morale data like ours, would have had other concerns such as staff complaints and union issues. However, my school did not have any of these problems.

In response to the data, our school was required to develop a detailed plan on how to address the school climate/staff morale concerns. Developing a plan to address the issues was a difficult task for many reasons. First, the district survey has low participation per school, so it does not represent the entire school. Second, the district survey only provided a percentage of responses based on the number of respondents and it was limited in providing details about the specific concerns of survey participants. Furthermore, the district had no sample plans or guidelines about how to go about addressing the concerns. It also did not have a list of actions that would be suitable for an array of circumstances. In short, there was no guidance that was developed district-wide, and schools were left to create a plan based on their own resources.

As the principal, I corralled the leadership team and key staff members to help develop a new survey to gather input from the staff about how we could improve staff morale and school climate. We sent the survey to the staff towards the end of the first quarter of the school year. Comments on the completed surveys were clear. The staff members were candid in their comments which showed a deficit view of me as the principal. There were critical comments about my ability to lead and that my positive demeanor was disingenuous. My Caucasian Assistant Principal was described as the bright light that our school needed, and I was referred to

as a dark shadow. Comments also referred to me as the Assistant Principal's counterpart.

Although the comments seemed directed at me and were very personal at times, I was content to hear the voices of the staff and get some perspective as to the low score on our district survey.

We were able to address some comments to show that we were committed to making improvements based on staff input. The following year, 2018, our score increased slightly. The district discontinued administration of the survey after 2018. Nevertheless, I continued to give the survey in the following years, but I gave it every quarter, allowed staff to provide additional comments, shared the data with the staff, and provided feedback on how we would address their concerns. In addition, we instituted an onboarding process for staff new to our school. I also shared my leadership style, my purpose, and my vision with staff multiple times throughout the year. I also invited them to share their vision for our work. I increased my time getting to know the staff on a personal level and began to share more about myself. I hired staff who were aligned with my vision for the school which enabled me to develop a strong leadership team of caring individuals who enjoyed working with me and our community. We incorporated fun and care for the staff and strived to meet their personal and professional needs as a first line approach in all situations. Our mottos were "Whatever It takes!," "One Band, One Sound," and "All Hands-on Deck." In May 2019, when the survey was given for a fourth time, we saw a huge increase in our staff morale data. We went from 18.4% in 2018 agreeing that staff morale was positive to 88.2% agreeing that staff morale was positive (see Table 1). I continued to give the survey every quarter to my staff and allowed them to provide comments. I truly believe that when I was my authentic self, showed care towards my staff, gave the staff a voice, built strong relationships, and was accessible, my school's climate changed for the better and the staff's perception of their work environment was more positive. School leaders have influence and

school climate starts with us. Our plan worked for us; however, this study makes the task of developing a plan manageable and research-based for other school leaders. It provides lived experiences and examples that can be replicated to help other school leaders, in this and other districts, address staff morale and school climate concerns.

Table 1

Researcher’s School District Climate Survey Data by Year

School Year	Response Rate	Total Agreement
2016-2017	52%	29.3%
2017-2018	60%	10.2%
2018-2019	63%	18.4%
2019-2020	50%	88.2%

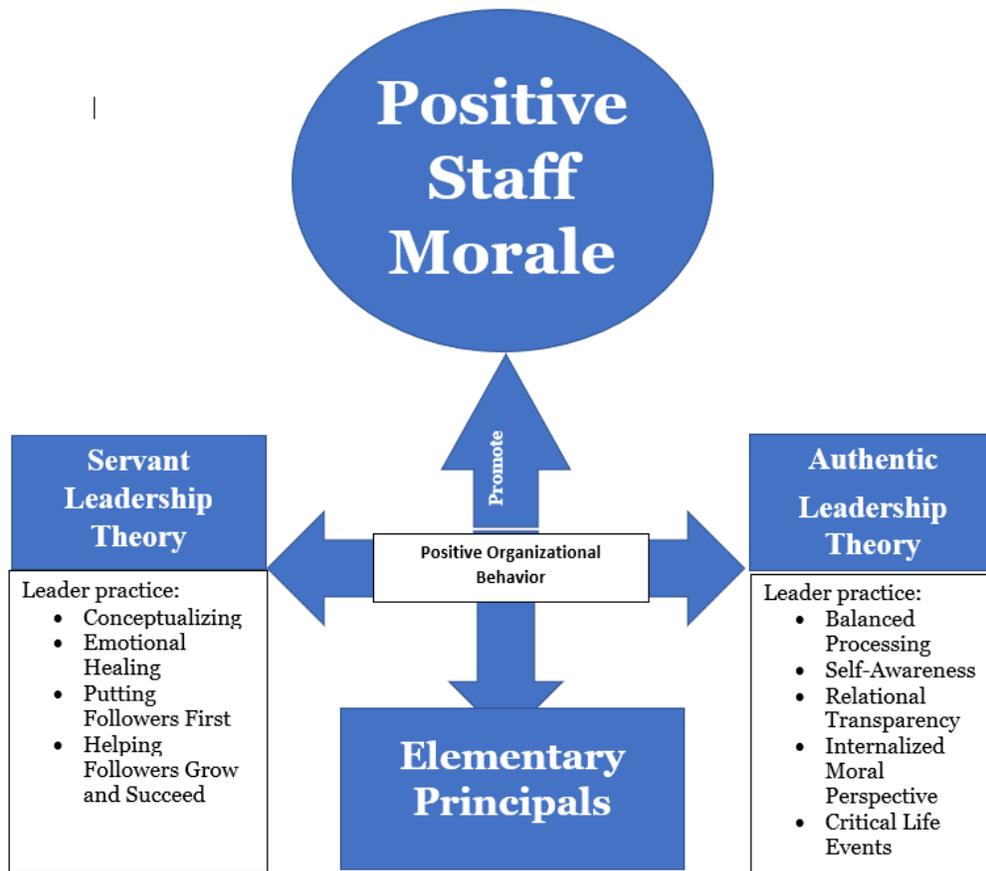
Conceptual Framework

The relationship between authentic leadership, servant leadership, and positive organizational behavior was examined in the literature review and data collection process during this study. In this study, POB, as the conceptual framework for this study, refers to the staff’s perception of their school’s climate, which is defined as their staff morale. Positive organizational behaviors can exist if teachers perceive that their basic needs are being met. In addition, during traumatic times, such as the time of this study conducted during the heighten strife of racial inequities with the murder of George Floyd and the stressful COVID-19 virus pandemic, it is most important for leaders to use trauma-informed approaches. Trauma-informed leadership privileges a view of creating support and safety for staff by meeting their needs (Greig et al, 2021).

This phenomenological qualitative study explored the relationship between staff morale and the actions of school leaders that they perceived promoted a positive school climate. Figure 1 is a visual representation of how the concepts, beliefs and theories of this study informed the research. It depicts the constructs of authentic leadership (balanced processing, self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, and relational transparency) working together with the constructs of servant leadership (conceptualizing, putting followers first, helping followers grow, and succeeding in creating actions that lead to positive employee and staff morale). It also shows how positive organizational behaviors are embedded in both authentic leadership and servant leadership. The combination of these three constructs promotes a positive staff morale.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Theoretical Framework

Authentic Leadership Theory

Authentic leadership theory, the theoretical framework of the study, makes distinctions between three types or levels of authenticity: an individual's personal authenticity, a leader's authenticity as a leader, and authentic leadership as a phenomenon (Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Yammarino et al., 2008). Authentic approaches to leadership have become more important as demands have been placed on school leaders to be transparent, aware of their own beliefs, and use a moral and ethical perspective while leading. The void of ethics and morals in leadership, drove Luthans and Avolio (2003) to focus their research on leadership and positive psychology; they make a distinction between transformational leadership and the new type of leadership, with a positive approach to leading, called authentic leadership. Positive psychology and authenticity are elements of authentic leadership. Luthans and Avolio defined authentic leadership as "a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulation positive behaviors on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development" (p. 243). The theory of authentic leadership consists of four components; self-awareness, balanced process, internalized moral perspective and relational transparency.

A leader's authenticity is the combination of personal experiences (i.e., values, thoughts, emotions, and beliefs) and actions that are in accordance with one's true self (expressing what one really thinks and believes and behaving accordingly). Authenticity is further explained as the ability of a person to recognize one's acts in order to express oneself in the way that is consistent with his inner thoughts and feelings (Harter, 2002). Authentic leaders are those who lead with purpose and integrity. They build enduring organizations, motivate their employees to provide

superior customer service, and create long-term values for shareholders (George, 2003). Through increased self-awareness, self-regulation, and positive modeling, authentic leaders foster the development of authenticity in their followers. In turn, the follower's authenticity contributes to their well-being and the attainment of sustainable and veritable performance (Gardner et al., 2005). Trust in leadership is found to be associated with a variety of important organizational outcomes including belief in information, commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, satisfaction with leaders, and intention to stay (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Consistent with this, authentic leadership scholars have explicitly recognized their intellectual debt to the humanistic values of psychologists such as Rogers (1963) and Maslow (1968) as important influences on the development of this new positive perspective on leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Servant Leadership Theory

Servant leadership theory emphasizes service to others and recognition that the role of organizations is to develop people who can build a better tomorrow. It addresses the notion that leaders have become selfish and need a more positive approach to leadership to help resolve the challenges of the 21st century leaders who are often rooted in unethical practices. Servant leadership was created by Greenleaf over three decades ago in 1970; however, it remains understudied and not practiced in school organizations. It is prominently practiced in boardrooms and organizations (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Leading organizational management authors have discussed the positive effects of servant leadership on organizational profits and employee satisfaction (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Servant leaders are distinguished by both their primary motivation to serve (what they do) and their self-construction (who they are). From this conscious choice of 'doing' and 'being,' they aspire to lead (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Greenleaf (1977) believed servant leadership was an inward lifelong journey.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to provide a compilation of lived experiences and actions for elementary principals to use as a framework to guide their planning to improve staff morale. Phenomenological studies answer the question, what is the nature of the essence of the experience (Patton, 1990, p.10). The participants in this study shared their leadership actions that they perceived promoted a positive staff morale and school climate. The study elevated influences of authentic leadership theory, servant leadership theory, and positive organizational behavior theory. As a result, the study provided a compilation of actions to share with other elementary principals as a framework to add to or improve their leadership behaviors to enable them to promote a positive school climate for their staff.

Research Questions

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of elementary school principals regarding their leadership actions that promote a positive staff morale and school climate. Primarily, this study was designed to be used to help all principals improve the school climate and staff morale. The research questions are:

RQ1: What are the elementary principals' perceptions of the actions a leader takes to promote a positive staff morale?

RQ2: What critical life experiences do elementary principals believe impacted their leadership actions that improved staff morale?

The goal of the study was to obtain school leaders' perceptions of what leadership actions promote positive staff morale and school climate. School climate is comprised of the attitude and perceptions that define the morale of the staff. Research indicates that school leaders within an organization have a significant amount of influence on staff morale and school climate.

Overview of Research Methodology

The study's qualitative approach aimed to reveal the lived experiences of elementary principals from their point of view rather than from that of the researcher (Glesne, 2006). This study was narrow in focus and sought to gain actual accounts of elementary school principals from a large school system in a Mid-Atlantic state. Although the findings represented experiences of elementary school principals in one school system in a Mid-Atlantic state, conclusions cannot be drawn about the impact of these experiences beyond this population. Data sources included a self-assessment survey, a semi-structured interview, and a focus group. In this Mid-Atlantic district, 33 schools were identified as having positive staff morale based on their scores on a district climate survey that was administered to all schools in the district in the years of 2016, 2017, and 2018. All 33 elementary school principals were invited to participate in a self-assessment survey administered in this study. Twenty elementary principals participated in the survey(See Appendix A for the self-assessment survey). All 20 survey participants were also offered an opportunity to participate in the semi-structured interviews; however only 11 elementary principals participated in the semi-structured interviews. Five elementary principals who participated in the semi-structured interviews were also invited to participate in the focus group based on their responses to questions on the impact of race and gender during the semi-structured interviews

Participant Interviews School Type and Staff Morale Data

The participants listed in Table 2 represented three types of schools based on their percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced meals (FARMS). Schools with a high percentage of students who received FARMS are designated Title 1 Schools. Title 1 funds are given by the state to the district. Schools with a moderate percentage of students receiving

FARMS are funded as Focus Schools. Focus schools are unique to this district. Schools with low percentages of students receiving FARMS are considered non-focus. Elementary principals represented in this study led schools with student enrollments that range from 340 to 640 students. Two of the schools represented with the lowest enrollment, also are single-administrator schools, which means they have a principal position and no assistant principal position. All participating schools serve students in grades K-5 except Steady Rock Elementary School which serves only students in grades 3-5.

Table 2

Interview Participant Staff Morale Data by Years of Experience

Participant Pseudonym	School Pseudonym	Years of Experience	2016 Staff Morale Data	2018 Staff Morale Data
Shari	Steady Rock ES	0-5	88	98
Marvin	Maple Lane ES	6-10	88	100
Olivia	Olive Lane ES	6-10	75	95
Betty	Bright Valley ES	6-10	71	95
Edward	Evergreen Valley ES	6-10	80	89
Paul	Proud Valley ES	6-10	90	90
Sonya	Still Valley ES	6-10	80	88
Shona	Sweet Valley ES	6-10	80	83
Shay	Sunny Rock ES	6-10	88	98
Alicia	Aloe Valley ES	16-more	69	81
Lisa	Lark Valley	16-more	68	100

Ethical Procedures

In order to respect, protect, and show appreciation for the participants in my study, I created a consent form that explained the study and the ways that each person and their data would be protected (See Appendix B for the Informed Consent Form). Each participant was required to sign the form using a pseudonym to protect their identity. I acknowledged that this study used the positive parameters that the participants provided and verbally praised them for being the voice of positive outcomes for the study and the district. Once I submitted to and received the Hood College Institutional Review Board's (IRB) approval to conduct the study, I sent the 33 potential participants an electronic mail requesting their participation (See Appendix C for the Hood College IRB approval document).

Data Collection Methods

Twenty elementary school principals participated in the self-assessment survey. Of the 20 elementary school principals who completed the self-assessment survey, 11 agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview. Of the 11 interviewed participants, I invited five to participate in a focus group. The focus group participants completed a self-anchoring scale, sentence completion task, and ranking activity guided by the researcher. This allowed for triangulation of the data collected from the three methods: the survey, individual interviews, and focus group. The design of the methods aligned with the primary and sub research questions.

As the researcher in this qualitative study, I was the main collection tool. During the time the study was conducted, our nation faced the COVID-19 pandemic which required practicing social distancing. As a result, I collected data virtually.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data collected from the self-assessment survey, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. The data unveiled concepts and topics related to the research questions. I collected the self-assessment survey data using a Google Form and used manual coding to analyze the data. I conducted the semi-structured interviews using the Zoom platform to record each session and provide a transcript. After reviewing the audio transcriptions from the interviews, I conducted a theme analysis. I coded the interview data using three iterations of manual coding (Anfara & Mangione, 2002). Then, after multiple cycles of analysis, themes emerged through further manual coding. The focus group session lasted 45-60 minutes, and the data were captured using the Zoom platform, which provided an audio recording and transcript of the session. I reviewed documents that depicted previous research to determine relationships between the actions of the elementary principals, authentic leadership theory, and servant leadership theory. Also, I completed text mining with seminal and current research on teacher and leader perceptions of school climate and the impact of leadership. I used manual coding to show relationships between the participants' responses and theory. The units of analysis for this study were (a) leadership perceptions of actions, (b) influences of authentic leadership and servant leadership theories, and (c) positive school climate.

Context

The setting for this study was a Mid-Atlantic school district that had 209 schools, 135 elementary schools, 40 middle schools, and 26 high schools. The study focuses on elementary school principals. Of the 135 elementary principals in this large school system, approximately 33 of the schools met this study's criteria with high enough scores on a district school climate survey given across all years from 2016-2018. The survey included a question about staff

morale. Schools that achieved or maintained a percentage of 80% or higher for positive staff morale for all 3 years were invited to participate. Also, schools whose percentage over time improved to accomplish 80% on the 2018 administration of the school district's climate survey were also included.

District Climate Survey

Organizational climate data analysis allows for leaders to ascertain the perceptions of staff as they pertain to the workplace and the effectiveness of the leader based on actions and behaviors. In this study, a Mid-Atlantic districts' school climate survey data that captured climate data pertaining to staff morale was used to identify elementary principals who promoted a positive staff morale.

The school climate survey was distributed to staff directly by the school system via an electronic link. This survey served as an essential source of information about the perceptions of each school's climate as well as the perpetual conditions created to maximize learning for students. This school system expected school-based leaders to partner with the teacher leaders to analyze the staff climate data and develop an action plan in a spirit of continuous improvement. Additionally, it was suggested the school climate survey be used to inform school improvement goals and school structures when the response rates were high and better reflected the perceptions of staff. The staff climate survey included items on shared decision-making, high expectations for student learning, school safety, staff morale, collaboration, and school quality. For this study, I focused on staff morale specifically.

Purpose of the School Climate Survey

The target audience for the staff climate survey was all active, permanent (.5 FTE or more) school-based staff. Administrators, teachers, instructional professionals, and support staff

were included. The climate survey was distributed by the district through an online invitation to all staff in elementary, middle, high, and alternative schools. The staff survey contained 17 items and four demographic questions. Staff responses provided their level of agreement using a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*; *not applicable* was also a response. The items measure employee satisfaction as it relates to professional growth, morale, collaboration, shared decision-making, safety, and cleanliness. The basis of the survey is perceptual and reflecting the beliefs and attitudes of the school-based staff, i.e., what the staff thinks and feels. Often the *not applicable* response on the survey allowed staff members the option not to decide rather than not to respond. Because of the anonymous nature of the survey, there was no option for leaders to follow-up with the staff who participated; this further delayed appropriate actions to unfavorable scores. The lack of having a follow-up procedure for non-responders is a common type of error in research that leads to bias and inappropriate conclusions (Ponto, 2015).

Description of the School Climate Survey

The staff survey was developed in collaboration with the employee associations in this large school system in a Mid-Atlantic state. The components of the survey were not aligned with what experts say should be included in a study that assesses organizational climate. Additionally, there was no apparent progression or sequence to the order of the questions. For example, the first item relates to professional growth and the next item inquiries about the perception of staff morale. Skipping from topic to topic is problematic because it potentially biases the participant. Once the results of the survey are shared, school principals were directed to create an action plan to address any low scoring areas on the survey. There were no guidelines or framework for principals to use to develop strategies. It was expected that school principals would work with

their school leadership teams to determine which actions should be implemented to improve school climate.

