

## Perceptions of School Climate and Culture

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine relationship between Leader in Me schools teachers' perceptions of culture, climate, and discipline referrals during the 2010-11 school year. Primary data were obtained from 172 teacher-reported surveys, from nine schools in three districts in Florida and Mississippi. A MANOVA analysis was used to determine whether a relationship existed between the dependent variable, discipline referrals, and the independent variables using The School Culture Survey and The Revised School Level Environment Questionnaire. Results indicated Leader in Me schools had teachers that perceived culture as high in a number of factors including professional development, unity of purpose, and collegial support. In Leader in Me schools there was a statistically significant difference in school climate:  $F(5,166) = 2.655$ ,  $p = .024$  and with discipline referrals  $F(11, 88) = 6.825$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .460$ .

### Introduction and Background

One omnipresent goal of schools often has been to produce citizens who can survive and even thrive in an educated society. Many schools today strive to produce students who have skill sets that enable graduates to live and contribute to society in a global economy. In order for schools to produce these types of graduates, many struggle to connect the 3R's (reading, writing, and arithmetic) with the 4C's (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity). Though NCLB focuses more on the 3R's, results have often produced students who take tests very well. To be most effective in the 21st century, students not only need to become proficient in core subjects such as reading, writing, science, and math, but proficient in basic social and life skills. In short, they need to have the mindsets, skill sets, and tool sets to (a) take care of themselves, to become independent; (b) to interact well with others, to become interdependent; and (c) to continually improve and stay current over time (Hatch, 2011). The *Leader in Me* program provides this same type of learning focus. In a conversation with President George W. Bush about education, including the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Dr. Stephen Covey shared, "I was deeply troubled that an almost single-minded focus on accountability may simply be pushing teachers to turn our children into better test-takers" (Covey S. R., 2010, p. 1). When asked what he thought was needed, he responded, "Partnerships between schools and parents in educating the whole child, which includes developing both the character strength and the competencies required to really succeed in the 21st Century" (Covey S. R., 2010, p. 1).

Because postsecondary success seems to be an overarching goal of current school reform, much attention to social and behavioral development might have assumed a backseat to academics. The issue of social and behavioral development is not only justified by the resulting increase in instructional time available to students, when office disciplinary referrals for misconduct decrease, but is also justified by the likely gains that are associated with improved social integration and behavior in post-school environments such as work and home (Unley & Sailor, 2002).

### **Problem and Purpose**

*Leader in Me* schools focus primarily on teaching skills of the *whole child*: problem solving, creativity, teamwork, communication, and cultural sensitivity (Covey, 2009). Effective school leaders continually strive for new methods to improve their schools' climate and culture. This study's importance is in school administrators who seek to explore another method to improve the work environment for teachers and the academic achievement of students. There is an apparent gap in research on the topics of teacher perception of climate and culture combined in a school-wide method of teaching and administering a school, and is the presumed result of five issues.

First, there appears to be an inconsistency in a clear definition of school climate. Second, while there are superior options, some policymakers have made poor choices in regards to school climate measurement at the state level. Third, there appears to be a lack of defined climate-related leadership at the state level. Fourth, many states continue to isolate school climate policy in health, special education, and school safety arenas, without integrating it with other school accountability policies. Fifth, many states have not yet created quality or improvement standards, which can easily link data to improvement plans and technical assistance (National School Climate Center, 2008). Augmenting overall presence of culture and climate attributes can produce a more effective school (Leadership for Student Success, 2006). The overarching aim of this work was to show that through the implementation of the *Leader in Me* process, teacher's perception of their school's overall climate and culture could change, while at the same time, increase school overall academic performance.

The specific purpose of this study was to determine relationship between *Leader in Me* and non-*Leader in Me* teacher's perceptions of culture, climate, and discipline referrals. The study could potentially benefit administrators and teachers who seek a method of improving school culture and climate, and ultimately improve student academic achievement.

This study investigated whether being a *Leader in Me* School, or not, had an impact on teachers' perception of culture, climate, number of discipline referrals, and to examine if teachers at *Leader in Me* Schools felt better about their work environment. The study's three independent variables were *Leader in Me* school, or not, teacher perceptions of school culture, and teacher perceptions of school climate. School culture and climate were determined by surveys. The dependent variable was the number of discipline referrals processed at each school. Each school's number of discipline referrals was compared with the other schools' referral rates. The research sought to uncover if there was a difference in teacher perception of school culture and climate between *Leader in Me* Schools and non-*Leader in Me* Schools, and if there was a relationship between teacher perception of school culture and school climate and student discipline referrals.

