

Creating and Sustaining Positive School Climate During COVID- 19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The researchers used a qualitative design with a descriptive phenomenological approach to examine the experiences of 10 principals in creating and sustaining a positive school climate during COVID-19. The researchers conducted interviews over Zoom from October to December in 2021. The principals have worked in two American states, one Midwestern state and one in the South region of the country. Findings indicated that although the principals knew about school climate, they did not have a complete understanding of the concept. In the present study, it was concluded that a positive school climate is created and sustained with specific leadership skills such as pertaining to communication and building robust relationships. The challenges experienced by the principals included the socio-political climate of the country, low student participation, lack of socialization, stress due to the pandemic, student behavior problems, and workload of teachers.

Keywords: *School climate, positive school climate, leadership, COVID-19 pandemic*

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Introduction

School climate is a set of internal characteristics that distinguish one school from another (Cohen et al., 2009; Shaw, 2009). Since the school climate affects the teachers (Amedome, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013), a healthy and positive school climate increases teachers' performances (Agustina et al., 2021; Gulsen & Gulenay, 2014) and makes important contributions to the students' academic success (Ertugrul & Toremeh, 2017), the teachers' emotional well-being, and their job satisfaction (Hoy et al., 2002); and the student success (Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Smith et al., 2020). Creating a positive school climate, which is so important for both teachers and students (Cohen, 2013), is one of the biggest responsibilities of school administrators (Spicer, 2016). According to Celik (2013), the main task of the principal who is the school leader, is to create a positive climate that will meet the expectations of teachers, students, parents, and the society, and to be a leader who develop the teaching policy (Hoy & Clover, 1986; Zincirli, 2020). For this reason, the school climate is directly affected by the principal's leadership practices (Stamatis & Chatzinikolaou, 2020). The principal's ability to motivate staff and facilitate the development of quality teaching practices affects the success of teachers and therefore students (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). Principals are responsible for sustaining a climate that focuses on supporting teachers (Silva et al., 2017) and students throughout the education process, enabling communication, and interaction (Cohen et al., 2009; Hallinger, 2003). This study focused on the crucial role principals play in creating and sustaining a positive school climate during COVID-19 pandemic.

School Climate

School climate comes from the concept of organizational climate. Organizational climate expresses the perception of the relations, mutual interactions, and communication (Hoy et al., 1991; Varli, 2015) existing in the organization by the employees (Holloway, 2012). In short, the sum of the perceptions shared by the employees about the organization corresponds to the organizational climate (Hoy et al., 1990; Gultekin, 2012). School climate, on the other hand, is defined as a set of distinguishable features within the school, emphasizing the unique characteristics of the school (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). School climate includes, emotions in the school atmosphere, the emotional atmosphere, tone of the school (Hoy et al., 2002; Zincirli, 2020), and quality of life at school (Cohen et al. 2009; Gorgonio, 2017). Therefore, climate affects stakeholders' working lives, including their work attitudes (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015), organizational citizenship behaviors, ethics (Cohen et al., 2009), safety (Cohen, 2013; Hernández & Seem, 2004), innovation, and individual and team performance. It is particularly interesting in the field of education as it covers many areas (Hoy & Miskel, 2005).

School climate can be positive or negative (Showers, 2019). Stakeholders' adoption of the school's structure and culture indicates that the school climate is positive; the opposite shows that the school climate is negative (Yaman, 2008). A positive school climate is effective in achieving the goals of the school (Bursalioglu, 2002). Teachers who interact with principals, staff, and colleagues in a positive school climate think optimistically about their school, use praise, enjoy working with colleagues, and are enthusiastic, accepting, and mutually respectful toward their colleagues (Fultz, 2011; Hoy & Clover, 1986). A positive climate is conducive to teachers' intimacy

with their colleagues, and their professionalism and socialization, as well as their sense of community support for each other (Cohen et al., 2009). In a positive school climate, emphasis is placed on academic development and learning, positive relationships exist between students and teachers, all members of the school community respect each other, equitable and consistent policies are followed, and family support and family participation are considered important (Ayik & Sayir, 2014; Cohen et al. 2009). For this reason, a positive school climate affects the quality of the school environment and the behavior of all stakeholders (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Hoy, 1990).

In order to understand the school climate, it is necessary to know the difference from the school culture. Although these two concepts are often used interchangeably from time to time, they are actually (Cobb, 2014; Spicer, 2016). According to Van Houtte (2005), culture is the legacy separate to the principals by their predecessors, the way they act and practice in accordance with this heritage during their term of office. While culture deals with values, meanings, and beliefs, climate is related to the perception of these values, meanings and beliefs (Hoy et al., 2013; Huber, 2010; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012; Van Houtte, 2005).

Culture is the structure of the school from the past and has a long-term structure. The climate, on the other hand, can change because it is psychological. Climate focuses on how teachers and administrators currently feel about their school (Glisson, 2007). The climate is usually short in duration and flexible to suit the current needs of students, school, and society. The climate affects the culture of the school over time (Glisson & Green, 2006). School principals play a key in creating a positive climate and culture is always essential (Blase & Blase, 2002). It is even more crucial in times of crisis (Brion, 2021) especially during COVID-19 pandemic crisis. This study sought to examine how school leaders promoted positive school climates in the midst of the global pandemic.