School climate and staff morale are complex concepts. Improving school climate and staff morale is challenging for principals; it is even more challenging with no guidance or direction. For the purpose of this study, I used the question on school climate survey that pertained to staff morale and selected elementary school principals who scored 80% or higher at least two of the years the climate survey was administered to participate in this study.

Researcher Positionality

At the time of this study, I, was employed as an elementary school principal in this study's large school system context. This fact created the possibility of researcher bias. For that reason, I made every effort to balance any potential bias by using the entire data set during the analysis phase. Thus, I contributed practical experiences as a working professional having both knowledge and understanding of the environmental context. Since I had some of the same experiences uncovered in the research, my biases, judgments, and assumptions were acknowledged. I was committed to a high degree of on-going critical self-reflection while interpreting and analyzing study findings. In order to increase the credibility of the research procedural safeguards, I used open-ended questions, recordings from virtual platforms, and pseudonyms for participants.

Boundaries/Delimitations

This study had limitations due to the size and context of the sample population. All responders to the survey, interviews, self-anchoring scales, sentence completion tasks, and focus groups were elementary school principals within a large school system in a Mid-Atlantic state. Therefore, the perceptions of middle and high school principals were not represented in this

study's findings. There are other leaders within elementary schools, such as assistant principals, who were also not represented in this study. Consequently, the members of the sample had many common experiences that may not exist in other school systems. These shared experiences may have included similar access to professional development, district protocols, and procedures. In addition, although the experiences discussed were focused on past experience prior to the pandemic, participants shared current experiences such as the complexities of leading a school with similar needs for school improvement, for safety due to mitigating the spread of the COVID-19 virus, for student and staff management, and for virtual or in-person assessment and curriculum implementation demands. Therefore, the transferability of the findings in this study are considered based on these unique parameters.

The ability to generalize the causal associations found in the study comprises its transferability. There is no indication that the findings can be related to a larger population outside of the sampling used in the study (Maruyama & Ryan, 2014). Causality was not determined by this study as it was qualitative by design. Lastly, leadership experience, age, ethnicity, race, and gender may have had an impact on the perception data.

Significance of the Study

The rationale for this study was birthed from the desire to provide elementary school leaders with insights, practices, and actions to improve staff morale and school climate for teachers in elementary schools. Over 60% of elementary schools in this Mid-Atlantic district struggled to promote a positive school climate, while more than 30% of the elementary schools in this district had success with promoting a positive school climate. This study provided an opportunity for successful elementary school principals to share their lived experiences with the majority or principals in need. In addition, this study attempts to fill an existing void of practical

knowledge, resources, considerations, trainings, and opportunities for mentorship. Every elementary school principal aspires to create a work environment that is positive. However, every elementary school principal does not have the prerequisite skills to do so. Consequently, this district did not offer targeted trainings to elementary principals to address this important need that impacts teacher attrition and effectiveness. Increased positive school climate is correlated with improved student achievement and a decrease in teacher attrition. Students deserve to have master teachers, and teachers deserve the best leadership and support when working with students. Also, the staff's basic needs (physiological, safety, esteem, and self-actualization) should be met and, finally, the interactions among staff in the school should promote positive modeling around balanced processing, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and self-awareness.

Definitions and Key Terminology

Authentic Leadership Theory—Authentic leadership theory makes distinctions between three types or levels of authenticity: an individual's personal authenticity, a leader's authenticity as a leader, and authentic leadership as a phenomenon in itself (Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Yammarino et al., 2008). Authentic leadership theory is a part of the growing popularity of positive perspectives that exists throughout the social sciences, including psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), organizational studies (Cameron et al., 2003) and organization behavior (Luthans, 2002). Luthans and Avolio's (2003) chapter on authentic leadership development is generally credited with being the starting point of the research program on authentic leadership (see Avolio et al., 2009; Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). It is said to be the union of Avolio's interest in full range leadership and Luthans' work with positive organizational behaviors (POBs). The theory focuses on the following areas as they pertain to a

leader's behaviors: (a) self-awareness, (b) relational transparency, (c) internalized moral perspective, and (d) balanced processing.

Authenticity—Authenticity is the combination of personal experiences (values, thoughts, emotions, and beliefs) and acting in accordance with one's true self (expressing what one really thinks and believes and behaving accordingly).

Elementary School Principal—The principal is termed a school leader, an educational leader, an instructional leader, who provides purpose and direction for the school and school community (Parent-Teacher Association, 2007). The principals in this study served students in prekindergarten to fifth grade.

Leadership Style—Leadership style is the manner and approach of providing direction, implementing plans, and motivating people. As seen by the employees, it includes the total pattern of explicit and implicit actions performed by their leader (Clark, 2015).

Organizational Climate—According to Madhukar (2017), some scholars define organizational climate as a function of a person and interaction with the organizational environment as well as independent variables that may be influenced by individuals or subjective perceptions.

Positive leadership—In contrast to the type of leadership that contributes to managerial malfeasance and ethical failures, positive leadership provides optimism in the face of negative and difficult circumstances (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Positive forms of leadership are associated with, but not limited to, a transformational, charismatic, servant, and spiritual leadership with authentic leadership theorized as a root construct of other forms of positive leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Positive Organizational Behavior—This is the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capabilities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance and improvement in today’s workplace (Gardner & Schermerhorn, 2004). Additionally, positive organizational behaviors include characteristics of confidence (or self-efficacy), hope, optimism, and resilience that can be developed among leaders and followers alike (Luthans, 2002; Luthans & Avolio, 2009; Luthans & Youssef, 2007).

Servant Leadership Theory—It begins with the natural feeling one wants to serve and to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first (Greenleaf, 1970). Spears (1998) developed the 10 characteristics of servant leadership: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.

School Climate—School climate is the attitude and perceptions of school stakeholders and what they can feel (Jackson, 2018). In this study, a district survey is used to determine a school’s climate based on a 17-item Likert scale. The perceptions of staff are collected in a variety of areas such as school morale, effective communication, and feelings about involvement in decision-making. School climate consists of the attitude and perceptions of school stakeholders and what they feel. School culture includes the beliefs, customs, and expectations that influence behaviors, perceptions, and practices (Jackson, 2018).

Staff (Employee) Morale—According to Merriam-Webster, staff or employee morale is the mental and emotional condition (as of enthusiasm, confidence, or loyalty) of an individual or group concerning the function or tasks at hand. It could also refer to the level of individual psychological well-being based on such factors as a sense of purpose and confidence in the future.

Summary

This chapter presented the key elements that show the importance of studying the perceived actions of elementary school principals that promote a positive school climate. It outlined authentic leadership theory and servant leadership theory. Elementary principals are influential figures in their organizations. This study highlights the actions they perceive have helped them maintain or improve their school climate over the years. It will be a useful resource for elementary school principals who are in search of guidance for promoting positive staff morale and school climate in their schools. The following chapters will include a review of the literature for the constructs of the study, an overview of methodology, an analysis of the findings and implications of the findings. Table 3 provides a summary of this chapter.

Table 3

Summary of Chapter 1

Element	Summary
Purpose of the Study	<p>To identify the leadership actions of elementary principals that promote a positive morale.</p> <p>To provide a compilation of actions to share with other elementary principals as a resource to assist them with promoting a positive staff morale.</p>
Justification	<p>Sixty percent of the elementary schools in this district have low staff morale. A system-wide comprehensive plan to address this problem does not exist.</p>
Methodology	<p>This phenomenological study includes qualitative analysis of 20 self-assessment surveys, 11 semi-structured interviews and a five-participant focus group.</p>
Research Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="467 827 1403 894">1. What are the elementary principals' perceptions of the actions a leader takes to promote positive staff morale?<li data-bbox="467 907 1403 974">2. What critical life experiences do elementary principals believe impacted their leadership actions that improved staff morale?
Theoretical Framework	<p>Constructs of authentic leadership (balanced processing, self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, and relational transparency), constructs of servant leadership (conceptualizing, emotional healing, putting followers first, helping followers grow and succeed creating actions that lead to positive employee and staff morale), and positive organizational behaviors (hope, resilience, confidence, and optimism) support improved staff morale.</p>
Limitations	<p>This study had limitations due to the size and context of the sample population. All responders to the survey, interviews, self-anchoring scales, sentence completion tasks, and focus groups were elementary school principals within a large school system in a Mid-Atlantic state. Therefore, the perceptions of middle and high school principals are not represented. There are other leaders within elementary schools, such as assistant principals, that are also not represented in this study.</p>

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of literature includes relevant studies, benchmark studies, and informational texts relevant to leadership styles and school climate. I include a review of relevant literature on the applicable topics of this study including leadership theory, organizational school climate, authentic leadership, servant leadership theory, and positive organizational behavior (POB). In addition, the connections between the constructs themselves and the actions of leaders are drawn to show relevance to this study.

This purpose of the phenomenological study was to provide a compilation of lived experiences and actions for elementary principals to use as a framework to guide their planning to improve staff morale. The participants in this study shared their actions that they believe promoted positive staff morale and school climate in their organization. The identified actions will be examined to determine if there are any influences associated with organizational climate, authentic leadership theory, POB, and servant leadership theory.

School climate consists of the attitude and perceptions of school stakeholders and what they can feel. School culture includes the beliefs, customs, and expectations that influence behaviors, perceptions, and practices (Jackson, 2018). The effectiveness of an elementary school principal is partly a function of the school's climate in which they work. School climate also refers to the way school staff work and fit with the school's goals. An important task of the principal is to work for a climate in which curriculum development, instruction, and student learning can continue to improve. Leadership trust and POBs seem to be key ingredients for a positive school climate. The importance of trust may be overlooked by some principals (Ontai-Machado, 2016). Increased responsibilities for school principals sometimes become a priority

over behaviors that promote a positive climate which leads to lessening feelings of connection and belongingness for staff.

The definition of authentic leadership theory is often described as the union of Avolio's interest in full-range leadership (see Avolio, 1999) with Luthans' work on POB (Luthans, 2002). The core characteristics of POB, confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience are keys to high performance systems (Luthans, 2002). POB makes managers concentrate on people's strengths rather than their weaknesses (Gardner & Schermerhorn, 2004). Similarly, authenticity concentrates on one's inner thoughts, beliefs, and emotions and acts in a way that reflects one's true self. Authentic leaders lead with their values and earn trust by practicing their values every day. Thus, the authentic leader affects the company performance in a positive direction (Khan, 2010).

In comparison to other leadership theories, authentic leadership theory is fairly new; early research of Yammarino and colleagues (2008) about authentic leadership theory found only seven empirical reports including three book chapters, one journal article previously identified by Yammarino and colleagues, two other journal pieces, and one referenced conference paper.

Educators are more satisfied when they feel that their basic needs are met, and they reach a level of acceptance of connectedness to the people and work environment (Maforah, 2015). When teachers have an assurance of their own worth and their job's importance, a sense of belonging to the group, and a trust in the official leadership, they are ready to attempt to improve instruction (Patrick, 1995). Authentic leadership theory and servant leadership theory were the focus in the analysis of the results of this qualitative study. The actions of elementary principals were used to provide guidance for the types of actions that could improve staff morale and organizational climate in elementary schools.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Authentic Leadership Theory

Contemporary leadership theory and practice describe authenticity in relation to self-awareness of one's fundamental values, purpose, and attributes the motivational effects of leadership to the consistency of leader's values and behaviors and the concordance of their values with those of follower (Sparrowe, 2005). The theoretical model of authentic leadership includes the leader's behaviors as well as characteristics of the followers and leaders, such as their levels of psychological capital, suggesting a more integrative approach to studying leadership and organizational behavior (Gardner et al., 2005; Luthans et al., 2006).

There are two approaches to authentic leadership: practical and theoretical. The practical approach was developed by Bill George in 2003 when he combined his experience as an executive with interviews with 125 successful leaders. George found that authentic leaders have a purpose, strong values, trusting relationships, self-discipline, and compassion. A leader's experiences facilitate the development of these qualities, which are essential parts of becoming an authentic leader. The theoretical approach to authentic leadership was developed from research beginning in 2003 as a response to extensive ineffective and unethical leadership.

Authentic Leadership and Staff Morale

The concept of authenticity has its roots in Greek philosophy (e.g., To thine own self be true). Harter (2002) provides excellent reviews of the origins and history of authenticity within the fields of philosophy and psychology. Authentic leadership, as proposed by Luthans and Avolio (2003) and further developed by Gardner et al. (2005) and Avolio and Luthans (2006), is a process by which leaders are deeply aware of how they think and behave, of the context in

which they operate, and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths.

Components of authentic leadership were developed by Walumbwa and other researchers who conducted a review of the literature about authentic leadership (Walumbwa et al., 2008). As part of their search, the researchers found studies revealed at least two important patterns. The first was their relative success in finding support for theoretical predictions. The studies suggested that leader authenticity is a relevant and potentially important issue for followers. The perception of how authentic a leader is matters to the members of the organization, and members appear to respond favorably to leaders they perceive as authentic. Follower attributions of leader authenticity have been linked to positive emotion (Jensen & Luthans, 2006), organizational commitment (Jensen & Luthans, 2006; Walumbwa et al., 2008), and performance (Walumbwa et al., 2008). The four components of authentic leadership theory are self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, relational transparency, and balanced processing (Walumbwa et al., 2008). The authentic leader is confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, transparent, moral/ethical, future-oriented, and gives priority to developing associates to be leaders (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). One study examined organizational climate as a mechanism to measure authentic leadership's effect on followers. The measurement remained at the individual level (Caza & Jackson, 2011). Despite the theoretical emphasis on the collective and relational effects associated with authentic leadership, nothing beyond individual perception and behavior has yet been tested.

Four Components of Authentic Leadership

Gardner et al. (2005) developed a model regarding the idea of self-awareness. They maintained that by being more aware of oneself, a leader will appear to be more authentic from an outside perspective. Internalized moral perspective is a self-regulatory process whereby

individuals use their internal moral standards and values to guide their behaviors rather than allow outside pressures to control them. Possessing such a perspective supports the ability of the values of authentic leadership to be viewed by others. Balanced processing is a self-regulatory behavior that refers to an individual's ability to analyze information objectively and explore other people's opinions before deciding. Being unbiased and fair is a significant aspect of this component. As a leader, one might not agree with something they are told, but it is vital for them to ascertain and process the information. "Relational transparency refers to being open and honest in presenting one's true self to others" (Northouse, 2015, p. 203). Also, relational transparency is considered a self-regulatory behavior that shows both the negative and positive aspects of emotions. Relational transparency permits the people that are being led to see the positive leadership traits in the best and worst of situations. Together, these four components (self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, relational transparency) form the foundation for a theory of authentic leadership (Northouse, 2016).

Additional factors that influence authentic leadership are positive psychological capacities, moral reasoning, and critical life events. Four key positive psychological areas that influence authentic leadership are confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Confidence means having self-efficacy, the belief that one can succeed. Luthans and Avolio (2003) maintain that confident leaders "are more likely to be motivated to succeed, to be persistent when obstacles arise, and to welcome a challenge" (Northouse, 2015, p. 204). Hope is the belief or expectation that a task or objective can be positively completed. Leaders who are hopeful inspire others to be hopeful and trusting. Optimism is having a positive outlook or expectations regarding what will happen in the future. "Leaders with optimism are positive about their capabilities and the outcomes they can achieve" (Northouse, 2015, p. 204). Resilience is the

ability to positively recover from a setback, regardless of its magnitude. Resilience also relies on processes, structures, and practices that promote competence, restore efficacy, and encourage growth that equips organizations with capabilities to mitigate increased strain (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2003). Moral reasoning influences authentic leaders in the decision-making process. A leader's moral reasoning guides their perception of right and wrong. It also helps them make decisions on behalf of the greater good. Critical life events that shape who the leader is, whether positive or negative, seem to strengthen a leader's capacity to adjust to adversity and change.

Positive Organizational Behavior

Luthans (as cited by Gardner & Schermerhorn, 2004) defined POB as the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capabilities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance and improvement in today's workplace. Similarly, authenticity concentrates on one's inner thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and acting in a way that reflects one's true self. Specifically, authentic leadership in organizations is defined as a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors of leaders and associates that fosters positive self-development (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). When the trait of authenticity emerges in someone who becomes a leader and role model for the company's values, and the leader practices the values of the company daily, the authentic leader affects the company performance in a positive direction.

Eagly (2005) explored the conditions for authentic leadership theory. Specifically, she focused on cases where leaders who transparently expressed and acted on their core values, consequently, failed to achieve what she calls relational authenticity with followers. Possible reasons for failure included values that were not shared by followers and/or the hesitation among

followers to allow the leader the right to promote such values on their behalf. In such cases, persons who show authenticity to lead may nevertheless fail to garnish the personal qualities and capabilities required to secure the trust and commitment of followers. Eagly argued that women and other outsiders who have not traditionally had access to certain leadership roles may find it difficult to achieve relational authenticity because they are not accorded the same level of legitimacy as leaders.

Servant Leadership Theory

The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead (Greenleaf, 1970). Spears (1996) carefully considered the work of Greenleaf and developed the following 10 characteristics of servant leaders :

- **Listening-** Servant leaders seek to identify the will of those that follow them and help to clarify that will. The servant leader listens intently to what is being said and not said. Listening also encompasses hearing one's own inner voice. Listening, coupled with reflection, is essential to the growth and well-being of the servant leader and members of the organization.
- **Empathy-** The servant leader empathizes with the members of their organization and creates a feeling of acceptance and recognition of their special and unique strengths. One assumes the good intentions of co-workers and colleagues and does not reject them as people, even when one may be forced to refuse to accept certain behaviors or performance. Servant leaders are empathetic listeners.
- **Healing-** The servant leadership has the potential for healing oneself and one's relationship to others. Servant leaders recognize that they have an opportunity to help

make whole those with whom they come in contact who may have experienced emotional hurt.

- **Awareness-** General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant-leader. Awareness helps one in understanding issues involving ethics, power, and values. It lends itself to being able to view most situations from a more integrated, holistic position. As Greenleaf (2002) observed, “Awareness is not a giver of solace—it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener.”
- **Persuasion-** In making decisions within an organization, servant leaders rely on persuasion rather than on one’s leadership position of authority. The servant leader seeks to convince others rather than coerce compliance. The servant leader is effective at building consensus within groups.
- **Conceptualization-** Servant leaders seek to nurture their abilities to dream great dreams. The ability to look at a problem or an organization from a conceptual perspective means that one must think beyond day-to-day realities. For many leaders, this is a characteristic that requires discipline and practice. The traditional leader is consumed by the need to achieve short-term operational goals. Leader who wish to also be servant leaders must stretch their thinking to encompass broader-based conceptual thinking. Within organizations, conceptualization is, by its very nature, a key role of boards of trustees or directors. Servant leaders are called to seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day operational approach (Spears, 2010).