The schools designated as *Leader in Me* schools, were found on the website for the *Leader in Me* ([www.theleaderinme.org](http://www.theleaderinme.org)). The schools that were non-*Leader in Me* schools, were schools from the same geographic state and region. The study was delimited only to a predetermined number of *Leader in Me* and non-*Leader in Me* schools in the same region to ensure consistency with school testing procedures and assumed that all respondents completed the questionnaire with honesty. The survey instrument was easy for respondents to understand, and participants were certified teachers in K-12 public schools. Resulting data could be used by school administrators and community leaders considering the use of this method of teaching in their schools to improve the learning environment, and could assist administrators in determining if the *Leader in Me* program would be effective in improving their teacher's perception of their jobs within the schools. Additionally, the study could provide insight into teachers' perceptions of culture and climate at schools presently implementing *Leader in Me* compared to non-*Leader in Me* schools.

### ***Leader In Me***

To implement *Leader In Me*, a school must commit to a three-year process of knowledge building (Fonzi & Ritchie, 2011). However, this implementation is not a one-size-fits-all process because of the varying populations, achievement levels, and challenges at different schools (Covey S., 2008). During the first year of implementation, a school must undergo a process of engagement and buy-in as faculty, administration, and staff learn the desired expectations of *Leader in Me*. However, the important event is internalizing *7 Habits*. Nine criteria used to govern *Leader in Me* schools were used as a rubric of how the program is performed at the school level. The criteria are (Franklin Covey Company, 2011):

- a) Having a Lighthouse Team
- b) Creating a Leadership Environment
- c) Integrating leadership language into instruction and curriculum
- d) Collaboration of staff members
- e) Providing student leadership roles
- f) Parental involvement
- g) Producing Leadership Events
- h) Tracking goals
- i) Seeing improvements as a result of the implementation.

### ***Culture***

Culture is defined as the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of a group and refers to the language, thought, spirituality, social activity, and interaction of a group. So as to not discriminate, the culture of public schools seem to strive to somewhat disconnect from specific religions, socioeconomic status, or size of the school, although, the school's culture actually influences everything that occurs within a school. The development of culture is an important issue because school culture has been seen by many researchers as the missing link to school improvement (Wegner & Hall, 1998). Every school develops its own culture. The culture then, defines the daily school operations. Culture can and should be continuously improved, and whenever a school looks at changing any practice, it might be best for it to examine first how the change will affect the school's culture. The building principal should be fully aware of the driving force behind the changes of school culture.

## *Climate*

The National School Climate Council defined school climate as the patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures (Cohen & Geier, 2010). The climate of a school is also synonymous with school environment and/or school-level learning environment. Teachers often define climate as the amount of teacher morale or their empowerment on campus (Johnson & Stevens, 2006). A good climate exists when teachers, students, parents, and administrators function in a manner that is cooperative and beneficial for the students' welfare. When teacher perceptions' of school climate is positive retention and attendance are increased and home-school relationships are better (Monrad, et al., 2008).

The Revised School Level Environment Questionnaire (RSLEQ) measures teachers' perceptions of schools. According to the RSLEQ, five factors influence school climate: collaboration, student relations, school resources, decision making, and instructional innovation. The resulting survey by Drs. Bruce Johnson and Joseph Stevens was revised from the original questionnaire because it had no published factor analysis results, rendering it a tentative instrument (Johnson & Stevens, 2006).

The *Leader in Me* program was adapted from the *7 Habits* by a principal, and now it is implemented in schools overseen by Sean Covey. The school-wide approach emphasizes leadership, personal responsibility, and goal-setting (Delisio, 2011). This program can improve the climate and culture of a school. Schools with strong climates can be identified by having more students who perform well academically (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