School Principals' Influences on Positive School Climate

As the leader of the educational environment, the school principal has a direct influence on the climate of the school (Blase & Blase, 2002; Hallinger, 2003). By arranging intra-school communication (Davis & Warner, 2018) principals improve teacher morale, parent partnerships, and professional-colleague solidarity, which positively affects students' teaching (Hoy et al., 2002). High teacher morale and solidarity increase teachers' job satisfaction, commitment to school and sense of honor (Kirca, 2019). For this reason, school climate is not a static concept, but a constantly changing situation that needs to be monitored and improved (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). As the school leader, the principal monitors the climate and organizes the processes and practices to ensure the healthy development of the environment (Hoy & Miskel, 2005).

Mitchell and Castle (2005) stated that school principals are consciously motivated to develop and maintain a positive school climate. Kelly et al. (2005) found that the most important aspect of sustaining a successful educational environment is effective leadership. They found that leadership styles have a positive effect on school climate when principals payed attention to the individual needs of their employees and facilitate knowledge and skill development within a complex community of educators. When principals were involved in the teaching of teachers and supported teachers, there was a positive effect on school climate and student achievement (Hoy & Hannum, 1997; O'Donnell & White, 2005; Pepper & Thomas, 2002; Smith et al., 2020; Van Houtte, 2005).

Goddard et al. (2000) define positive climate as teachers' academic emphasis. The academic emphasis is on teachers' belief that students have the ability to succeed academically. They have determined that a climate in which academic emphasis is developed supports not only teachers individually, but also the school community as a whole.

School leaders are responsible for this focus on academic emphasis by creating an environment where teachers can provide this support to students. Because principals play an important role (Blase & Blase, 2002), positively affecting school components, they also gain momentum towards achieving organizational goals (Kiral & Kacar, 2016; MacNeil et al., 2009). Principals exert positive influences in a variety of ways (Nir & Hameiri, 2014), such as determining the way of learning at school and creating both the social and intellectual contexts of the school (Mitchell & Castle, 2005). They also mentor and create or follow a vision (Beauchamp & Parsons, 2012; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Tschannen-Moran, & Gareis, 2015). Researchers have found that there is a strong relationship between school principals' ability to influence school stakeholders and positive school climates (Adams et al., 2017).

There are differences between successful and unsuccessful schools' climate. Successful schools have a more positive culture and climate when they are positively influenced by school leadership (O'Malley et al., 2015). Principals who can establish relationships with teachers and interact with all staff (Thapa et al., 2013) hold the key elements of creating a positive school climate (DiPaola et al., 2004). Teachers want to work in a highly successful school, and when principals focus on good hospitality and create a positive atmosphere teachers begin to believe that their school is successful (Sergiovanni, 2000). The most successful teachers have a positive and relaxed relationship with their principal. Strong relationships in the school building are built when the principal accepts, respects and values employees; this means that all employees are acknowledged for the value they add to the building (Toll, 2010). When school leaders focus on creating an atmosphere conducive to school success, the school is perceived as successful by teachers and students (Hoy et al., 2002).

Principals support (Thapa et al., 2013) and affect school climate positively (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Nduku, 2019), which allows teachers to positively affect students' academic success (Kelley et al., 2005). A positive climate radiates warmth, belonging and colleague solidarity, and principals are responsible for sustaining such an environment so that teaching and learning can take place (Goddard et al., 2000). When the studies on school climate are examined, the studies showing similarities with this study are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Examples of School Climate Studies

Quantitative	Agustina et al., 2021; Amedome, 2018; Ayik & Sayir, 2014; Dis & Ayik, 2016; 2017; Ertugrul & Toremeh, 2017; Fultz, 2011; Gulsen & Gulenay, 2014; Gultekin, 2012; Halawah, 2005; Hoy & Hannuum, 1997; Hoy & Clover, 1986; Hoy et al., 1990; Kelley, et al., 2005; Nir & Hameiri, 2014; O'Donnell & White, 2005; Sanchez et al., 2020; Shaw, 2009; Shouppe, 2005; Silva et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2020; Senturk & Sagnak, 2012; Varli, 2015
Qualitative	Necanli, 2017; Showers, 2019; Smith vd., 2014; Spicer, 2016; Zincirli, 2020
Mixed	Cohen et al., 2009; Griffith, 1999
Review	Hoy, 1990; Gorgonio, 2017; McCormick, 2019; Nduku, 2019; Pepper & Thomas, 2002; Shore, 1997, Stamatis & Chatzinikolaou, 2020; Thapa et al., 2013

Table 1 was classified according to the research method in which they were conducted. These studies investigated how to create a positive school climate (Shore, 1997; Showers, 2019; Smith et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2020), climate policy and practices (Cohen et al., 2009; Zincirli, 2020); principal-leader effect and applications (Ayik & Sayir, 2014; Dis & Ayik, 2016; Ertugrul & Toremeh, 2017; Fultz, 2011; Griffith, 1999; Gultekin, 2012; Halawah, 2005; McCormick, 2019; Necanli, 2017; Pepper & Thomas, 2002; Sanchez et al., 2020; Shaw, 2009; Shouppe, 2005; Spicer, 2016; Stamatis & Chatzinikolaou, 2020; Senturk & Sagnak, 2012; Varli, 2015).