- **Foresight-** The servant leader uses foresight to understand the connections between the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future.
- **Stewardship-** The servant leader works closely together with all members of the organization to uphold the organization to excellence for its greater purpose. All members assume responsibility of serving the needs of each other. Servant leadership, like stewardship, assumes, first and foremost, a commitment to serving the needs of others.
- **Commitment to the Growth of People-** The servant leader is deeply committed to the growth of every individual within the organization. The servant leader recognizes the responsibility to nurture the personal and professional growth of employees and colleagues.
- **Building Community-** The servant leader seeks to identify some means for building community and suggests that building a true community can be created among those within the organization.

These 10 characteristics of servant leadership are by no means an exhaustive list. However, they do serve to communicate the power and promise that this concept offers to those who are open to its invitation and challenge (Spears, 2010).

Servant leaders provide support to staff to build their capacity and help them grow and heal. The organization of a school for efficient management is determined by the principal's conception of school management (Patrick, 1995). Leadership in the organization has placed an emphasis on training school leaders to support the changing school climate. These positive professional relationships are demonstrated by the desire to help and support each other by

respecting professional competence and by supplying strong social support to colleagues which, in turn, displays a commitment to students (Blum et al., 2002; Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Hoy & Hoy, 2003). When teachers have the assurance of the importance of their jobs, a sense of belonging to the group, and a trust in the official leadership, they are ready to attempt to improve instruction. According to Peterson (1999), teachers in schools with positive cultures feel supported and are inspired to learn, grow, take risks, and work together.

Competing Perspectives

In early studies of school organizational climate, Halpin and Croft (1963) identified the slippery concept of leader authenticity as a key element regarding the extent to which a school climate was open or closed. Halpin and Croft (1963) discussed the authenticity concept as a serendipitous by-product of his organizational climate studies. He believed authenticity was a "fuzzy" concept defying operational measure. In contrast to many findings on the importance of educational leaders on school climate and staff morale, (Shaw, 2009; Al-Safran et al., 2014) found no significant correlational relationship between the leadership style of the principal and the morale of the teaching staff. Conclusions such as mirror work by Helwig (1969) and Boykin (1983) concluded a low positive relationship between the leadership styles exhibited by the principal and the general morale of the teachers. The study also found many other factors that contributed more to morale beyond the school leader. Heller, Clay, and Perkins (1993) found no significant relationship between teacher job satisfaction and principal leadership style.

Authentic Leadership versus Transformational Leadership

Differences between authentic leadership and transformational leadership have come under scrutiny due to the redundancy and similarities of both styles of leadership. There are many differences and similarities between transformational leadership and authentic leadership.

Regarding conceptual differences, transformational leadership focuses on developing followers for the purpose of performing leadership roles (Avolio, 1999), whereas authentic leadership is more concerned with developing followers' sense of self more generally (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Also, authentic leaders are not necessarily charismatic or inspirational, yet transformational leaders communicate their vision to stimulate creativity among followers within an organization. Other components of authentic leadership theory that differ from transformational leadership theory include (a) a reciprocal relationship between positive psychological capital and authentic leadership/followership, (b) open and transparent relationships with close others, (c) alignment between leader values and ethical conduct, (d) a positive, strengths-based perspective, and (e) follower authenticity and development (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). These differences reflect the core premise of authentic leadership that the alignment of the leaders' values and behavior produces tangible benefits for the leader in the form of heightened levels of psychological well-being. In turn, authentic leadership theory aligns with my study that focuses on improving school climate for staff.

Synthesis of the Literature

Evolution of Leadership Theory

The concept of leadership has universal appeal. Despite the abundance of research and literature about leadership, there is no universal definition. A review of the leadership literature reveals an evolving series of schools of thought from trait theories to newer theories such as authentic leadership. Leadership is complex and researchers have found it challenging to fully understand. According to Stogdill (1974), there are just as many definitions of leadership as there are people who try to define what it is. Yukl (1989) defined the word leadership in terms of

“individual traits, follower perceptions, leader behavior, interaction patterns, role relationship influence, task goals, and influence on organizational culture” (p. 252).

Trait Theories

We have heard statements such as, “He is born to be a leader” or “She is a natural leader.” These statements are commonly expressed by people who see leadership based on the traits of an individual. In the early 20th century, these theories were referred to as the “great man” theories because they focused on identifying the innate qualities and characteristics possessed by social, political, military personnel (e.g., Catherine the Great, Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Joan of Arc, and Napoleon Bonaparte) (Bass & Avolio, 1990). Some of these traits that people were born with are suited to leadership. “With the right combination of traits, people will become or make good leaders. Four traits identified are (a) management of attention, (b) management of meaning, (c) management of trust, and (d) management of self” (Bennis, 1999, pp. 2-3). An effective leader must adhere to these specific details. Leaders who possess these traits can create an environment that will allow individuals to feel empowered, have significance, and work as members of a team. In the trait theory, traits can be perceived as positive or negative. Trait theory is described as patterns of behaviors that make a leader who he is as a leader (Grys, 2006). The author explains six traits that have received wide empirical support: cognitive capacities, personality, motives and needs, social capacities, problem-solving skills, and tacit knowledge (Grys, 2006). The information pinpoints that the relationship between leaders and followers is formed through the perceptions of their interactions.

Behavior Theories

The approach of behavior theories to leadership focuses on what leaders do and how they act. Leadership has been considered an influential process that assists groups of individuals

toward goal attainment (Northouse, 2016). Leadership defined as a process negates the notion that it is about the character traits of an individual; rather it is more about using influence to bring individuals together. These theories concentrate on what leaders did rather than on their qualities. Bolden et al. (2003) contend that the behavioral theories came about after the publication in 1960 of *The Human Side of Enterprise* by Douglas McGregor.

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

The leader-member exchange approach to leadership focuses on the interactions between leaders and followers. The assumption that leaders treat all followers in a collective way is challenged by this theory that highlights the differences that might exist between a leader and each of the followers. “In a meta-analysis of 164 leader member exchange (LMX) studies, Gerstner and Day (1997) found that LMX was consistently related to member job performance, satisfaction (overall and supervisory), commitment, role conflict, clarity, and turnover intentions” (Northouse, 2016, pp. 140-141).

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership theory focuses on a leader’s ability. According to Northouse (2016),

Transformational leadership theory gives more attention to the charismatic elements of leadership and the leader’s ability to influence followers to accomplish more than is expected. Since the early 1980s, the research about this approach to leadership has grown at an increasing rate, not only in traditional areas like management and social psychology, but in other disciplines such as nursing, education, and industrial engineering. (p. 161)

Transformational leadership contrasts with (a) instructional leadership that pertains to hierarchies and leader supervision that excludes teacher development, and (b) transactional leadership that is based on services exchanges for different kinds of rewards that the leader controls (Liontos, 1992). Marks and Printy (2003) contended transformational leaders motivate their followers to go beyond their self-interests for the sake of the organization by raising their followers' consciousness about the importance of the organization's goals.

Authentic Leadership Theory

Authentic leadership theory is one of the newest approaches to leadership and is in the formative stage of development (Northouse, 2016). The incorporation of a moral and ethical perspective moves the theory of authentic leadership beyond transformational or full-range leadership (Avolio et al., 2005). Authentic leadership focuses on the authenticity of the leader and whether the leadership is genuine or real. Authenticity has been shown to influence individual well-being and enduring social relationships (Erickson, 1995; Rogers, 1959). Maslow (1968) suggested that satisfying higher-order needs was a precondition to authenticity. Authentic leadership theory is differentiated into two approaches: practical and theoretical. The authentic leadership construct encompasses four dimensions; self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing.

According to Marks and Printy (2003), instructional leadership in the 1980s considered the principal the primary source of educational expertise. Barth (1986, as cited in Marks & Printy, 2003) contended that the role of the principal was to (a) maintain high expectations for teachers and students, (b) supervises classroom instruction, (c) coordinate the school's curriculum, and (d) monitor student progress (p. 372).

School administrators were also advised that teacher job satisfaction depends primarily on the quality of the administrative relationships in which teachers were involved and the quality of the leadership they received (Patrick, 1995). Collaborative leadership styles are those in which administrators and teachers routinely work together to promote effective teaching and learning. The collaborative school is often characterized as one in which teachers engage in frequent, continuous, and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching practices. In addition, teachers are frequently observed and provided with useful critiques of their teaching. Teachers work together to plan, design, research, evaluate, and prepare teaching materials. The collaborative principal facilitates this process of teachers working together and teaching each other the practice of teaching. Schmuck (1985) stated collaboration ultimately depends on the development of norms of cooperation among the school's personnel. Sagor (1992) felt that collaborative principals survey their staff often about their wants and needs. Maehr et al. (1993) contended that when people are personally invested in their work with an organization and have a voice in what happens to them, their work becomes more meaningful and significant because it is viewed as contributing to a higher purpose or goal. Teachers who perceived their principals as using a collaborative leadership style rated their schools as having more positive school climate than did the teachers who perceived their principals as using a directive or non-directive style of leadership (Mendel, 2002). Fundamentally, if the schools' organizational structure is to increase positively, principals' leadership styles must first change. A thorough understanding of effective leadership styles and practices broadens the knowledge of and investment in behaviors influencing student achievement, teacher efficacy, and school climate (Ross, 2016).

Authenticity

The concept of authenticity has attracted attention of humanistic psychology. Positive psychology aims to understand organizational dynamics and positive human processes that make organizational life meaningful (Sagnak & Kuruoz, 2017). Followers want a trusting relationship with their leaders. Authentic leaders can open themselves and establish a connection with others. Through mutual disclosure, leaders and followers develop a sense of trust and closeness (Northouse, 2016). Luthans and Avolio (2003) suggested that authenticity is represented in part by positive psychological capacities. In contrast, Gardner and colleagues (2005) maintained that authentic relations with followers lead to trust. Although ethicists suggest that leaders who are true to their values are more successful, scant empirical research has linked authenticity to organizational performance indicators. However, initial empirical findings suggest that authentic leadership at the individual level has an impact on follower organizational citizenship behaviors, follower commitment, follower satisfaction with the leader, and follower performance (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Themes from the authentic leadership literature apply to organizational settings. One is that people can learn to be authentic leaders suggesting that human resource departments can foster authentic leadership behaviors in employees who move into leadership positions (Northouse, 2016, p. 209). Another theme is that authentic leaders tend to do the right thing, be honest with themselves and others, and work for the common good. Authentic leadership can have a positive impact on organizations. For example, Cianci et al. (2014) investigated the effect of authentic leadership on followers' morality and found that authentic leaders significantly inhibited followers from making unethical choices.

Influence of School Leaders on Staff Morale

Creating meaningful interaction with faculty and staff may be a preferred role for principals who are attempting to establish a supportive environment and a climate for learning (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992). Consequently, what a leader says or does communicates what is important. While looking at leadership and its motivators, a place to start is examination of the morals, values, and needs that drive the individual. Personal leadership traits are commonly documented across various schools, methodological approaches, and belief sets. Thus, certain expectations are communicated which are related to the organization's fundamental values and assumptions which, in turn, are influenced by the leader (Staessens, 1991).

Leadership Behaviors

Principal leadership behaviors have been described as the key to educational excellence (Owens, 1995). Studies have documented that the leadership of the principal can influence teacher and student educational performance, community approval, and school climate (Gottfredson et al., 2005). The leader's behavior is a powerful display of mannerisms that convey the expectations, and values of the organization that sets the tone for the organizational climate (Grojean et al., 2004). The connection between leadership behavior and positive school climate provides a way for principals to meet the increased demands for improvement in student academic achievement (Epperson, 2018). When a leader is perceived as bad by one member of an organization, that opinion is perceived to be widely held by other members of the organization (Erikson et al., 2007). Lewin and Lippitt (1939) and White and Lippitt (1960) conducted some of the earlier studies to investigate the effects of democratic, autocratic, and laissez-faire models of leadership on group climate and group achievement. Many studies followed these early studies on autocratic and democratic patterns of leadership. The results were mixed. Stogdill (1974)

concluded that the evidence does not show that democratic leadership increases production. However, the evidence was strong that democratic leadership is positively related to group member satisfaction. Some investigators compared group-members-centered and task-centered leadership. Of 28 studies reported by Stogdill, 19 showed a positive relationship between follower-oriented leaders and production, and nine studies showed either a zero or negative relationship. The evidence was even stronger in favor of follow-oriented leaders and the satisfaction of their followers. But there were still many cases at variance with the follower-oriented theory of leadership.

The evidence is beginning to form that there may not be one best style of leadership behavior (Patrick, 1995). Collaborative, democratic, and transformational leadership styles seem to have a positive effect on school climate. However, authentic leadership style has a positive impact on school climate. It encompasses the characteristics of trust, morality, and positivism that followers believe help to create positive organizational behavior. In addition, authentic leaders employ collaborative measures as they lead using balanced processing.

Leadership Style

The leader's values are developed through their own experiences, culture, and beliefs. The success of principals stems from their values, character, and leadership style that create a climate where everyone is working toward the same goals (Fullan, 2002). Murphy and Hallinger (1992) and Hallinger (1992) concluded that school leaders needed to adopt more collaborative forms of leadership when faced with increasingly complex situations, uncertainty, ambiguity, and high expectations for innovation and reform. Authentic leadership contributes to numerous positive outcomes including increasingly developed followers, workplace well-being, trust, engagement, commitment, empowerment, enhanced follower performance, and job satisfaction

(Avolio et al., 2004; Gardner, et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Leadership is a process through which an individual secures the cooperation of others toward the achievement of goals in a setting. High faculty morale and satisfaction seem to be influenced by the school administration, and, as a result, a positive school climate emerges.

Staff Morale

School leadership is vital to an organization. If leaders are not selected wisely, organizational damage and morale issues can quickly arise (Mcintosh & Rima, 1997). Leadership behaviors impact staff morale and satisfaction. The evidence indicates that, where teachers have the freedom to plan their work and opportunities to participate in policy making in matters of curriculum and teacher welfare, morale is high. Equally important is the consistency of administrative behavior, so that teachers know what to expect.

Authentic Leaders and Positive School Climate

Authentic leaders impact group climate by creating norms around empowerment, positive emotional states, and engagement (Carsten et al., 2010). Trust, collaboration, interactions, and economic exchanges increased when leaders exhibited authentic leadership behaviors. Authentic leaders are thought to use positive emotions to influence the emotional climate of a group through emotional contagion or through the spread of similar emotions through social networks (Gardner et al., 2005).

Making a difference in schools is the primary task of principals; determining how to influence and motivate teachers to be engaged and involved at school is essential. School leaders face regularly many difficult challenges including dealing with teachers' work stress and burnout. The importance of psychological capital is equal to that of financial, human, and social capital. Related research supports a link between psychological capital and positive outcomes at

the individual (employee behaviors, attitudes, and performances) and organizational levels (organizational change and organizational climate) (Avey et al., 2008; Luthans et al., 2007). Authentic leadership is viewed as one method of enhancing employees' psychological capital. Luthans and Avolio (2003) depicted authentic leaders as confident, hopeful, optimistic, and resilient (p. 243). Avolio et al. (2004) proposed that authentic leadership can influence employees' attitudes through the psychological processes of identification, hope, positive emotions, optimism, and trust.

Positive Psychology and Traits

Positive psychology focuses on positivism at three levels—the personal experience, the individual level, and the group or organizational level. At the experiential level, positive psychology recognizes and emphasizes various subjective experiences or states, including well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present) (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Positive psychology considers traits, such as a capacity for love, courage, interpersonal skill, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, spirituality, and wisdom. Positive psychology is also about the study of strength and virtue. It includes building what is right within an individual coupled with a quest at the organizational level for what is best in work, education, insight, love, growth, and play (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi). Authentic leadership and servant leadership significantly draws from positive psychology (Seligman, 1999), and its organizational application is known as positive organizational behavior (Luthans, 2002).

Positive psychology recently emerged as a critical paradigm shift within the field of clinical psychology. For nearly 50 years following World War II, clinical psychology concentrated on healing psychological damage from a disease model of human functioning

devoted to addressing pathologies (Seligman, 2005). However, Seligman (1999) recognized that such an approach was extremely unbalanced, in that, by concentrating on pathologies it overlooked the restorative power of focusing on the positive qualities within a person. Thus, Seligman and others (see Snyder and Lopez, 2005, for a full review of positive psychology and its related applications) have called for psychological treatment based on the building of personal strengths as opposed to merely treating pathologies.

Influences of Organizational Behavior

The term 'school climate' has been defined by many researchers. School climate is comprised of how members of the school community feel about their school. It includes their impressions, their beliefs, their expectations of their school as a learning environment, the symbols and institutions that represent the expressions of their behavior, and their associated behavior (Homana et al. 2006). School climate has also been conceptualized into four frameworks. The first and second conceptualizations of school climate view it as the measurement of an individual's relations with other employees in the work environment and in terms of faculty-principal or subordinate-superordinate relationships (Halpin & Croft, 1963; Likert, 1961). The third conceptualization involves human behavior in response to the internal and external environment ability to meet personal needs of individuals (Steinhoff, 1965; Stem, 1970). The final conceptualization of school climate focuses on the relationship between teachers and their students (Willower et al., 1967).

The concept of school climate has been expanded through school effectiveness researchers to identify school-level factors (including climate) which impact student achievement (Brookover & Lezotte. 1979; Keefe et al., 1985). The essential elements of effective schools have the following notable characteristics:

- strong administrative leadership;
- a climate of high expectations;
- an orderly and quiet atmosphere conducive to learning;
- pupils' acquisition of basic skills takes precedence over all other school activities;
- school resources can be diverted to furtherance of the fundamental objectives;
- frequently monitored pupil progress in achievement used as the basis for program evaluation. (Edmonds, 1979; Edmonds, 1982).

An open climate describes the authenticity and openness of interaction between leaders and their employees (Raza, 2010).