## **Methods**

### ***Instruments and Sample***

This study was conducted at 15 schools that were participating in the *Leader in Me* program and schools that have not adopted the program. Teachers at both type of schools completed the surveys. The schools that were considered *Leader in Me* schools were schools that were or in the process of becoming a *Leader in Me* school. School districts and principals who agreed to participate were sent a packet of surveys for their teachers to complete. The study used two survey instruments to examine culture and climate: The School Culture Survey (Gruenert & Valentine, 1998) and The Revised School Level Environment Questionnaire (RSLEQ) (Johnson, et al., 2007). Permission to conduct this study was secured from the University of Southern Mississippi's Institutional Review Board, district superintendents, and school principals. Surveys were returned and quantitatively analyzed using descriptive, differential, and correlation statistical processes. The design of the analysis was casual comparative, intended to establish cause and effect, but cannot assign subjects to treatment/control. This method yields limited interpretations, but is typically used for identifying possible causes and is similar to correlation (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 1993). School climate surveys, such as RSLEQ, a commonly used instrument in the U.S., Australia, and South Africa for measuring teachers' perceptions, has five subscales: collaboration (.82), decision making (.78), instructional innovation (.79), student relations (.86), and school resources (.77), with their respective coefficients of internal consistency or reliability (Johnson, Stevens, & Zvoch, 2007). The School Culture Survey measures faculty perception of school culture and has these six subscales and reported reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) scores: teacher collaboration (.91), collaborative leadership (.83),

professional development (.87), collegial support (.80), unity of purpose (.82), and learning partnerships (.66) (Gruenert & Valentine, 1998).

### **Research Questions**

After reviewing the literature and analyzing the instruments to measure culture and climate in schools, the following questions were developed:

1. Is there a difference in teacher perception of school culture between *Leader in Me* Schools and non-*Leader in Me* Schools as measured by the variables in the School Culture Survey?
2. Is there a difference in teacher perception of school climate between *Leader in Me* Schools and non-*Leader in Me* schools as measured by the variables in the Revised School Level Environment Questionnaire?
3. Is there a relationship between teacher perception of school culture and school climate and student discipline referrals at *Leader in Me* Schools and non-*Leader in Me* Schools as measured by the schools' discipline report?

### **Methods and Analysis**

Descriptive and inferential statistical procedures were used to analyze the data from both surveys. Discipline records used were from the 2010-11 school year. RSLEQ and School Culture Survey data were independently input and coded, then analyzed to determine significance via Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) and the f-test. Significance levels for each independent variable were set at .05 and a Pillai's Trace statistic was conducted. The MANOVA was the primary data analysis mechanism with the main objective of determining the responses of teachers on the RSLEQ and School Culture Surveys. MANOVA test are useful in experimental where at least some of the independent variables are manipulated (French, Macedo, Poulsen, Waterson, & Yu, 2006).

### **Respondents**

There were 500 questionnaires distributed among 15 schools. Resulting primary data consisted of 172 teacher reported surveys from nine schools in two similar school districts in Mississippi and one large district in Florida with varying demographics. A total of 60% of schools responded representing a return rate of 34.4%. Frequency data from this sample indicated that 97.1% of the respondents were female. Teachers' years of experience ranged up to 20 years in both *Leader in Me* and non-*Leader in Me* schools. The majority of the respondents had a bachelor's degree, 62.8%, and 37.2% had a master's or higher degree.

### **Results**

This results section focuses on the significant findings. This may limit drawing conclusions. A full list of complete results can be viewed in the lead author's dissertation. The development of culture is an important issue and school culture has been seen by many to be *the* missing link to school improvement (Wegner & Hall, 1998). Table 1 represents descriptive statistics and frequencies gleaned from School Culture Surveys from non-*Leader in Me* and *Leader in Me* (*LIM*) schools' teachers. Results from Table 1 indicate that teachers from the *Leader in Me* schools had higher means consistently in every category below. Although, it is not clear whether the language, thoughts, spirituality, and interaction at any of these schools have been developed and/or fully explained to each teacher. One of requirements to become a *Leader in Me* school refers to creating a leadership environment. When leadership is created or developed, it is

imperative that the leader knows the expected boundaries. It is not enough to know the mission; leaders need to know why the mission is the mission. When leaders know the mission and why the mission is important because it has been clearly explained and developed collaboratively, there is more value and understanding of a school's mission. It is noted that a the size of the two groups differ; the non-*Leader in Me* is about a third smaller than that the *Leader in Me* group. Therefore, generalizability is limited.

Table 1  
School Culture Survey question responses for non-*Leader in Me* Schools (n=126) and for *Leader in Me* Schools (n=46)

School Culture Perception Questions	Mean	Standard Deviation
Teachers understand the mission of the school	4.44	.60
Teachers understand the mission of the school ( <i>LIM</i> )	4.50	.54
Teachers utilize professional networks to obtain information and resources for classroom instruction	4.39	.64
Teachers utilize professional networks to obtain information and resources for classroom instruction ( <i>LIM</i> )	4.46	.72
The faculty values school improvement	4.38	.60
The faculty values school improvement ( <i>LIM</i> )	4.70	.46
Teaching performance reflects the mission of school	4.28	.72
Teaching performance reflects the mission of the school ( <i>LIM</i> )	4.48	.58

Note: The School Culture Survey contains a 5 point Likert scale with 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree.