Social Interactions

School climate is observed and experienced by each member of the school and is depicted through the social and professional interactions with the administration (Duff, 2013). Every interaction between the principal and teacher is an opportunity to build or destroy trust (Cosner, 2009). Perhaps the most essential ingredient in teacher satisfaction is the attitude of the teacher toward the principal (Patrick, 1995). The relationships teachers have with their peers in informal groups in the school are also very important. Every child deserves to spend most of their time with a master teacher who is familiar with their learning needs. Student achievement increases when teachers are consistently present. Moreover, research has concluded that school climate has a significant impact on student achievement and social-emotional health, as well as teacher job satisfaction and retention (Jackson, 2018). Organizational climate includes two goals that educators have persistently pursued: productivity and satisfaction (Howard et al., 1987). Furthermore, Edmonds (1979) envisions productivity in schools as most evident in academic achievement. Owens (1995) views satisfaction as high morale, trust, and cohesiveness.

Therefore, schools with high levels of satisfaction among employees and high student academic achievement are usually schools with a good climate (Howard et al., 1987).

Relationships

Factors that influence school climate vary. Advancement is not a factor associated with teacher satisfaction or dissatisfaction; the work itself is a potential source of either satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Sergiovanni, 1967). Factors which seemed to contribute primarily to teacher dissatisfaction are poor relations with peers and students, unfair or incompetent administrative and supervisory policies and practices, and outside personal problems. It should be noted that the conditions affecting satisfaction or dissatisfaction, or both, as reflected in Sergiovanni's study, do not vary with the gender, teaching level, or tenure status of the teacher (Sergiovanni, 1967).

The relationship between school leaders and followers has been shown to influence organizational climate. The impact of these relationships in the workplace is commonly referred to as organizational climate. For schools, specifically, research demonstrates that the organizational climate can enhance or detract from effective schooling (Anderson, 1982; Hoy & Hoy, 2003). The perceptions of the members of a school influence school climate. There is growing evidence perceptions of members influence attitudes and behaviors of the educational team as well as the behavioral and social skills of the students on both ends of the spectrum (Collins & Parson, 2010; Flay, 2000; Patton et al., 2006). More specifically, Hoy & Hoy (2003) define school climate as a set of enduring qualities embedded in a school's environment that, when experienced by actors, influences their behaviors. They note that when institutions create an environment that allows students and teachers to feel accepted and valued, people excel and meaningful learning happens (Hoy & Hoy, 2003). Teachers' perceptions about their leader's behaviors to promote a positive school climate are important. A factor contributing to teacher

attrition is the amount of support received from school principals (Quinn & Andrews, 2004).

Table 4 includes a summary of major works relevant to this study.

Table 4

Selected Major Works by Research Field

Author	Date	Research Field	Research Contributions Used in this Study
Avolio & Gardner	2005	Authentic Leadership	Root of positive forms of leadership
Caza & Jackson	2011	Authentic Leadership	Events in the leaders' past impact their leadership
Cianci et al.	2014	Authentic Leadership	Influence on followers
Gardner et al.	2005	Authentic Leadership	Ideal of self-awareness and leadership
Khan	2010	Authentic Leadership	Lead with their values impact company performance
Luthans & Avolio	2003	Authentic Leadership	Development of Authentic Leadership theory
Sparrowe	2005	Authentic Leadership	Motivation of followers based on the leader's values
Walumbwa et al.	2008	Authentic Leadership	Theory development
Yammarino et al.	2008	Authentic Leadership	Connection to Positive Organizational Behavior
Frick & Sipe	2009	Servant Leadership	Definition of Servant Leadership
Greenleaf	1977	Servant Leadership	Servant Leadership Theory and followers
Greenleaf	1998	Servant Leadership	Cater to the needs of followers, service
Laub	1999	Servant Leadership	Concept of putting needs of others first
Parris & Peachey	2013	Servant Leadership	Impact of servant leadership on employee satisfaction
Spears	1996	Servant Leadership	Ten characteristics of Servant Leadership
Boykin	1983	Organizational Behavior	Correlation between principal leadership, teacher morale
Brookover et al.	1979	Organizational Behavior	Elements of effective schools, school atmosphere
Duff	2013	Organizational Behavior	Social interactions drive perceptions of morale
Hoy & Hoy	2003	Organizational Behavior	Feelings of belongingness in an organization, perceptions
Luthans	2002	Organizational Behavior	Positive Organizational Behavior (POB)
Mani & Devi	2010	Organizational Behavior	Staff Morale
Ontai-Machado	2016	Organizational Behavior	Trust and leadership
Raza	2010	Organizational Behavior	Leader and follower interactions
Seligman	2000	Organizational Behavior	Positive Organizational Behavior

Summary

This chapter discussed leadership theory, organizational school climate, authentic leadership theory, servant leadership theory, and positive organizational behaviors (POBs) to help the reader understand the relationship between leadership, positive school climate, and the behaviors that research attributes to influencing positive organizational behaviors. The rationale for presenting this information was to give some context as to what types of practices one can expect that principals do to promote a positive school climate and why they take those specific actions in their schools. Finally, studies related to authentic leadership were reviewed to understand how authentic leadership behaviors promote a positive school climate. Chapter 3 includes information regarding research design and the methodology used in this qualitative study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is richly descriptive and is used effectively in educational research. Merriam (2016) states, “having an interest in knowing more about one’s practice, and indeed in improving one’s practice, leads to asking researchable questions, some of which are best approached through a qualitative research design” (p. 1). Maxwell (2013) indicates there is no cookbook for qualitative methods and there is no such thing as inadmissible evidence in trying to understand the issues or situations you are studying (p. 97). The relationship between the research questions and data collections methods and triangulation of different methods are key conceptual issues in qualitative research. The phenomenological qualitative research design was chosen for this study to gain lived experiences, perceptions, and background information to address the research problem.

The purpose of this study was to gather the lived experiences of elementary school principals who have had success promoting positive staff morale. In addition, it sought to identify the actions and behaviors these elementary school principals perceived promote positive staff morale and school climate. The study focused on the perceptions of elementary principals in a large school system in a Mid-Atlantic state who had scored 80% or higher each year or in the 2018 on the district’s school climate survey that was administered in the years 2016, 2017, and 2018. The survey was based on the perceptions of the staff in the school. The score of 80% or higher each year or only in 2018, on the areas of the survey that focused on staff morale were used to select the elementary school principals. The study identified the principals’ actions and examined how the actions of the elementary principals aligned with the authentic leadership and servant leadership theories.

I collected data from a self-assessment survey, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and a self-anchoring scale activity that was only completed by participants in the focus group I compiled, coded, analyzed, and triangulated the data. The intent is for results to be used to help other elementary school principals promote positive staff morale and school climate within their schools. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the elementary principals' perceptions of the actions a leader takes to promote positive staff morale?

RQ2: What critical life experiences do elementary principals believe impacted their leadership actions that improved staff morale?

This chapter begins with a discussion of the research design, the study setting, and the researcher's positionality. It continues with a description of the participants, the data collection, and the data management. The final sections describe piloting, data analysis, boundaries and delimitations, and trustworthiness.

Research Design

The purpose of the phenomenological study was to capture the essence of the lived experiences of elementary school principals regarding the phenomenon of how the actions they take improve staff morale. Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of meaning of our everyday experiences (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). This phenomenological approach included a self-assessment survey, semi-structured interview and focus group. Each method provided ways to collect the words, concepts, and descriptions of the participants. The context of the shared lived experiences was based on how the participants perceived it, described it, felt about it, judged it, remembered it, made sense of it, and talked about it with others (Patton, 2015, p. 104). Ultimately, the goal was for participants to share this information to provide a

framework for all district elementary school principals and other leaders to use to improve or maintain positive staff morale and school climate.

The qualitative phenomenological approach was used to gather firsthand perspectives of each principal through a self-assessment survey, a semi-structured interview, self-anchoring scale activity and a focus group. Results from the self-assessment survey, semi-structured interview, self-anchoring scale activity, and focus group were examined against the literature to uncover any relationships between the data, authentic leadership, and servant leadership theories. The data were coded and then triangulated around themes discovered through the data analysis.

Context

The setting of this study is a Mid-Atlantic school district that has 209 schools, 135 elementary schools, 40 middle schools and 26 high schools. This study focused on elementary school principals. Of the 135 elementary principals in this large school system, approximately 33 of the schools met the criteria for participating in this study. The criteria were based on scores on a district school climate survey that was given in the 2016, 2017 and 2018 school years. The survey includes a question about staff morale. Principals from elementary schools who achieved or maintained a percentage of 80% or higher on this question for all 3 years or improved their percentage over time to accomplish 80% on the 2018 administration of the school district's climate survey were eligible for participation. I submitted my research plan to the Mid-Atlantic school district and received its approval to recruit elementary school principals and conduct the research in the district (See Appendix D for the district's approval to conduct the research).

Researcher Positionality

As the researcher, I was responsible for gathering and analyzing the data. I too was an elementary school principal who worked in the same large school system that was the setting for

this study. It was vital for me to divulge that, since 2016, the school climate survey had been critical in my work with my staff. The school district administered this survey once a year to all staff members and used the results to determine which schools had a positive school climate. Unlike the participants in this study, my school was identified as a school that did not have a positive school climate. Each year my school's leadership team created a school climate action plan as part of the school improvement efforts to address the poor climate survey results. During this process, we received little guidance from the district as to how to develop the plan. The district survey results did not provide any useful information for school leaders to address climate concerns. Therefore, the strategies for addressing school climate concerns were created based on the school leader's knowledge, which varied from leader to leader. This research was something that I would have greatly appreciated having as a school leader, and I am sure many of my colleagues would have felt the same.

I equated my low school climate data, in 2016, 2017, and 2018, to several things that involved the staff, organizational norms, and my own intentional and unintentional behaviors. Each year, with little guidance from district leaders, our school team came up with possible solutions to increase staff morale, such as:

- increase more effective communication processes;
- recognize and praise staff members;
- provide equity training to help us work with others, understand others, and build better trusting relationships;
- conduct training on microaggressions and biases about age, race, and gender;
- set clear processes and expectations around staff-to-staff interactions, staff-to-student interactions, and staff-to-parent interactions;

- communicate consistent messages and outlines for staff to guide their work and expectations in the building for working together;
- create an open and trusting environment of connection and transparency that starts with the school leadership team, enabling the staff to understand my leadership and decision-making style better, and know me more on a personal level; and
- evaluate school climate through frequent data collection that includes staff voice through commentary.

It was a common practice for elementary school principals and their school teams to use their prerequisite knowledge to create plans to address staff morale. Effectiveness of the plan was based solely on the collective capacity of the elementary school principal and the school team. For most of the elementary school principals in my district, this led to multiple years of low staff morale. My hope was for my study about the experiences of elementary principals with successful staff morale to inform and inspire others to emulate their actions.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2019). I invited principals who were known to have a positive school climate. The participants were elementary school principals who had been in their current school for 4 or more years and had either improved to a score of 80% or higher or maintained a school of 80% or higher for the prior 3 years (2016-2018). In this Mid-Atlantic school district, there were 33 elementary school principals who met these criteria. A variety of demographic elements for consideration existed within this group of elementary school principals such as size of school enrollment, low-to-high impact schools based on socioeconomics, years of experience of the elementary school principal at the school, as well as gender and race of the principals. Eight of the 33 elementary school

principals who were invited to participate in the study were African American female leaders, however, only four of them actually participated in the study. As the researcher, I was interested in learning if the experiences of these eight African American female elementary school principals had had any commonalities or differences from the larger group or me as the researcher.

Self-Assessment Survey Participants

Twenty of the 33 invited elementary school principals completed the self-assessment survey, which was a return rate over 60%. The demographics of the participant group for the survey included eight males and 12 female elementary school principals. The principals who completed the survey had been the principal of their school during the years of 2016, 2017, and 2018. Participants' self-identified ethnicity data showed that there were 11 Caucasian, six African American, two Hispanic, and one Asian participant. Demographics of years of experience as an elementary school principal indicated that seven participants had between 0-5 years of experience, eight participants had 6-10 years of experience, two participants had 11-15 years of experience, and three participants had 16 or more years of experience.

Semi-Structured Interview Participants

All of the elementary principals who completed the self-assessment survey were invited to participate in the semi-structured interview, however only 11 elementary school principals participated in the semi structured interviews. The demographics of the participant group for the semi-structured interviews included three males and eight female elementary school principals. Ethnicity data shows that there were four Caucasian, four African American, and two Hispanic. Years of experience demographics showed that one participant had between 0-5 years of experience, eight participants had 6-10 years of experience, and two participants had 16 or more

years of experience as an elementary school principal. Table 5 lists demographics of participants and their present schools.

Table 5

Semi-Structured Interview Participants by Years of Experience

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Years of Experience	Enrollment	FARM %
Shari	F	AA	0-5	607	64.6
Marvin	M	C	6-10	340	9.4
Olivia	F	H	6-10	634	17
Betty	F	C	6-10	475	58.9
Edward	M	C	6-10	543	32.2
Paul	M	C	6-10	613	45.2
Sonya	F	AA	6-10	622	41.2
Shona	F	AA	6-10	608	46.9
Shay	F	AA	6-10	491	70.1
Alicia	F	H	16-more	516	61
Lisa	F	C	16-more	368	50

Focus Group Participants

During the semi-structured interviews, five female principals shared their leadership experiences that revealed ways in which their gender and race influenced their leadership actions. As a result, those five participants were invited to participate in a focus group to delve into those experiences more fully (See Appendix E for the focus group invitation). It was always my intent to select focus group participants based on the analysis of the self-assessment survey and semi-structured interview data to gather a greater understanding of their experiences. The intersectionality of race and gender was not an original research question; however, there were related questions within the semi-structured interview protocol. The data collected during the interviews led to the decision to invite the five-female woman of color to participate in a focus

group to learn more about their unique experiences leading for a positive staff morale. I deemed it important to elevate any unique information that could help this district support female elementary school principals of color. Table 6 presents demographics of focus group participants.

Table 6

Focus Group Participants Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Years of Experience	Age Range
Olivia	F	H	6-10	45-55
Sonya	F	AA	6-10	45-55
Shona	F	AA	6-10	45-55
Shari	F	AA	0-5	45-55
Shay	F	AA	6-10	45-55

Data Collection Methods

Data sources included a self-assessment survey, semi-structured interview, self-anchoring scale activity, and a focus group of a subset of participants. Phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of lived experiences. The fundamental goal of the approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The phenomenon this study attempted to describe was the relationship between the actions of elementary school principals and positive staff morale. According to Creswell (2007, all data fall into four basic categories: observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials (p. 129). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all data were collected virtually rather than using the more typical face-to-face process associated with qualitative methodology.

Researchers may use many different techniques, but at the soul of qualitative research is the desire to expose the human part of a story through an interview. Interviews served to

discover from participants those things that cannot be directly observe including feelings, thoughts, intentions, and behaviors that took place at a previous point in time (Patton, 2002). In addition to semi-structured interviews, I used a self-assessment survey and focus group. This allowed me to triangulate the data and increase the rigor of the findings. The responses from the participants served as the evidence and answers to the research questions. The data were analyzed to identify themes associated with school type (small, moderate, large, etc.) and participant demographics (race, gender, etc.). Each of the three data collection methods is described in the following sections.

Self-Assessment Survey

A self-assessment survey was designed to have participants self-assess their leadership actions based on the characteristics of authentic leadership and servant leadership. The survey was offered to elementary school principals from the 33 schools that met the criteria of scoring 80% over time or 80% in 2018 on the district's school climate survey question about staff morale. A portion of the survey came from an adaptation of the *Authentic Leadership Questionnaire* and *Servant Leadership Questionnaire*. The portion used listed actions and requested the participants to rate themselves as doing the listed actions *most of the time*, *sometimes*, or *rarely*. The self-assessment survey also contained open-ended questions that allowed the participants to share their intentional and unintentional actions that improved staff morale in their school buildings. They were also able to share lessons that they have learned from mentors and other elementary principal colleagues about promoting positive staff morale. The data collected from these open-ended questions provided answers to the research questions in this study. The survey data were collected and analyzed by the researcher for themes and patterns.

Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data-gathering source used to help construct the participants' perspectives regarding the research questions (Anfara et al., 2002) This phenomenological study was designed to align the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants with the research questions. One interview session was conducted with each of the 11 elementary school principals participating in the study. Each conversation was semi-structured and included open-ended questions related to the research questions (See Appendix F for the Interview Protocol). The interviews were no longer than 45 minutes in length. The discussion allowed for the researcher to ask probing questions as needed.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using a virtual platform to adhere to the social distancing practices required to reduce the spread of COVID-19. The Zoom platform application was used and provided an audio recording and transcription of each interview. Data collected from the semi-structured interviews were reviewed and informed the structure of the focus groups activities.

During the interviews, most of the participants appeared relaxed and comfortable. Prior to the study, I had worked with each of the participants in some capacity. We were all elementary school principals with similar experiences, mentors, and colleagues. Some of the participants, whom I would consider friends, expressed concern about giving me enough information or good information so that I would have what I needed to successfully complete my study. It was common for participants to veer away from the interview process to acknowledge how the pandemic, virtual teaching and learning, and other aspects of transitioning from a traditional way of leading to a virtual way of leading, was impacting staff morale. In addition, the participants freely shared some adjustments they made to their leadership actions in light of the COVID-19

pandemic. At the end of each interview, I made a positive statement about the participant. I reminded each that this is a positive study to showcase their leadership based on the district's school climate survey data that suggested they were doing well at promoting positive staff morale in their schools. In addition, I made references to their interview responses that aligned with the theories of authentic and servant leadership and showed my gratitude for their participation in the interview by providing them with a token gift card.

Focus Group

A focus group is a small gathering of individuals who have a common interest or characteristic assembled by a moderator who uses the group and its interactions as a way to gain information about a particular issue (Williams & Katz, 2011, p. 2). As Krueger and Casey (2000) noted, the purpose of focus groups is to promote a comfortable atmosphere of disclosure in which people can share their ideas, experiences, and attitudes about a topic. Focus groups are used for generating information on collective views and the meanings that lie behind those views. They are also useful in generating a rich understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs (Gill et al., 2008). Additionally, focus groups can be of tremendous value if investigators are trying to generate new relationships, study the relevance of particular concepts, or understand new terminology from the perspective of various groups within a school community (e.g., parents, teachers, administrators, and students) (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Five elementary school principals who were female and woman of color were invited to participate in the focus group (See Appendix E for the focus group invitation). These participants had completed the self-assessment survey and a semi-structured interview. They were chosen for the focus group due to their responses to questions in the semi-structured interviews that alluded to their race and gender impacting their leadership actions and experience. During the 60-minute

focus group session, using the Zoom video conferencing application, each participant was asked to complete a self-anchoring scale. The scale prompted them to reflect on a few questions which focused on their lived experiences, the intersectionality of their gender and/or race, and perception of how each of those areas impacting their ability to lead for positive staff morale in their schools. I began the focus group by choosing quotes from their interviews and asked each participant to further describe the meaning of each quote. For example, the principal of Steady Rock Elementary School, Shay, had shared that she is a “soft place” for her staff to land. Each participant was asked to respond to that quote from their perspective on leading for positive staff morale. Next, each participant was asked to use a pencil, and paper to participate in a self-anchoring scale activity (See Appendix G for the focus group agenda and Appendix H for the self-anchoring scale). Then participants were asked to answer a few questions about the impact of mentors, race, and gender on their leadership actions.

The purpose of the focus group was for participants to share their own experiences and thoughts about leading schools with positive staff morale, to hear from others who had similar leadership experiences, and to contribute to a growing body of research on the impact of principal leadership on staff morale. The information shared by the participants was used to triangulate with the data provided from the self-assessment survey and semi-structured interviews in the generation of common concepts and themes. Table 7 displays the alignment of methodology with the research questions.

Table 7

Research Questions and Methodology Alignment

Research Questions	Number of Participants	Data Source
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RQ1 1. What are the elementary principals' perceptions of the actions a leader takes to promote positive staff morale?	20	Self-assessment Survey, open-ended questions: Q # 30, 31, 32
	11	Semi-structured Interviews: Q # 6, 7, 8, 12, 14
	5	Focus Group Self-anchoring scale activity
RQ2 2. What critical life experiences do elementary principals believe impacted their leadership actions that improved staff morale?	11	Semi-structured Interview: Q # 10, 11, 15, 16
	5	Focus Group Open-ended questions

Data Management

The data were collected and stored on a USB drive. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities, and the individual identities of participants were known to the researcher. A spreadsheet generated from a Google Form was used to organize data from the self-assessment surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus group. Recordings were transcribed within the Zoom application platform. My fieldnotes, the data from the USB drive, transcriptions, and backup data were stored on my personal computer, and I was the only person who had access to the data. Each participant signed a Consent Form that outlined how their data and input during the study would be kept private and used.

Once written consent was obtained, I sent each participant an email to explain the research study (see Appendix I), a link to the survey on Google Form, and an attached Informed Consent detail (see Appendix B). The Informed Consent Form described the study, assured possible participants of confidentiality, and stated that there were no costs associated with participation. Participants were given gift cards in the amount of \$25.00 for their participation. It also stated that the participants could discontinue their participation at any time during the study. The data were only accessible to the researcher, and confidentiality of the subjects was a priority. Each participant signed the Informed Consent Form.

Piloting

To get feedback on the semi-structured interview protocol and self-assessment survey prior to launching the study, I invited current and former elementary school principals to complete the self-assessment survey and pilot the semi-structured interview protocol. As a result, I was able to revise the interview protocol to shorten the completion time and address any clarity issues. In addition, my dissertation committee members reviewed the self-assessment survey, semi-structure interview protocol, and focus group protocols and provided their feedback and refinement in the areas of question clarity, open-endedness, question order, and timing. Piloting the interview protocol helped evaluate if the questions would generate the data my study intended to collect to answer the research questions prior to the actual data collection phase.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using coding practices to identify emerging themes. Saldaña (2009) suggests that small-scale studies should be coded on hard-copied printouts first, stating, “there is something about manipulating qualitative data on paper and writing codes in pencil that give you more control over and ownership of the work” (p. 26). All coding for this study was done by reviewing each data source for common concepts and ideas. Those common concepts and ideas were then color-coded based on similarities. Initial coding breaks down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examines them and compares them for similarities and differences (Saldana, 2016). The data were categorized by common concepts and topics that emerged and were used to align with the research questions of the study.

Self-assessment survey data provided demographic data and responses from 20 of the possible 33 participants who were invited to participate. The survey data answered the question about actions that elementary school principals take to promote a positive staff morale. The

responses were used to align with the research questions and were similar to answers from the other data collection methods.

Semi-structured interviews were used as a major data source to draw out the participants' perspectives regarding the research questions. The semi-structured interview questions were cross referenced to the research questions. The interview protocol questions numbers 6, 8, 12, 13, and 16 were most aligned with the research questions. These interview questions were:

- As the leader, what do you think were the most effective leadership actions that you took that impacted your staff's morale? (# 6)
- What does your staff tell you about what you say or do to improve their morale? (#8)
- What leadership actions do you think other principals who have positive staff morale have in common with you? In your opinion, why are these actions so common? (#12)
- Please choose two or three [from the list of actions that individuals may use] and share how you take actions in your school to make allowances for these behaviors amongst staff and with you as the principal. (#13)
- What have you learned from your experiences, mentors and/or other leaders about how to promote a positive school climate? (#16)

Respondents to these questions mentioned the keywords and phrases in Table 8.

During the coding process for the semi-structured interviews, initial or open coding was used. Initial coding breaks down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examines them and compares them for similarities and differences (Saldana, 2016). It was important to remain open to all possibilities to lessen interference from the researchers' positionality while analyzing the data. During the first cycle of coding, confronted with a mountain of data from 11 participants from five of the interview questions, I faced the difficult task of making sense of what has been

learned (Anfara et al, 2002). During the first cycle, the data for each question was analyzed for initial concepts based on the interviewee's responses. The concepts were color coded based on key phrases or words of the participants. The color-coded data were assigned a theme.

During the coding process for the focus group data, initial and open coding were used for the responses to the open-ended questions. Key phrases and words extrapolated from the artifact were color-coded based on emerging themes. In addition, the focus group generated artifacts from the self-anchoring scale activity. The artifact was examined and coded based on written key words and phrases. The artifact was a hand-written labeled diagram with information about the participants' perceptions about leadership actions that promote positive staff morale. The triangulation of the data collected from the self-assessment survey, semi-structured interview, self-anchoring scale activity, and focus group were used to provide evidence of the strengths and weaknesses of the tools and their ability to gather data that could answer the research questions. This triangulation created a higher level of dependability because the themes were found in all three data sources.

Boundaries and Delimitations

Due to the use of a criterion purposive sample for this study, the ability to transfer the findings to other districts and populations of elementary principals is limited. The results of the district climate survey used to identify the sample was determined not to be a valid and reliable tool for measuring positive staff morale or school climate. Also, the district climate survey used in the study was developed by the researcher. It was adapted from other tools to align with this specific district, the possible experiences of these participants with the district's survey, and expectations about staff morale and school climate. The intention of qualitative research is to

understand the meaning for specific participants within particular contexts. Therefore, situatedness and boundaries were intentional in the study design.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research establishes trustworthiness by ensuring high levels of neutrality in the research design. The researcher is the primary data collection tool, so it is crucial that the study's findings allow others to gain insights to consider in their own organization. Triangulating the data between multiple data sources, such as fieldnotes, interviews, surveys, and focus groups, increased the level of dependability. Dependability is determined by dense description of research methods, stepwise replication, triangulation, peer examination, and code recording procedures (Krefting, 1991). Confirmability by triangulation and reflexivity was used to enhance research quality by converging multiple perspectives from mutual confirmation of data while minimizing distortion from a single data source or biased researcher (Creswell, 2017; Krefting, 1991).

Summary

This chapter provided an in-depth description of the study's participants, research design, data collection methods, data management, data analysis process and the importance of triangulation of the data to explain how themes were developed. In addition, an emphasis on the significance of using qualitative tools that would elevate the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants in this phenomenological study, was shared and explained. In the next chapter, the findings are described.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to ascertain what actions elementary principals in a large Mid-Atlantic school district perceive to promote a positive staff morale. These two research questions framed the study: 1) What are the elementary principals' perceptions of the actions a leader takes to promote positive staff morale? and 2) What critical life experiences do elementary school principals believe impacted their leadership actions that improved staff morale? This chapter includes an explanation of decisions I made about coding and identifying themes, discussions about how the data were analyzed, description of the findings, and the alignment with the research questions of this study.

Data Analysis During COVID-19

When studying lived experiences of human participants, particularly as they relate to school climate and morale, having in-person interactions seemed obvious and important. However, the COVID-19 pandemic was prevalent in the United States when I conducted this study. Due to the pandemic, all the elementary schools in this Mid-Atlantic school district had issued guidelines to mitigate the spread of the virus for their employees and students. The pandemic influenced the data collection and analysis procedures which were completed virtually and documented electronically. Emails, Google documents, and video conferencing via the Zoom platform allowed me to collect the self-assessment survey, semi-structured interview, self-anchoring scale activity and focus group data, safely. Data were collected for the semi-structured interviews and focus group via Zoom which recorded and transcribed each session.

I collected the self-assessment survey data using a Google Form. The Google Form generated a Google spreadsheet that allowed me to quickly identify the ratings of each participant and the themes in their data collected from the open-ended questions. I collected the

semi-structured interviews and focus group data by using the recording from the Zoom platform's transcription feature. It allowed me to quickly collect the data from the semi-structured interviews and focus group. Then, I organized this data by creating a Google Form for each question and inputting the data. The Google Form was then easily converted to a Google spreadsheet. The spreadsheet allowed me to view all of the participants' data at once and identify key words, phrases, concepts, and common themes that emerged among all the data. On the spreadsheets, I color-coded key words and phrases to identify emerging themes.

Coding Process

During the coding process, I color-coded the data collected from the self-assessment survey, semi-structured interviews and the focus group and categorized the data based on common key words, phrases, and themes. I analyzed the color-coded key words, phrases and themes within the self-assessment survey responses, semi-structured interview data, and focus group data to identify commonalities amongst all three data sets. After organizing the data from all three methods, I identified 25 concepts through triangulation. I was able to collapse the 25 concepts into nine concepts due to the similarities among the initial concepts. The nine concepts were then organized into six themes.

Among the 25 concepts (displayed in Table 8), key phrases, such as *allow them to decide*, *staff make decisions*, and *ask their opinion*, were very common and reflected the theme of collaboration or providing staff with a voice. Several of the 25 concepts were similar, and I used those similarities, and the full context of the data to create categories that would encompass the essence of the participants' responses.

Table 8*Initial Keywords and Phrases of Interview Questions*

Initial Keywords and Phrases				
Good Listener	Admit mistakes	Help staff	Be visible	Encourage innovation
Develop Relationships	Staff make decisions	Lead by example	Let them know who I am	Clear Communication
Open Communication	Trust your people	Gather input	Give feedback	Build capacity
Be Caring	Treat staff like family	Help them grow	Exercise grace	Ask their opinion
Give Them Permission	Allow them to decide	Help invest in the work	Celebrate them	Recognize them

Initial coding breaks down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examines them, and compares them for similarities and differences (Saldana, 2016). It was important to remain open to all possibilities to lessen interference from my positionality while analyzing the data. I faced the difficult task of making sense of what I learned from the data. What I learned based on the keywords and phrase was that elementary school principals in this study seemed to prioritize collaboration, transparency, care, and appreciation as they led for a positive staff morale. In addition, they seemed to suggest that leaders are authentic and model the expectations that they have for their staff by leading by example or “walking the walk.

During the second round of analysis, I combined the nine concepts by identifying more keywords that were similar together. The analysis and combination of the nine concepts, led me to create the following themes: *show appreciation and care, support and service, collaboration, staff voice, authenticity and self-awareness, and accessibility.*

After further review of the participants’ quotes, I discovered that accessibility was used interchangeably with visibility, so I included both as part of the themes for the third analysis. I

categorized the participants' words and phrases to decide on the themes. I also reviewed and triangulated the data from all data sources to determine the findings of this study.

Self-Anchoring Scale

During the focus group, I administered a self-anchoring scale activity to the five focus group participants. A component of the self-anchoring scale activity required the five participants to share, in writing, words that described the actions of a principal who has positive staff morale. The words of the participants are outlined in the first two columns of Table 9. The first column includes words that describe the actions of elementary principals who have positive staff morale. The second column includes words that describe the actions of a principal with the poorest staff morale. During the self-anchoring scale activity, I also asked the focus group participants to rate their own staff's morale during their first year as principal, during the 2018 administration of the district's school climate survey, during the present school year of 2021; I also asked them to project what their staff morale would be in 3 years in 2024. The self-anchoring rating scale ranged from 0 to 10, with 0 representing the lowest level of staff morale and 10 representing the highest level of staff morale. As displayed in Table 9, the principals' average for their first year was 3.3. Their average for 2018 and 2021 was 7.4, and their average for 2024 was 9.2. The elementary school principals' perception data shows their belief in the actions they took to improve morale at the start of the principalship, their belief in their actions to maintain staff morale during our current year within a pandemic, and their hope for a brighter future for their staff's morale in 2024.

I organized the self-anchoring scale activity artifacts in Table 9 to show the responses of each participant. Some of the participants' responses had common ideal actions of what they

perceive an elementary principal’s actions should be in a school with positive staff morale. Some common key words from the artifact, suggested elementary principals do the following:

- Collaborate to promote communication in the form of listening to staff’s ideas, transparency of expectations, openness,
- Provide support to staff in the form of providing feedback, motivation curriculum
- Build relationships by acknowledging family, showing care towards staff, praising them for their hard work and being empathetic.
- Are consistently visible and accessible to staff

Table 9

Participants’ Responses on the Self-Anchoring Scale Activity

Participants	Ideal Action Words	Worst Possible Action Words	Average Staff Morale Ratings			
			1 st Year	2018	Now 2021	Future2 024
Olivia	Accessible	Never in the school	3	8	7	9.5
	Listen	Office door closed				
	Cares about staff	Dictator				
	Know Instruction	Ask for input doesn’t				
	Shares expectations	use it				
	Provides feedback	Mean				
Shay	Praising	Not recognizing hard	1	6	8	8.5
	Providing support and feedback	work				
	Shout-outs	Not praising or giving support				
	Acknowledging Family	No meaningful feedback				
	Listening	Not listening				
	Recognizing hard work	No empathy				
	Empathy					
Explaining reasoning						
Shari	Transparent	Not transparent	3	7	6	
	Motivational	Dictator				
	Lead by example	Poor communicator				
	Good communicator	Does not lead by				
	Listens	example				
	Consistency	Inconsistent				
Shona	Visibility	Absent	5	8	7	9
	Communication	Not involved				

Participants	Ideal Action Words	Worst Possible Action Words	Average Staff Morale Ratings			
			1 st Year	2018	Now 2021	Future2 024
	Relationships Understanding Listener	Closed door Not available School not a happy place for staff and students				
Sonya	Approachable Open door policy Visible in classroom Engaging conversations with staff Talking to students	Disengaged from students Does not know staff In their office	4.5	8	9	10

Findings

Emerging themes from all three data sources were triangulated, and I noted common themes within each data source. The elementary school principals in this study described actions that promoted positive staff morale based on their lived experiences, learned lessons from mentors, and personal philosophies on leadership. I cross-referenced and synthesized the data multiple times to identify themes from the data. The principals' lived experiences depicted actions of service to staff, collaboration with staff, reflections of their leadership journeys, deep understanding of their school's cultures, and high levels of engagement, visibility, and accessibility. The participants shared evidence of actions they believed improved staff morale in all three data collection activities. Through the coding process, six themes emerged from the triangulated data. This section will describe each theme and share triangulated data to support each theme. In their own words, elementary principals consistently shared actions that centered around the following themes to describe how they promote positive staff morale:

- Theme #1: Serve them, relate to them, build their capacity, show care, concern, appreciation, empathy. Communicate a deep belief in them personally and

professionally. Get to know your staff, treat them like family, take actions towards them in a thoughtful and meaningful way.

- Theme #2: Collaborate and engage, share the work, collect ideas and opinions, and use input from staff to create and steward a collective vision for the school.
- Theme #3: Be authentic, show them who you are, lead by example, show vulnerability, openly apologize for mistakes, be transparent, give them a voice, and allow them to challenge different opinions and perspectives. Iron sharpens iron!
- Theme #4: Be visible and accessible, be present, make time for them, stay engaged, listen fully, and be responsive.
- Theme #5: Learn the school culture and climate, acknowledge the impact of your predecessor in the first year of leading an elementary school, and make time to gather information about all aspects of the organization.
- Theme #6: Embrace your lived experiences, reflect on how your background, family, ethnicity, race, gender, and personality traits impact your leadership.

Theme #1: Serve Them, Relate to Them

Elementary school principals in this study elevated service and relationship building as key components of their leadership that promote a positive staff morale. In response to the self-assessment survey, semi-structured interview questions, and focus group discussions, the principals showed their staff appreciation, were empathetic, showed care, communicated a deep belief in their staff, and took meaningful actions to serve and relate to them.

Self-Assessment Survey

Ninety percent of the self-assessment survey participants chose *most of the time* as the response to describe how often they develop long standing relationships with many staff

members and help them through tough times. In addition, during the open-ended question portion of the self-assessment survey, elementary school principals shared that they relate to staff and show care by providing staff “with the gift of time” that allows them to have time away from work to take a break. Additionally, a principal shared they, “intentionally take time to listen to staff and deeply care about them as people. In the self-assessment survey, the school principals responded by rating themselves as *most likely*, *sometimes* or *rarely* to a set of statements and by answering some open-ended questions. In the self-assessment survey, 85% stated that they recognized and supported staff when they needed support without them needing to ask, 95% stated that their staff perceived them as a good listener, 90% stated that they believe they helped staff work through difficulties they experience at work, and 85% agreed they used what they know about the strengths and weaknesses of staff to provide them with opportunities to grow and improve professionally, most of the time. In the open-ended portion of the self-assessment survey, participants shared some of their intentional actions that they do to promote a positive staff morale.

Another shared they “intentionally give teachers tasks and assignments that will help them grow and develop as teacher leaders.” Elementary school principals also shared that they bring staff together to acknowledge them and laugh and have fun with them by doing “raffles, giveaways, food trucks, providing breakfast, gifts and scavenger hunts.” Also, another shared, they “ recognize staff in the principal’s bulletin, share teacher spotlight with staff where I take a picture and say something positive about their work.” Thus, providing opportunities to engage positively with staff, get to know them, acknowledge them, and provide support allowed these principals to effectively promote a positive staff morale.

Semi-Structured Interview

During the semi-structured interviews, the participants shared the importance of serving staff. The service was provided to support the professional, personal, and emotional needs of their staff. They also shared their reflections about building relationships and cultivating a family-oriented atmosphere in their schools. The elementary principals discussed building trusting relationships, being vulnerable, and showing appreciation for staff as ways to promote a positive staff morale. For ease of reading, I italicized direct quotations of participants in this and the following sections.