Table 1 data represents results of the analysis of frequencies and descriptive statistics from the School Culture Survey, examining the same four questions. These were derived from the paradigm of *Leader in Me* schools' teachers. It must be noted that the standard deviation of the school improvement value was below 50%. With *Leader in Me* schools undergoing the process of the nine required criteria to become *Leader in Me* school, they may not have been fully developed at the time of these surveys were completed. When complete, the *Leader in Me* school program ensures improved teacher understanding. The very title, *Leader in Me*, describes schools that are in the beginning of the process as well as schools that may be in the middle of the process of leadership change. One reason for some of the differences in standard deviations is that the transformation of being a *Leader in Me* school is not an overnight change, but takes extended

periods of time. The experiences listed on the *Leader in Me* website, do not emphasize changes in children, but changes in the teachers (Hatch, 2011). These changes are part of the process of culture change, again, which takes time. In all but one of the questions from Table 1 there were smaller standard deviations for *Leader in Me* schools' teachers' perception of culture. This might indicate that these teachers are beginning to experience the changes from the transformational process. Also, note that *Leader in Me* schools had a .30 higher mean (M=4.70) for faculty values school improvement as compared to non-*Leaders In Me* schools' mean (M=4.38). The process of change for this program to occur is in fact part of a school improvement process. *Leader in Me* schools' respondents value school improvement more according to the data results.

The responses of the RSLEQ from *Leader in Me* schools' teachers in Table 2, presents a standard deviation of .87 with regards to good communication among teachers. With a standard deviation this high, there is great variability with teachers at *Leader in Me* schools in how they experience communication among peers. Additionally, there was evidence that teachers believed that new and different ideas were always being tried (M=4.07) and (SD=.68).

Table 2  
RSLEQ question responses for *Leader in Me* Schools (N=46)

Climate Perception Questions	Mean	Standard Deviation
There is good communication among teachers	4.07	.87

Note: The RSLEQ contains a 5 point Likert scale with 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree.

With high means, non-*Leader in Me* schools' teachers were innovative (M=4.13) and (SD=.63) and willing to try new approaches (M=4.19) and (SD=.66). The standard deviations for these questions appeared to be more normal. As will be discussed later, higher innovation efforts were associated with higher discipline referrals. Table 3's non-*Leader in Me* data illustrates a similar, but slightly higher, mean and a lower standard deviation with regards to good communication among teachers when compared to teachers at *Leader in Me* schools. More research is needed in this area particularly.

Table 3  
RSLEQ Responses for Non-*Leader in Me* Schools (N=126)

Climate Perception Questions	Mean	Standard Deviation
There is good communication among teachers	4.09	.72

Note: The RSLEQ contains a 5 point Likert scale with 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree.

### ***Significant Findings***

There was an overall total score statistically significant relationship between *Leader in Me* schools and school climate:  $F(5,166) = 2.655, p = .024$ . In Table 4, the factors of the RSLEQ were used to examine relationship between school climate and *Leader in Me* schools. There were significant differences specifically in two factors in *Leader in Me schools*: school resources ( $M = 3.16$ ) and decision-making ( $M = 3.62$ ). This means the *Leader in Me* schools were more generous with school resources and more collaborative with decision making when compared with teachers at non-*Leader in Me* schools.

Table 4  
Factors of RSLEQ Results from *Leader in Me* schools

Factors of Climate	LIMS	Mean	Standard Deviation
School Resources	Yes	3.16	.57
	No	2.96	.48
Decision Making	Yes	3.62	.56
	No	3.29	.58

Note: The RSLEQ contains a 5 point Likert scale with 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree.

There was a relationship between *Leader in Me* schools and discipline referral rates based upon the discipline records used were from the 2010-11 school year:  $F(11, 88) = 6.825, p < .001, R^2 = .460$ . The study did not find significance in non-*Leader in Me* schools. The results suggest that being a *Leader in Me* school in the year 2010-11 had a significantly positive influence on discipline referrals. The study found that learning environment and student relationships correlated highly in reducing discipline referrals in *Leader In Me* schools. Table 5 reports results via high mean scores in three factors: professional development of teachers  $M = 4.22$ , unity of purpose  $M = 4.27$  and collegial support  $M = 4.06$ .