Marvin, the principal of Maple Lane Elementary School (ES), acknowledged the value in a leader knowing their staff well to better understand them, balancing accountability, and treating everyone as human-beings:

The teachers and the staff I've worked with have helped me evolve in that way, to have a better understanding...who we are. Teachers are human, as you hold people accountable, understanding that people have to be held accountable for their jobs, and they have to do their jobs, and they have to do them well because the lives of children are at stake. Trust but verify. But those same people go home to their children and their families and have to be there for them as well. You have to celebrate with them and cry with them. Our staff needs to feel valued.

Shari, the principal of Steady Rock ES, shared the importance of building staff capacity and being there for them to lean on:

Building their capacity to own the work and letting them know that I will support you and give you the resources. I'm a soft place to land and that is what I want my staff to be for

my students. Build those relationships, let people know I believe in you, I see this in you and now I'm putting you out there because you're the expert!

Shona, the principal of Sweet Valley ES shared a resource that resonated with her during her leadership journey: *There's a book that I read years ago and it was called If You Don't Feed the Teachers They'll Eat the Students. I believe that was the title and I take that literally and figuratively.*

Betty, the principal of Bright Valley ES, shared the importance of being a coach as a leader: *I will always be your coach. I often will talk to people about what they want to be when you grow up like they're already grown up, but where do you see yourself in five years.*

Edward, the principal of Ever Green Valley ES, reflected on how we should treat our staff in response to their stress:

Treat people the way you want to be treated. Our staff come to work feeling stressed, so I want them to come to work. and know that when they walk through the doors, they are supported, they are received well, they are treated well, and they are trusted with all of those things. I am a great listener. Family first is my mantra, so if there's something going on in their family, they know they can take care of it, and they know that things here will be taken care of, so the stress and anxiety is gone.

Paul, the principal of Proud Valley ES, emphasized that importance of asking staff what they need and showing appreciation:

Kind of that service leadership that I was talking about, you know, what do you need, how can I help you? When somebody says to you, I appreciate you, you know I really appreciate that you did that for me.

Alicia, the principal of Aloe Valley ES, emphasized the importance of treating staff like family and listening: *Got to treat your staff like your family, like your kids right, if you're going to say something nice keep it personal and real. Really listen when they talk.*

Lisa, the principal of Lark Valley ES elevated the importance of showing care towards staff: *I think people first, making sure that they know that you care about their wealth, and health, and their kids. I will always make sure they take care of themselves and their family first.*

Shay, the principal of Sunny Rock ES, expressed the importance of support, encouragement and exercising grace:

I'm always letting them know that I believe in them, and they can do it, and it's okay. During the pandemic, I shared with them, we're exercising grace, it's okay if you don't get to. I'm giving you permission to have grace. I'm giving you permission to make mistakes. Please come to me for help. I'm going to be there. I'm going to figure out a way to help you because we're all growing and learning. I respect my staff as adults.

Focus Group

Each focus group participant reflected on a quote from an interviewed participant about the job of a principal as “A soft place to land” for their staff. Shari, the principal of Steady Rock ES and author of that quote, also clarified what she meant by that statement. When asked, what does it mean to be a soft place for your staff to land to you, most respondents had responses similar to Shari’s:

It was a really modest way of sending the message to the staff that even when you're wrong, I believe that you can grow, and get better. You have to make them walk away from the table with their integrity, and you have to meet people where they are, but they can't stay there, they have to grow. You can't expect it to happen overnight.

Elementary principals in this study prioritized getting to know their staff members, supported their growth and healing, communicated a deep belief in their staff members, showed empathy and appreciation to their staff to help them feel a sense of belongingness and care.

Theme #2: Collaborate, Collaborate, Collaborate

In this theme, the principals discussed how they shared their power, valued the opinions of their staff, and gathered and used the input of their staff . They also discussed how that helps them promote positive staff morale. Incorporating balanced processing into their school-wide protocols allowed multiple stakeholders to have a voice in the decision-making process and express their concern in a timely way. This helped created a collective vision for the school.

Self-Assessment Survey

The self-assessment survey showed that ninety-five percent of the participants encourage staff to make important decisions about their own job-related tasks and ninety percent listen carefully to the ideas of others before making decisions in my school, most of the time. Ninety-five percent of the survey participants chose most of the time to describe how often their staff perceive them as a good listener.

Based on the self-assessment survey, the elementary principal shared some of their intentional actions that they do to promote a positive staff morale, that relate to collaboration, in their own words when asked to describe something you intentionally do to improve staff morale in your school, the survey respondents shared the following:

- I involve them in decision making processes.
- I work collaboratively with staff when there is a decision that needs buy in from the staff.
- I apply the principles of distributive leadership.

- Staff share best practices to elevate levels of expertise in the building.
- Let staff make decisions as often as possible using a process for gathering voice.

One participant indicated,

My assistant principal and I meet 2-3 times per year with every team in the building (grade levels, specialists, paras, building services, etc.) for a "State of the Union" meeting. In these meetings, teams share whatever is on their mind about the state of their team, the school, etc. There is no set agenda, but we take notes, compile them, identify patterns, and share with staff. This enables us to resolve minor issues, usually quickly, as well as to identify patterns around larger issues. For example, after years of hearing wide-scale concerns around our ESOL programming, we revamped our entire program 5 years ago based on that feedback.

Semi-Structured Interview

During the semi-structured interviews, eight of the 11 participants stated that they gathered input from their staff, had a shared vision for their school, and encouraged their staff to freely share their opinions and make decisions. Among the eight participants, collaboration was mentioned 20 times. Typical reflections regarding collaboration include the following.

Paul, the principal of Proud Valley ES, shared his belief about power: *The willingness to give up power, because the more power and control you give up, the more you get back from your staff.*

Marvin, the principal of Maple Lane ES, reflected on the benefit of including ideas and opinions of staff:

We are all open to understanding that our first ideas are probably not the best ideas, and we need input from everybody to make it the best it could be for our school, our staff, our

kids, and our families. I never work in isolation. I never go in with thinking I'm right. I go in with, we need a starting point. and based on this starting point, and the non-negotiable rules around that starting point, is this best way to proceed, or what are the questions that are arising from understanding that. Letting people know that you hear them, that you may not always agree.

Betty, principal of Bright Valley ES, shared the importance of valuing people's work: *Stakeholder input must be a commonality, not just being directive, or giving directives. Valuing people's work. and asking for people's opinions or asking other people to do the work instead of you doing it. They just appreciate being heard and knowing that they have a say in whatever decisions that are made. I share leadership.*

Edward, principal of Evergreen ES, shared the importance of allowing people to freely share their displeasure and solutions:

I asked for their preference, and they appreciated me asking. We have staff bringing their displeasure, to speak up to us in different ways, but not in a disrespectful way, but in emotionally charged ways, but we still talked about it, we worked through it, you know, and we came up with solutions together.

Focus Group

During the focus group, the elementary school principals shared the importance of sharing the work, giving their staff decision-making power, and sharing ownership of the school's vision. Shay, the principal of Sunny Rock ES, shared something that resonated with her from a popular podcast about delegation and collaboration: Shay said what resonated with her was when the guest said, "if you are always the essential person, you are not doing your job

right.” Focus group participants consistently shared the work, collected ideas and opinions from their staff, and used their staff’s input to steward the vision of the school.

Theme #3: Be Authentic

During the study it was revealed that the elementary school principals’ perceptions of actions that support a positive morale were aligned with the concepts of relational transparency, self-awareness, and morality in leadership. The participants discussed the importance of leaders modeling how to openly apologize for mistakes and challenge different opinions and perspectives in a respectful way.

Self-Assessment Survey

of the participants in the study agreed that their morals and core values drive what they do as a leader. They admitted their mistakes to their staff most of the time. Ninety-five percent of the participants indicated they let staff know who they truly are as a person. Ninety percent of the principals shared that they openly confronted unethical principles and would not compromise ethical principles in order to meet success. One hundred percent of the survey participants chose most of the time to describe how often their morals and core values drove what they do as a leader. Based on the self-assessment survey, the elementary principal shared some of their intentional actions that promote a positive staff morale, that relate to authenticity. When asked to describe something they intentionally do to improve staff morale in their schools, the survey respondents shared: *[I] remind them of the prominent things I value (children, teachers, optimism, and exceptionalism) and try to let this show in all of my interactions with staff.* A respondent also added:

I’ve created a very clear support structure at my school, which drives how we operate. I make sure that people know where and how decisions are made. I work to identify and

minimize people's insecurities. Every decision is made based on what's in the best interest of students. I also make sure that everyone's family is prioritized. One of my proudest work is that our most "introverted" staff are some of our most vocal and impactful leaders in the building.

Semi-Structured Interview

During the semi-structured interviews, the elementary principals shared their actions and practices of being authentic and the impact of their actions on promoting positive staff morale. Eight out of the 11 participants, with 12 mentions, shared thoughts about self-awareness, leading by example, being reflective, openly apologizing for mistakes, and challenging different perspectives and opinions as practices that promote a positive staff morale.

Olivia, the principal of Olive Lane ES, shared the importance of modeling your expectations: *Lead by example.*

Paul shared the importance of telling staff the raw truth and offering support: *I am kind of a straight shooter, you know, tell you the truth. tell you when I can't tell you, or that I don't know, but we'll get it worked out.*

Betty spoke about being the example for her staff of what we want out of a leader: *Reflect on what we want as people from our leaders and do that for our staff. I am done worrying about what other people think, I can reflect on that, and then I can fix it!*

Elementary principals in this study showed vulnerability, led by example, were transparent, valued different perspectives, and allowed their staff members to have a voice in the decision-making process.

Focus Group

During the focus group, participants shared their perceptions on how a leader should act to promote a positive morale. Transparency, vulnerability, authenticity, and honesty were key terms that used to describe how leaders should behave when leading their staffs. Some respondents shared their views when describing themselves as leaders.

Shay reflected on being transparent: *Being very transparent as a leader, Leadership is not about your position. People follow you because they want to, and not because they have to. Being a leader is about the influence that I am having on those around me.*

Shona, the principal of Sweet Valley ES, reflected being aware of strengths and weaknesses as the leader:

Show up as your authentic self, so that they can show up as their authentic self, because if either of us is putting on, it's not going to work. There's always room for improvement, with everyone in the building. You don't hold grudges with people, things happen, you address them, and you move on.

Sonya, the principal of Still Valley ES, reflected on her approach to sharing information with her staff: *I'm able to just be real, like I'm not going to sugarcoat it. They know that I am going to be honest, and then we will work together.*

Theme #4: Be Visible and Be Accessible

Elementary school principals in this study reflected on the importance of being visible and accessible. In the very busy life of an elementary school leader, this is a big challenge that should, however, be prioritized. The participants described how increased visibility and accessibility lowers the stress and anxiety of the staff because they can get their needs met quicker if they have access to their leaders.

Self-Assessment Survey

On the self-assessment survey, the elementary principals shared intentional actions promoting positive staff morale that relate to visibility and accessibility. In their own words When asked to describe something they intentionally did to improve staff morale in their school, the survey respondents shared the following:

- *I am accessible and transparent: My staff can always get in touch with me no matter what. I am an upfront principal who leads with integrity.*
- *Being accessible, and honestly inform staff of what is going on, even, if I do not have all the answers.*
- *I moved out of my office so that teachers have access to me all day. Do not have meetings just to have meetings... filter information, make connections*

Semi-Structured Interview

According to the responses to the semi-structured interview questions, the participants expressed the need to be visible and accessible to respond and listen to staff as a way to promote positive staff morale. Six out of 11 participants shared that being visible and accessible was an action they took to promote positive staff morale. Among six participants, this was mentioned 10 times. Participants shared their reflections and thoughts.

Alicia prioritized being available and having face-to face interactions with staff:

Prioritizing the interactions that you have with staff is worth 1000 pieces of paper. So, I would say that was the other leadership move. If they want to talk with you, make sure that you're available. They say, "Can I talk to you?" You say, Yes, I'll come find you or come down. Do it soon, talk to them, communicate that what they have to say is important.

Betty described the second leadership action she took as a new principal to encourage transparency in communication:

The second thing I did was in January of my first year. I held a staff meeting, and I said, ...If you have something to say, I just want you to tell me. You're not going to hurt my feelings. I'm new here, right? I don't know what I don't know. So, if I don't know what I don't know, chances are I probably did what I did because I had no idea how you might feel about it. So just talk to me." I constantly communicate.

Focus Group

Elementary principals in this study described ways they believed in transparency, accessibility, and visibility. Here are two quotes that were similar to others regarding access and transparency.

Sonya shared: *I'm accessible. I'm not like behind the veil. I think that's another very deliberate move or action. They see you, and they know they can get to you.*

Shay suggested having a mobile office to increase accessibility and visibility:

As leaders, someone like me, who has high staff morale, we're visible and we're accessible. I don't stay in my office that much during the school year, and I move my cart around, and they know they see my cart all pimped out. I position it in the hallway, or wherever I need it to be. I'm visible, and I'm accessible!

Olivia echoed the thoughts of Shay regarding leaders with positive morale:

They are probably accessible. One move was that I moved out of the office, so I got on the cart, and teachers had access to me all day long. So, if something was brewing, and they were mad, or whatever, or had an issue, they didn't have to wait until three o'clock

to come find me. They could get to me during their planning time, or when they were running to the bathroom.

Elementary principals in this study created opportunities for their staff to interact with them in meaningful and thoughtful ways that increased access by developing mobile offices and scheduling time for purposeful discussions with groups and individuals.

Theme #5: Learn the School's Culture

Elementary principals listen and gather input from staff to learn the organization during their first few months. Although the job of the elementary school principal can be complex and insurmountable, it is critical to set aside time to meet with staff, parents, and students to learn and assess the school climate and culture. The participants in this study used a variety of ways to learn the school's climate and culture during their first year as the principal. In addition, they created a process to regularly assess the climate and culture to better support the needs of the staff, students, and community. During the semi-structured interview and focus group, data to support how the participants learned about their school's climate and culture was captured.

Self-Assessment Survey

The self-assessment survey showed that 85% of the respondents said they listen carefully to the ideas of their staff before making decisions in their school. Eighty-percent stated they use what they know about their staff's strengths and weaknesses to provide them with opportunities to grow and improve professionally.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In response to interview questions 6, 8, and 13, many of the principals discussed ways they made time to listen to their staff and gather input from them about the school climate and

culture. They described this as a leadership move that helped them promote positive staff morale from the beginning.

Edward gave staff an opportunity to voice their thoughts to him during his first few months as the principal:

I met with every staff member, individually, or sometimes in teams. I asked them three questions... Tell me something that...I should not change that's just working really well. Tell me something that you think could be opportunities for growth; and then tell me something about you personally.... I wanted to give them an opportunity to share what they thought,

Betty described her meeting with her staff during her first year as principal: *I interviewed or met with every staff member and just heard them share the things we should keep, what are the things we should get rid of, and I stuck to it.*

Marvin explained how he vets decisions through multiple school teams of staff:

I would say, active listening, and being reflective, knowing that it's okay to change a decision...not going in with a decision made. I always vet things through the core team, whatever we produce we take to the leadership team, and then we vet it through them. Not top down, we try to make it as collaborative as possible.

Focus Group

During the focus group, some of the respondents reflected on staff morale during the first year of their principalship based on how long their predecessor had been at the school. The participants all agreed that the amount of time a predecessor led the building has an impact on how long it will take to impact staff morale in a positive way. Participants who shared following a begrudged predecessor saw a faster increase in their staff morale data.

Shona reflected on her predecessor and how long it took for it to feel like it was her school:

Your first year, it's still someone else's school, and maybe I was in a unique situation, because the principal had been there as principal for 21 years and had been there as an assistant principal before being the principal. I would say it took probably 3 years for it to be my school.

Olivia shared her similar experience and the impact it had on staff morale:

I had a similar experience to Shona because I was coming in after somebody who had been there over 20 years, and the assistant principal that they absolutely loved wanted the job. By the end of that first year, I mean the morale was so low because she didn't get the position, she wasn't a principal, and they didn't trust me yet.

During the focus group discussions, some respondents shared that their first year was met with low morale due to what they heard the staff felt about their predecessor, sometimes to their surprise.

Shari shared her surprise about the survey numbers: *The (staff morale data) were lower than what I would have thought, as I came into a school behind three very well-loved principals, and we didn't have a long-term principal. Each principal served 5 to 7 years.*

Shay shared a different perspective based on her predecessor:

I came on the heels of a begrudged principal. The staff did not like the principal, and they did not trust her. They did not trust her, they did not like her, she was unapproachable, I mean these are comments that I received. The Community Superintendent at the time, she said, your number one job for the first year, if not the second year. is to build the staff climate and culture. I said, what about academics? She said that will come.

The focus group included a self-anchoring scale activity during which each respondent was asked to share what actions they take to increase their staff morale data to show an increase of maintaining the percentage to 80% or more.

Shari shared some firsts that help the process of assessing staff morale in terms of transparency and collaboration:

We just really dissected the data and did a root cause analysis. I told them that the information from the survey didn't tell me anything. I asked for specific examples, give me examples of what would address those concerns for you, so I think those are probably the only changes I made in my first year. So, once we began to dig into that, and of course, come up with a plan to address the concerns, we started to see what the staff really felt. They didn't think their concerns would be heard, they didn't think they had a voice. So, it was really about making the process very transparent. So, I offered them the opportunity to provide solutions to the problems.

Shay reflected on her first staff meeting and steps:

You know, to tackle the elephant in the room, my first meeting in July...was my first day on the job in 2014. I had my first meeting and didn't know diddly squat about anything. But I went in there and I rocked it. I acted like I knew exactly what was going on. There was nowhere to go but up from here. I think I started to build a connection with my parent community. That was number one, and I let them know that I was real and that their voices matter, and that they had a voice at the table. They were a part of the decision-making process. Then the other piece, I will say is that I made sure that I did meet and greet with every single staff member. My first two, three, the first few days, I set up a schedule, and I met with every staff member. You have to rally those who support

you, who you latch on to, and then just like a flower it blooms. So that's sort of where we are now.

Sonya shared the importance of being an open book with staff:

Our climate survey was up, and then it took a dip the year that immersion came and that was some of the fluctuation. I realize that I tried to protect my staff, and not share as much as I should have shared. Normally I am an open book. ...instead, they started feeling like they couldn't trust me, or they couldn't trust the system. It showed in my survey. So, I talked to my staff about it, and said you know at this point, I'm just going to let you know what's happening. I'm going to be an open book with you, and let you know certain things.... that helped with my survey.

There were unanticipated themes that also emerged during the focus group including the impact of race, gender, and mentoring.

The five focus group participants were female elementary school principals with 5 to 10 years of experience as the principal at their current school. They all identify as being non-White. Each of these participants completed the survey and interview. During the focus group, they participated in a self-anchoring scale by answering questions and extending on quotes from their interviews about the actions they feel have created a positive staff morale in their schools.

Theme #6: Embrace Your Lived Experiences

Elementary school principals in this study shared their background, how key events and people shaped them into leaders. They shared how their family and college and professional mentors have supported and encouraged them over the years. In addition, they discussed how leadership grows overtime due to experience. They expressed that all leaders should expect and embrace the critical life experiences that strengthens their leadership.

Self-Assessment Survey

During the self-assessment survey, semi-structured interview, and focus group, participants identified critical life experiences that helped to develop their leadership behaviors and approach. The critical life experiences ranged from their family values, ethnicity, race, gender, and personal mentors. During the focus group, each participant was asked if race and gender played a role in their approach to creating a positive staff morale and building relationships. All five participants indicated that their background, culture, and race had an impact on their leadership actions and approaches. Some of their reflections highlighted their lived experiences that have created challenges leading to positive staff morale, equity, and community.

Semi-Structured Interview

During the semi-structured interview, principals in this study shared critical life events that stem from influences from their families, teachers, college professors, and colleagues that helped them develop their authentic character and approach to leadership. Many of them discussed a level of confidence that grew with experience over time and, therefore, had an impact on their approach to leading for a positive staff morale. Some of the participants expounded on a particular critical life event or learning from a mentor that showed them the importance of cultivating leadership potential in others, building relationships, and seeking information from others to promote positive staff morale.

Sonya, the principal of Still Valley ES, reflected during the focus group: *When I think about why I became a leader, it was because someone saw something in me that I didn't.*

Alicia, the principal of Aloe Valley ES, echoed the importance of dispelling the notion that the principal has all the answers: *I think, when you get past thinking that you're the person*

that's supposed to have all the answers. and understanding that you find the answers through your relationships, and honestly seeking information from others, that's a leadership move.

Olivia reflected on a decision to share more about her identity with the community:

I guess it was my media specialist. She was like, can I put something in the window for the first Back to School Night or Open House just about your background, like pictures of your family and the Brazilian flag? I was like, oh I don't know about that because Olive Lane is not so nice, you know not so nice if you're not white. I had to really think about that. I was like... put it up. People were like, you speak another language. My staff knew, but the community didn't. If I have to speak in Portuguese and Spanish, I do. I remember that was a difficult situation at the beginning, for me, with the whole cultural piece, because you wouldn't know that I speak three languages and grew up with a Brazilian family.

Shay reflected on colorism:

I love being a black woman in a position of leadership, but it does bring its challenges. Not just with White folks, but with Black folks too. Particularly Black women. I have often, not so much in my 40s and 50s, but when I was younger, I often struggled with keeping it real, for whatever reason. They saw, oh she's light-skinned, she has long hair, she's this, she's that. So, they already put me in a box, without even getting to know me. So, I think as I've gotten older, I am way beyond that now, but that reality does rear its ugly head at times, and I'm just in a place now, where you know I can shut it down, and I'm okay with it. Whereas I didn't always feel that confident in my earlier years.

Sonya described having to prove that she was fit to lead:

My first PTA meeting at Still ES was very interesting because I had an all-black PTA, but they were very bougie, like very. They wanted to ask me all types of questions, and I mean it was very interesting, and it was almost like I didn't fit into what they felt was the right type of black person to be running the school. I had to prove myself, absolutely! I had to pull all of my credentials out. I had brought things that I normally don't talk about into the conversation more often. For my staff, yes, and a lot of them are white, it's just a different level of entitlement, and it's not just the white staff. I think it has been a harder road, dealing with my own community having to kind of show who I was, and who I was not. Always having somebody else read your stuff to make sure it sounds the way I want it to sound, because they'll go to the board with something faster than a minute.

Shona shared the challenge of leading equity work as a leader of color:

This week, because one of my staff members sent out an email to the whole staff, sent several emails to the whole staff, as part of her signature line, it said we all matter. I felt like it was insidious, especially because you changed the wording ever so slightly from all lives matter to we all matter, and that you changed it on Monday, knowing that the anniversary of George Floyd's murder was on Tuesday. When I'm speaking, for African American principals, women of color, even when you're looking back at your staff, they're looking back at mostly White faces and you want people to take you seriously when you are talking about race and equity. Cultural proficiency you want people to take it seriously and you don't want it to seem like a personal agenda. I feel like people take it on as personal. It's Shona's personal agenda versus you know what we should do this! I think it does matter in some ways. I know that I have been deliberate in trying to create a diverse staff at Sweet Valley. I think that I'm doing a good job of it, but I think that HR

also has to do a good job of bringing in more people, a more diverse pool for us to choose from. When we are thinking about hiring and such, I do think that it plays a part when you have a profession, where the majority of the people in that profession are White women.

Shari reflected on regional culture:

I know I have a Southern accent; I will say something and literally my AP will say it right after me, she pretty much paraphrases what I said, and all the White women are like, oh, I know. But I don't even think my staff is aware of it, I just think they inherently relate better because the person looks, and sounds like them, it's natural. I get it, so I don't think it's intended to come across the way it does, but I notice. So, it's been interesting just to notice that dynamic, because prior to that I felt like the people I needed to convince that I can do this job. weren't my community, or my staff, it was the higher up people that came to my building who, if I didn't walk, or talk the way they walked, and talked, they did not value what I was doing.

Focus Group

Mentorship and someone believing in their ability to lead was a common theme of the principals who participated in the focus group and survey. A few of the participants' who learned leadership moves from mentors are highlighted:

Shona stated:

When I sat down with my advisor at the University, he said I don't see you as a reading specialist, or a counselor, I see you as a principal. I had never considered becoming a principal. So, I gave it a lot of thought throughout the semester, and one of the things that I realized was that we have principals who were not doing the very things that we're

talking about this evening. They were not. They did not feel authentic, they didn't have your back, they were not visible, you were scared of them, when you saw them in the hallway, you wanted to turn around, and go the other way. I know that's not a popular response, but it's authentic, and I'm being honest. It was about the adults, and not about the kids.

Sonya echoed others:

My mentor was someone who I had known since when I was a little kid, like 11, 12, or 13 years old. So, he was the reason why I went into administration because he was the same person who would say, I want you to lead this because he would see something in you, and he would put you in charge of it.

Therefore, in all three data sources the principals shared that critical life events, mentorship, cultivating leadership potential in others, being an authentic leader, and being visible impacted their leadership actions and some of those actions help them promote a positive staff morale. The study's participants identified that mentorship and the idea that some believed in each of their ability to lead as a common theme. A few comments from the focus group participant about what they learned from mentors are highlighted below:

Shay shared:

I grew up in a house full of strong women. I learned early on that a closed mouth doesn't get fed. So, I learned to speak up, and if I had something to say, I said it. I was born to be a leader. But I thank my mentor from a professional standpoint, God rest her soul. I loved her, she was my mentor. She called me, she said you're going to be a principal. I'm going to make sure you're a principal and she helped so many people in this county

today. So, I think part of the leadership piece is being able to see leadership potential in others.

The elementary principals in this study realized that there are experiences in their life that have influenced their approach to leading others and are critical to embrace while leading for a positive staff morale.

In summary, the six themes that emerged from the data were (a) serve them, relate to them, (b) collaborate, collaborate, collaborate, (c) be authentic, (d) be visible and be accessible, (e) learn the school's culture and climate, and (f) embrace your critical life experiences.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I discussed the purpose of the study, research questions that were answered by the data, data collection experience, analysis process. I identified the themes that emerged and provided supporting documentation in the form of participants' statements. In Chapter 5, I present discussion of the findings, provide implications, and end with conclusions of this study.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to ascertain what elementary school principals perceive are the actions that promote a positive staff morale in elementary schools in a large Mid-Atlantic school district. This chapter begins with a restatement of the research questions and continues with a discussion of the findings the alignment with the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, the intersection of gender and race, and the impact of mentorship and predecessors. The chapter also includes implications and conclusions of the research.

Research Questions

This phenomenological study addressed the following research questions:

What are the elementary principals' perceptions of actions taken by a leader who promotes a positive staff morale?

What critical life experiences do elementary principals believe impacted their leadership actions that improved staff morale?

Discussion of the Findings

In the discussion of leading for a positive staff morale, the elementary school principals in this study consistently highlighted the importance of the principal serving staff, relating to staff, collaborating with staff, being authentic, being accessible, being visible, learning about the school culture and climate, and embracing their own critical life events. According to the findings, principals who lead for a positive staff morale should do the following six actions:

- Theme #1: Serve them, relate to them
- Theme #2: Collaborate and Engage
- Theme #3: Be Authentic
- Theme #4: Be Visible and Accessible

- Theme #5: Learn the School Culture
- Theme #6: Embrace Your Lived Experiences

Alignment with the Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework for this study explained in Chapter 1 depicts how elementary school principals who lead with actions, characterized as those of servant leaders and authentic leaders, to improve staff morale. These leadership practices model positive organizational behaviors (POB), such as optimism, adaptability, flexibility, perseverance, resilience, and reflection. Elementary school principals in this study expressed an altruistic ideology sharing ways they support staff personally and professionally and recognized that their staff should feel a level of psychological safety at work knowing the leader will be there for them. An altruistic leader goes beyond the call of duty to meet other's needs. Their ultimate goal is to serve (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). In alignment with ideals of servant leadership, the elementary principals in this study shared ways they, as the leader, hold the interest of their staff over their own self-interest.

According to the elementary school principals in this study, employees view their supervisor's effectiveness based on their task completion and behavior. A leader's ability to take thoughtful actions, complete tasks while simultaneously building trusting relationships is welcomed and appreciated by staff and promotes a positive staff morale and a sense of belonging. Listening is a huge component of communication. What and how people speak to each other has an impact on others within an organization. Therefore, in order to create a pleasant interpersonal atmosphere in the workplace, the organization's members need to attend to the communication factors (Udin & Wikaningrum, 2018).

The participants in this study emphatically shared the importance of being unapologetically their true self when interacting with their staff which is a contributing factor to building trust and positive staff morale. A component of authentic leadership is relational transparency. Balanced processing, a component of authentic leadership, refers to a leader objectively examining all relevant information before making any decision (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Collaboration was a key finding in this study that aligns with the practice of balance processing. A leader who uses information from all possible areas creates a collaborative environment that is inclusive of the ideals and opinions of those they serve. Servant leadership promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the providing of leadership for the good of those led and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual, the total organization, and those served by the organization (Laub, 1999).

Servant leaders and authentic leaders share many characteristics in the way they approach leading others. Authentic Leaders lead by showing self-awareness, vulnerability, internal moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency. Servant leaders lead by showing a high level of support for staff professionally and personally, recognizing and celebrating staff, treating staff like family, exercising leniency (grace), and being good listeners. The participant's perceptions of the intentional and unintentional actions of elementary school principals and the perceptions of a positive school climate are aligned with two leadership theories: authentic leadership and servant leadership.

Intersectionality of Gender and Race

Elementary principals of color in this study shared unique challenges that they navigate to lead for positive staff morale. The challenges pertain to equity, race, microaggressions, and

culture that require additional resources that they often have to find themselves. This makes their work more challenging than their counterparts.

Elementary principals of color are taking actions and creating grassroots affinity groups and networks to have a safe space to share their experiences with similar leaders, without the resources or support of the district. The idea of affinity groups originated from a worker's movement that was created in the late 19th century during the Spanish Civil War (Fithian, 2022). The phrase, *affinity groups*, was coined by Ben Morea in the 1970s. Affinity groups are intended to bring people together around a common idea or experience. During the discussion about critical life events or experiences that have helped them lead for a positive staff morale, the participants discussed mentorships they had throughout their principalships and the positive effect that support was for them. Since there wasn't a mentor program in this district for principals, the principals spoke about their immediate supervisors or other district level personnel as their mentors. Some leaned on friends in those positions.

Mentorship

Critical events that involve mentors and experiences impact how the elementary school principals' lead and promote a positive school climate. The participants in this study shared the lived experiences that defined their principalship journey from start to finish. All participants discussed having a mentor who saw leadership qualities in them and provided coaching and support. Some of the mentors were based on family, college professors, and/or friends. Mostly, the leadership development program for this district was top of the list of producing mentors for the elementary school principals in this study. Although this district's current leadership development process was mentioned multiple times as a source for providing mentors for the participants, mentorship opportunities were not a key component of the leadership development

process. Rather, the mentorships were created organically, and not all principals were privy to such great mentorship opportunities during their leadership development program.

Predecessor

All participants in the focus group shared that their staff's perceptions of the previous school leader and the length of time that leader was at the school influenced the actions they took to improve staff morale. Participants, whose predecessors led in the school community for 15-25 years, shared that it was difficult to build trusting relationships and get the staff to trust them. Some participants shared that following a principal who was beloved with low staff morale climate data was surprising. In contrast, another participant described following a begrudged leader and finding it much easier to improve staff morale with a few quick and easy leadership actions.

Implications

This section provides a summary of recommendations for practice and future research that may address the areas mostly elevated to support elementary school principals and leaders improve staff morale. Additionally, concluding statements are provided to suggest ways that addresses key areas of the study that are noted in the discussion section about coaching, mentorship, school leader's predecessor, gender, and race.

Implications for Practice

Elementary school principals are not equipped to tackle the task of improving staff morale without effective tools that are based on research, clearly implemented, and evaluated to be successful. The school and classroom should be a stable and safe environment for students and staff. In years riddled with trauma and stress due to unforeseen circumstances, leaders should be prepared with trauma-informed approaches. School leaders along with allied education

professionals, such as counselors and psychologists, should provide support to trauma-impacted students and, in so doing, help teachers to cope with the heightened demands and responsibilities of teaching (Greig et al., 2021). The district should consider implementing research-based tools to effectively assess staff morale as a basis for discourse about school climate and culture to allow elementary principals to receive feedback from staff on their morale and needs (both professional and personal) in time to make a difference.

District leaders could also consider a systemic coaching and mentoring plan, especially for novice elementary school principals. The development plan could include research-based actions aligned with that of the servant leadership and authentic leadership styles to help build connections and trusting relationships with community members. Further, the district could examine its current leadership development plan for elevating the mentorship opportunities and match the needs of elementary and other school principals to potential mentors in the district. Finally, a district-wide resource can be developed to provide to all elementary school principals outlining steps they can take as part of their school improvement planning process to improve staff morale.

Regarding the intersection of race and gender, school districts can invite principals to share their lived experiences as elementary school principals and highlight the role race and gender plays on their ability to promote positive staff morale. Such information can be used to deploy support customized to individual principals. School districts should look for opportunities to provide resources and create structures for ongoing support for principals in the form of coaching, affinity groups, and networks for women leaders of color as they lead positive staff morale and climate in their schools. In summary, school districts should consider providing

professional learning opportunities, study circles, and direct support from central office staff to implement the work around staff morale and climate.

Implications for Future Research

This study resulted in findings about perceptions of actions which can positively influence staff morale in elementary schools. Some areas for future research could be designed to seek input into the following questions:

- What are the challenges and barriers faced by elementary principals who are woman of color?
- What roles do the superintendent and senior leadership team play in communicating, implementing, and modeling actions that promote positive staff morale and climate throughout the district?
- How are leadership development programs preparing future school leaders at universities and colleges providing opportunities for leaders to engage in training and research about promoting a positive school climate and staff morale?

A deeper understanding is needed of the challenges and barriers faced by elementary school principals who are also woman of color, as they promote positive staff morale, lead for equity, and influence communities. The participants expressed a need to have a group of “alike-leaders” to share experiences that are completely unique to woman of color. As the district addresses the pitfalls of racism and sexism, acknowledging that they exist for female elementary school principals by providing targeted supports would be a worthwhile consideration for the district. Additionally, the district could invite me to conduct this study for the entire district to provide a broader understanding of the needs of all district principals in the pursuit of promoting positive staff morale in their schools.

The actions staff working in elementary schools perceive having an impact on staff morale could be explored further. Thus, elementary school staff could be invited to identify actions of elementary school principals that have the greatest positive impact on their morale.

Also, leadership traits of principals who have positive staff morale at their schools can be collected to determine if there are any commonalities among the traits and characteristics of the principals who promote a positive staff morale. This information could help isolate innate characteristics of leaders to use during the district's hiring process for elementary school principals. The information could be intentionally used as protocols to highlight those traits during the hiring process. Leader traits are a part of their tapestry, they should be shared, cultivated, and aligned with the culture of the communities that they serve. During the analysis of the data collected during my study, the notion of common leadership attributes or traits of the participants arose. Cerit (2009) declared that understanding personal preferences, personality, and leadership style can assist educational leaders in anticipating the behaviors, needs, and drives of various stakeholders. In many ways, the actions of the participants in this study focused on catering to the needs of their staff members and those actions contributing to their positive morale.

Professional development on leadership styles founded on moral reasoning and focused on services, such as authentic leadership and servant leadership, should be used to train current and new school leaders. Examination of the role the superintendent and senior leadership team plays in communicating, implementing, and modeling actions that promote positive staff morale and climate throughout the district is also recommended.

Conclusions

Authentic leaders lead with purpose and integrity. Servant leaders lead by putting the needs of those they lead first. Positive organizational behaviors of elementary school principals who act in an authentic leadership and servant leadership styles promote a positive staff morale. The results of the study demonstrate that elementary principals who approach leadership positively are authentic, and serve others first promote a positive staff morale.

During the time of this study, we found ourselves in the midst of a health pandemic with education at the forefront of every debate. The COVID-19 pandemic put politicians, educators, and parents at odds as to how to continue providing an education to students while keeping everyone safe. Some began to call this time in our history in education the “great resignation,” because school-based staff were resigning in large numbers. The teacher unions and school systems were at odds about protocols, and at times elementary school leaders, as middle managers, were caught in the middle. If allowed to continue, the conflict could cultivate a tumultuous relationship between elementary principals and staff. It has never been a time more important than now for elementary principals to focus on improving staff morale of individuals working in our schools. Although this study was birthed during the pre-pandemic time and geared to seek answers about how to improve staff morale, the findings are timely, useful, and desperately needed. In order to secure top notch staff members for our students in our public education systems, we need to focus on how we recruit, sustain, and retain people who want to join the illustrious profession of educator. A starting point is focusing on how our elementary school leaders can improve the staff’s perceptions of their working environment. It brings me great joy to provide these findings to support improving the conditions that school staff may find themselves in when staff morale is low.