Table 5  
Factors of RSLEQ Results from *Leader in Me* schools

Discipline Referrals for 2010-11	Mean	Standard Deviation
Discipline 2010	1.03	.70
Professional Development	4.22	.51
Unity of Purpose	4.27	.57
Collegial Support	4.06	.62



Note: The RSLEQ contains a 5 point Likert scale with 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree.

In Table 6, a coefficient correlation was used to test how the *Leader In Me* schools scored in the 2010-11 school year in all factors of the School Culture Survey and the Revised School Level Environment Questionnaire. It was apparent that *Leader In Me* schools scores were significantly high in correlation with the factors of learning partnership, student relations, and instructional innovation.

Table 6  
Coefficients of School Culture Survey Leader In Me Schools 2010-11

Model	Unstandardized	Standardized	Sig.
	Coefficient	Coefficient	
	B	Beta	
(Constant)	1.81		.01
collaborative leadership	-.01	-.10	.96
teacher_collaboration	.08	.09	.54
professional_development	-.15	.11	.43
unity_of_purpose	-.39	-.32	.07
collegial_support	.17	.15	.32
learning_partnership	.37	-.41	.005
collaboration	-.04	-.2	.77
student_relations	-.27	-.30	.01
school_resources	.02	.01	.84
decision_making	.06	.05	.56
instructional_innovation	.38	.24	.01

Note: The survey School Culture Survey was a 5 point Likert scale with 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree.

The Beta score and significance for learning partnership showed that teachers of *Leader In Me* schools experienced a high degree of partnering relationships with parents and teachers, the correlation was high in student relations indicating high levels of student and teacher relationships, and with regards to the correlation with instructional innovations, the more instruction innovation found in a school, the more discipline referrals that school reported. This finding shows that the more teachers are asked to try new teaching ideas and innovations, the more they were having student discipline problems.

This study found that learning environment as well as student relationships correlated in reducing discipline referrals in *Leader In Me* schools. In contrast, instructional innovation did not help in producing positive teacher perceptions of school climate.

### Summary Culture

This study found higher means of teacher perceptions of school culture in *Leader in Me* schools compared to non-*Leader in Me* schools in the following areas: teachers understand the mission of the school, teachers utilize professional networks to obtain information and resources for

classroom instruction, the faculty values school improvement, and teaching performance reflects the mission of school. *Leader in Me* schools' respondents indicated that they valued school improvement more than non-*Leader in Me* teachers. It must be noted that some of these schools were in the process of transforming into *Leader in Me* schools and because change takes considerable time, effort, and commitment, it may have affected the mean scores. The *Leader in Me* website reports that what is experienced is not changes in the children, but changes in the teachers (Hatch, 2011). In all but one of the questions, there were smaller standard deviations for *Leader in Me* schools' teachers' perceptions of culture. This may indicate that the teachers are beginning to experience the cultural changes.

### ***Climate***

A statistically significant relationship was found between *Leader in Me* schools and teachers' perception of climate. Teachers at *Leader in Me* schools reported having higher means in decision-making and school resources. In *Leader in Me* schools there were significant differences between the two types of schools in two of the factors: school resources and decision-making. School climate in *Leader in Me* schools had a statistically significant difference with regards to teachers' innovation and willingness to try new ideas.

### ***Referrals***

A statistically significant difference was found between whether a school was a *Leader in Me* school and the number of school discipline referrals processed. Results suggest that being a *Leader in Me* school in the year 2010-11 had an important influence on discipline referrals.

### **Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

The relationship between school culture and school climate is especially important to school administrators that may be in schools where student discipline referrals are very high, where teachers do not seem to have a common vision, and where policy needs changing. A recommendation for policy makers includes implementing the *Leader in Me* program transformation in schools because it may assist in making true inside-out personal changes that teachers and schools need to improve relationships. Recommendations for further research include suggesting the use of parent perceptions of culture and climate to discover if they feel that *Leader in Me* schools are effective. Future studies need to focus on test scores of *Leader in Me* schools as opposed to schools that have not experienced the transformation. If educational policy makers fully understood the tremendous benefits that could be realized by transforming schools in their districts to become *Leader in Me* schools, there would be a widespread need to research why schools do not choose to adopt the *Leader in Me* program.

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