This positive study involving a group of elementary school principals who were promoting positive staff morale yielded many actionable ideas and practices. Novice and veteran school leaders may be familiar with some of the findings in this study. The hope is that they get a sense of urgency to prioritize and operationalize the findings in their daily actions and planning for staff and school improvement. In addition, this study elevated the need for elementary principals to regularly assess morale and address concerns in a transparent way. I have learned firsthand that when you ask for feedback and get it, it can seem personal and attacking. It could actually *be* personal and attacking. The most important notion is that the lines of communication must remain open, the staff must have an outlet to voice their needs in order to know how to improve conditions in the school environment. In addition, this study demonstrated that elementary principals should share their true, authentic self with their staff by being aware of their own and their staff's strengths and weaknesses. The leader's culture and personality are an asset, not a deficit.

This study also revealed that leaders need resources beyond detailed explanations of their school climate/staff morale data to promote positive staff morale,. In light of this study and the present climate of education, the district's attention to these needs is direly needed to improve staff morale in schools. In my own experience as an elementary school principal, I discovered that there are some themes and actions that are shared among elementary school principals who have a positive staff morale and school climate. I also found that some ideas and areas are more specific to African American female leaders that address my suspicions of the influence of microaggressions and equity issues on the district's survey results.

The literature review supported the connections between the elementary principals' behaviors and their alignment with authentic leadership and servant leadership attributes. Their

responses gave insight on how, by being authentic, they gave their staff a clear and consistent understanding of who they were as leaders. They also gave their staff a clear and consistent understanding of how they felt about the staff by being of service. It is my belief that other leaders can incorporate these same actions and improve staff morale in their school buildings. This study has made me more confident that a variety of school leaders, elementary and secondary, will find some guidance in these findings to help in their efforts to promote positive staff morale and school climate in their schools.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Self-Assessment Survey for Elementary School Principals

My name is Lakeisha Maddrey-Lashley, doctoral candidate at Hood College and elementary school principal, gathering data to study elementary principals like you who in the years 2016-2018 scored positively on the staff morale question on the School Climate Survey between regarding actions that they believe improve staff morale. The perspective of principals—like you—can offer valuable information about the experience and outcomes of elementary principals who successfully improve staff morale within their organization. You were selected as a possible participant because you have experienced success with promoting positive staff morale as measured by the 2016, 2017, and 2018 administration of the School Climate survey question on staff morale.

By completing this self-assessment, you are assisting with the collection of data. It will take approximately 6-8 minutes to complete this survey. Your completion of the survey is voluntary and anonymous. No email addresses will be tracked or collected during this survey. Thank you for your support of this educational research study.

Directions: For items 1-5 please choose or write a response that accurately shares your experience. For items 6– 32 please choose the response that best matches your level of agreement with the corresponding statement. For questions 33-34, please write a response that accurately shares your experience.

1.	How many years have you been a principal at your school? Mark an X next to your answer choice. <input type="checkbox"/> 0 – 5 years; <input type="checkbox"/> 6 – 10 years; <input type="checkbox"/> 11 – 15 years; <input type="checkbox"/> 16 or more years				
2.	How would you describe your race/ethnicity? Mark an X next to your answer choice. <input type="checkbox"/> Caucasian <input type="checkbox"/> Asian <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic/Latino <input type="checkbox"/> Black/African American <input type="checkbox"/> Multiracial <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say				
3.	How would you describe your gender? Mark an X next to your answer choice. <input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Non-binary <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say				
4.	How would you rate the usefulness of the Climate Survey (scale of 1-5 with 1=low; 5=excellent)? a. accurately assesses how your entire staff perceives staff morale _____ b. provides specific information to help principals develop a plan to address areas of need _____ c. provides timely information to address concerns _____				
5.	Please explain, why in question 4, you rated the Climate Survey in this way? Write your answer in the space below.				
	<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 60%; padding: 5px;"><i>Please select the appropriate level of frequency. (Only one response per statement can be selected.)</i></td> <td style="width: 10%; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">Most of time</td> <td style="width: 15%; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">Sometimes</td> <td style="width: 15%; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">Rarely</td> </tr> </table>	<i>Please select the appropriate level of frequency. (Only one response per statement can be selected.)</i>	Most of time	Sometimes	Rarely
<i>Please select the appropriate level of frequency. (Only one response per statement can be selected.)</i>	Most of time	Sometimes	Rarely		
6.	I develop long-standing relationships with many staff members.				
7.	I recognize and support staff when they need support without them needing to ask.				

8.	I encourage staff to use innovation and creativity to come up with solutions to problems.			
9.	My staff perceive me as a good listener.			
10.	My morals and core values drive what I do as a leader.			
11.	I openly share my feelings with my staff.			
12.	I seek feedback from my staff about my leadership to gain more understanding of who I am.			
13.	I listen carefully to the ideas of others before making decisions in my school.			
14.	I do not let groups within or outside my school influence or control my decision-making process.			
15.	I invite staff with opposing views to share them with me.			
16.	I let my know who I truly am as a person in my school.			
17.	I admit my mistakes to my staff in my school.			
18.	I accept the feelings I have about myself and the impact it has on my leadership.			
19.	I listen to the ideas of my staff closely before making a decision in my school.			
20.	I encourage staff to make important decisions about their own job-related tasks.			
21.	I talk to staff about my personal goals and life.			
22.	My staff know where I stand on controversial issues.			
23.	I openly confront unethical principles and will not compromise ethical principles in order to meet success.			
24.	I provide staff with personalized work experiences that enable them to develop new skills and grow professionally.			
25.	My cultural identity impacts my leadership actions.			
26.	My staff seek help from me when they are having a personal problem.			
27.	I prioritize the needs of others (personal or professional) over my own.			
28.	My gender identity impacts my leadership actions.			
29.	I use what I know about the strengths and weaknesses of staff to provide them with opportunities to grow and improve professionally.			
30.	I help staff work through difficulties they experience at work.			
31.	I purposely plan for ways to bring about enjoyment, laughter, and a sense of belongingness for staff.			
32.	My staff perceive me as a good listener.			
33.	Describe something you intentionally do to improve staff morale in your school?			

34. Please describe something that is innate about you that your staff has shared helps improve their staff morale? (Optional)

Note: Survey created by Lakeisha Maddrey-Lashley, 2020.

Appendix B Informed Consent Form

Your identity will be protected in any written report or article about this research project. To help protect your confidentiality, no email addresses will be tracked or collected during this survey. In addition, the recordings will be stored safely for 3-years and then destroyed.

5. RISKS/BENEFITS

RISKS: There are no intended risks involved in participating in this study. In addition to a doctoral researcher, Lakeisha D. Maddrey-Lashley is also an elementary school principal in the Mid-Atlantic school district referenced in this study. Mrs. Maddrey-Lashley's position of a school leader will not lead to any adverse impact for participants of this study. Participants' email addresses or other identify markers.

BENEFITS: The perspective of elementary school principals who are engaged in the work of leading schools with positive staff morale can offer valuable information for other school leaders. Participants will be able to help expose the unique needs and/or challenges and rewards of leadership. By completing the elementary principal self-assessment, interviews and/or focus group process, elementary school principals will lend their voice to a framework to help other principals and assist with capturing data to help inform and shape future research and practices.

6. CONFIDENTIALITY

Your identity will be protected in any written report or article about this research project. To help protect confidentiality of the elementary principal participants, no email addresses will be tracked or collected. The intent is for the responses to remain anonymous. Data will be destroyed after 3 years.

7. VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Hood College or any of its representatives. If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without affecting those relationships. If you choose to participate in the study, you can stop your participation at any time, without any penalty or loss of benefits. If you want to withdraw from the study, please tell Lakeisha D. Maddrey-Lashley, doctoral researcher at Hood College and elementary principal within the Mid-Atlantic school district. No adverse action will be taken against any participation of the study or any participant who chooses to withdraw from the study.

8. CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

You can ask questions about this research study now or at any time during the study, by talking to Lakeisha D. Maddrey-Lashley. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to speak with someone other than the researcher, you may contact Dr. Diane R. Graves, Institutional Review Board Chair, Hood College, 401 Rosemont Ave., Frederick, MD 21701, graves@hood.edu.

9. STATEMENT OF CONSENT

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

The procedures of this study have been explained to me and my questions have been addressed. The information that I provide is confidential and will be used for research purposes only. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw anytime without penalty. If I have any concerns about my experience in this study, I may contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board or the Chair of the sponsoring department of this research regarding my concerns.

Participant signature _____ Date _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent _____ Date _____

Appendix C Hood College IRB Approval Letter



February 8, 2021

Ms. Lakeisha D. Maddrey-Lashley
401 Rosemont Ave.
Frederick, MD 21701

Dear Ms. Maddrey-Lashley,

The Hood College Institutional Review Board reviewed your revised proposal for the study entitled *"Elementary Principal's with High Staff Morale Share Their Perceived Leadership Behaviors That Promote Positive Staff Morale"* (Proposal Number 2021-18). The committee approves this study for a period of 12 months. This approval is limited to the activities described in the procedure narrative and extends to the performance of these activities at each respective site identified in the IRB research proposal. This approval does not authorize you to recruit participants or conduct your study on site at other institutions. Should you decide you would like to systematically recruit participants and/or conduct your study on location at other institutions or facilities you will need to receive IRB approval from those organizations *prior* to any recruitment activities or data collection.

In addition, due to the current COVID 19 precautions, Hood's IRB is restricting all in-person (e.g. face-to-face) data collection with participants at this time. You may only recruit participants and collect data online. You are not authorized to meet with your participants for the purpose of data collection until notice from this IRB. In accordance with this approval, the specific conditions for the conduct of this research and informed consent from participants must be obtained as indicated.

All individuals engaged in human subjects research are responsible for compliance with all applicable Hood Research Policies:

<https://www.hood.edu/sites/default/files/Hood%20IRB%20Policy%20revised%20September%202013.pdf>.

The Lead Researcher of the study is ultimately responsible for assuring all study team members review and adhere to applicable policies for the conduct of human sciences research.

The Hood College IRB approval expiration date is January 8th, 2022. As a courtesy, approximately 30-60 days prior to expiration of this approval, it is your responsibility to apply for continuing review and receive continuing approval for the duration of the study as applicable. Lapses in approval should be avoided to protect the safety and welfare of enrolled participants.

No substantive changes are to be made to the approved protocol or the approved consent and assent forms without the prior review and approval of the Hood IRB. All substantive changes (e.g. change in procedure, number of subjects, personnel, study locations, study instruments, etc.) must be prospectively reviewed and approved by the IRB before they are implemented.

Sincerely,

Diane R. Graves, PhD
Chair, Hood College Institutional Review Board

Appendix D District Approval to Conduct Research

March 5, 2021

MEMORANDUM

To: [REDACTED]
From: [REDACTED] 
Subject: Approval of Request to Conduct Research

[REDACTED] this request to conduct research has been reviewed and approved by the [REDACTED]. The request is recommended for approval by the [REDACTED] Mrs. Lakeisha Lashley, Principal, [REDACTED], requests permission to conduct a dissertation research study titled *Elementary Principals with High Staff Morale Share Their Perceived Leadership Behaviors that Promote Staff Morale*. The purpose of this study is to describe the leadership qualities of elementary school principals who have had success promoting positive staff morale in their buildings.

Participant Recruitment and Participation

Principals at 31 elementary schools (see Table 1) will receive an email invitation to participate in the study. The invitation will include information on the study's purpose, data collection activities, and protocol to maintain confidentiality of collected information. Thirty-one principals will be asked to complete a 35-item questionnaire. After the questionnaire is completed, up to 12 principals will be asked to respond to 15 – 20 interview questions. Focus group data will also be collected after the interviews are conducted.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Collection Activities

Data collection activities will occur between March and August 2021. Initially, 31 principals will be asked to complete a 35-item questionnaire. A smaller group of at least 12 principals who responded to the questionnaire will also participate in an interview and focus group. The interview will include 15 – 20 questions and is expected to last approximately 45 minutes. The focus group will include 3 -5 questions about the principals' leadership experience and is expected to last 45 minutes. Interviews and focus groups will be conducted via Zoom video conferencing at a mutually agreed upon date and time, and with participant permission will be recorded. Any information participants provide will be kept confidential.

The Intuitional Review Board at Hood College has approved the research study. All data will be reported in summary format. The names of participants, schools, and the school district will not be used in the summary of results. The study is supported by [REDACTED]

There can be no changes to the scope and objectives of the study. The approved study and associated data collection activities must be consistent with what is included in this memo. Any proposed changes in data collection activities must be communicated to [REDACTED] for review and approval. If you have questions regarding this request, please contact [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Copy to:

Selected Elementary School Principals

[REDACTED]
Mrs. Lashley
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Appendix E Focus Group Invitation Statement

YOU ARE INVITED!

DISSERTATION RESEARCH FOCUS GROUP

By directive of the Office of the Superintendent of Schools, completion of this research instrument is a compulsory activity for employees who are designated as respondents. Lakeisha D. Maddrey-Lashley, doctoral candidate at Hood College and elementary school principal with the Mid-Atlantic school district referenced in this study, is conducting action research to study the perceptions of elementary school leaders about the actions that they believe promote a positive school climate. The elementary school leaders in this study scored eighty-percent or higher on the district's school climate survey's question about positive school morale between the years of 2016-2018. The perspective of school leaders—like you—can offer valuable information about the how other school leaders can promote a positive school climate with their staff.

There will be two separate focus groups (one comprised of a variety of principals and one for principals that share commonalities such as race, school profile, and/or gender).

Benefits of Focus Group Participation:

- sharing your own experiences and thoughts about leading schools with positive staff morale,
- hearing from others who have differing and similar leadership experiences, and
- contributing to a growing body of research on the impact of principal leadership on organizational climate.

For safety reasons, the sessions may be conducted using a virtual platform Zoom due to the global pandemic involving the virus known as COVID-19. I am not able to provide monetary compensation. I will shower you with an abundance of gratitude. No adverse action will be taken against any participation of the study or any participant who chooses to withdraw from the study. I sincerely hope you will find the time in your extraordinarily busy schedule to join me. Please contact me directly if you have any questions regarding this study and/or if you are interested in participating in a focus group.

Lakeisha D. Maddrey-Lashley, Principal & Doctoral Candidate (Hood College)

Appendix F Interview Protocol

Thank you for participating in this research study and contributing to a body of work that will allow other principals to experience the same success by using your experiences to help improve and promote positive staff morale in their schools. Please review the questions below for our two scheduled interviews.

1. How long have you been a leader in this district? How many years have you been the principal of the school with positive staff morale?
2. In as many words as you would like, please describe your leadership style. Where did you learn it? Why do you think it fits who you are?
3. Think about your staff. What are the top three characteristics of your school that would make your staff indicate that morale is high? (Which characteristic is the strongest and why?)
4. This district used a school climate survey in the past years as the metric to evaluate staff morale; how did you use the results of the school climate survey to develop actions to address staff morale in your school? If you didn't use the district school climate survey, what metrics did you use?
5. In your opinion, did the district's School Climate Survey provide adequate information to help you address staff morale? If not, what did you do to get the information you needed to promote positive staff morale and address staff concerns?
6. As the leader, what do you think were the most effective leadership actions that you took that impacted your staff's morale?
7. Please share ways that your staff show or convey to you that morale is positive at your school.
8. What does your staff tell you about what you say or do to improve their morale?
9. Give examples of how your personal values or morals drive the actions you take to improve the staff morale in your school.
10. What are some external barriers to having a positive staff morale? What do you do to alleviate any barriers that could negatively impact your staff's morale?
11. What are some aspects about you such as culture, race, ethnicity and/or gender that impact your approach to leading for positive staff morale?
12. What leadership actions do you think other principals who have positive staff morale have in common with you? In your opinion, why are these actions so common?
13. Below is a list of actions that individuals may use. Please choose two or three and share how you take actions in your school to make allowances for these behaviors amongst staff and with you as the principal: a. Challenging different perspectives and opinions b. Openly apologizing for mistakes c. Providing constructive feedback to each other d. Unapologetically sharing one's own beliefs

14. If you entered a school that was regarded as having the most positive staff morale in America, superior to all others in the world, what would you see the principals, teachers and students doing?

15. How many years did your predecessor lead your school prior to you becoming the principal? Did the length of your predecessor's tenure impact your ability to build a positive school climate in your first few years as principal?

16. What have you learned from your experiences, mentors and/or other leaders about how to promote a positive school climate?

17. Do you have any other thoughts that would help me understand how you promote positive staff morale climate?

Appendix G Focus Group Agenda

Session: 60 minutes

Platform: Zoom

Participants will:

- share research questions, purpose and significance of the study
- shared artifacts that embody an important leadership action(s) that has improved staff morale in their elementary school.
- reflected on their leadership journey to promote positive staff morale by completing a self-anchoring scale.
- reflected on staff morale and school climate by completing a sentence completion activity.

Appendix H Self-Anchoring Scale

1. What are some phrases or words that come to mind describing the actions of an elementary school principal doing in a school with a positive staff morale and school climate? Anything else?
2. What are some phrases or words that come to mind describing your ideas of the actions of an elementary school principal doing in a school with the worst staff morale and school climate? Anything else?
3. Think about your school's staff morale then indicate at which step of this ladder would your school's staff morale and climate be right now.
4. Where on the ladder was your school's staff morale and climate your first year as a principal at this school?
5. Where do you expect your school's staff morale and school climate will be in five years?
6. Can you explain why your numbers (stayed the same or were different for "now" versus your first year as the principal at your school)?
7. Can you explain why your numbers (stayed the same or were different for "now" versus in the next five years)?

Adapted from: Kilpatrick, F. P., & Cantril, H. (1960). Self-anchoring scaling: A measure of individuals' unique reality worlds. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 16, 158-173.

Appendix I Invitation to the Study

Hello Colleagues,

I hope this email finds you well! I have recently been approved to conduct research for my dissertation titled, "*Elementary Principal's Perceived Leadership Behaviors That Promote Positive Staff Morale*". I know first-hand that every minute of your time is dedicated to preparing everything and everyone for the reopening.

However, I was hoping that in-between all that you are doing right now, you could take 7-8 minutes out of your day to complete this quick self-assessment survey via the google link below. You have been chosen because **you** are our district leaders who are successfully leading for positive staff morale. This is in accordance with the data collected from the district climate surveys that were given to staff in 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019.

I would love to be able to gather and elevate your leadership actions that promote positive staff morale and climate in your schools for my study and for all principal leaders who are looking for additional tools to improve staff morale.

For the first 10 survey participants, I will use the application called "flippidity" to randomly choose 2 participants to receive a \$25 gift cards as a small token of appreciation for your time. You all deserve much more. Thank you in advance for your participation. The survey link is below.