When these studies were examined, it was determined that none of them focused on the difficulties the experienced by school principals in creating and sustaining a positive school climate during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic is affecting the school climate with all its difficulties, it is thought that doing research on such a subject is valuable in this respect and will guide the principals in creating a positive school climate during the pandemic period or other natural crisis periods. Based on the study's findings, the researchers provided recommendations for current and prospective school leaders.

The research was conducted in order to describe the difficulties faced by 10 school principals in creating and sustaining a positive school climate and their management strategies according to their experiences. This study sought to answer the following questions.

1. How do school leaders understand and define school climate?
2. How do they create and sustain a positive school climate during the pandemic?
3. What challenges do these leaders face in seeking to create and/or maintain a positive school climate during the pandemic?

Method

The researchers utilized a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach. This study sought to understand how school leaders created and sustained positive school climates during COVID-19. The use of a phenomenological approach was appropriate because this approach is represented in principals' experiences. It enables researchers to describe the meaning of individuals' experiences (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the "descriptive phenomenology" approach was adopted (Kiral, 2021). Because in the research, it was aimed to reveal the lived experiences of the principals, to focus on understanding the researched phenomenon according to the experiences of the participants (Merriam, 2014). For this reason, researchers have deliberately kept their own thoughts, knowledge or beliefs in the background (Osborne, 1994) as a requirement of descriptive phenomenology (Laverty, 2003).

Participants

The researchers used convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling to select schools and participants. The researchers contacted the principals two American states, one Midwestern state and one in the South region of the country from October to December in 2021 and asked these leaders if they would be willing to participate in the present study. Once leaders agreed, the researcher asked the participants if they would know other principals or vice principals who would have an interest in contributing to this study, a practice known as snowball sampling (Bryman, 2012). Snow ball sampling allows participants to recommend other colleagues for the research. Snow ball sampling is useful and commonly used because when participants voluntarily agree to participate in a study, it is likely that the data collected will be authentic and of quality because

they are willing to give their time to help researchers understand a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Table 2 provides information about principal participants.

Table 2

Participants of the study

Name & Position	Age	Gender	Level
Mark, Principal	40	M	Elementary
James, Principal	38	M	Elementary
Peter, Principal	56	M	Elementary
Jeff, Principal	47	M	High
Matthew, Principal	37	M	High (private)
Martin, Principal	54	M	High
Max Principal	36	M	Middle (charter)
Julie, Principal	41	F	Middle
Mary, Vice Principal	39	F	PreK-Elementary
Cindy, Vice Principal	44	F	Elementary

As Table 2 indicates, the sample included 10 principals and vice principals, aged from 36 to 56, seven men and three women. These leaders worked in PreK to high school. To understand how school leaders created, maintained, and sustained positive school climates during COVID-19, the researchers interviewed these 10 participants. Examples of interview questions included: Tell me about your understanding and defining of school climate. Tell me about the climate at your school and how you create a positive climate. What challenges, if any, did you experience and continue to experience as a result of COVID-19? These interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and were conducted by Zoom and a total of 120 pages. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

Data Analysis

The researchers used qualitative software called ATLAS.ti to analyze the data. This software allows for qualitative analysis of large bodies of textual and audio data. Coding is the base of the analysis as it is the interpretation of the data (Saldaña, 2009). Analysis of qualitative data took place over two cycles. In round one, open codes were developed for each key point emerging from the above methods. Examples of codes included being aware, more flexible, listening, and accepting. In round two, codes were grouped into overlapping categories to create themes. Themes that emerged pertained to leadership, relationships, and communication.

Trustworthiness

The researchers employed a rigorous study design along with robust qualitative strategies to enhance the internal validity and trustworthiness of the study's findings. First, the investigators gathered rich data from various leaders. Second, the researchers went back to participants to ask them to check the accuracy of the findings, also referred as member checking (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Third, the researchers created a data trail (Rodgers, 2008) in which they copied the participants' quotes from the present study's transcript and pasted them under each theme that emerged from the data analysis. Following this process ensured that the researchers, were not sharing their

viewpoints but, rather, the perspectives of the participants. Prior to conducting the research, the researchers obtained the approval of institution's review board. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, the researchers used pseudonyms to refer to the institution and the participants.

Findings

Findings pertained to the definition of school climate, how the leaders created and sustained positive school climates during COVID-19, and the difficulties they experienced and how they overcame these challenges.

Understanding of School Climate

The findings are organized by research questions. The first research question sought to understand how principals and vice-principals understood and defined school climate. The word clouds in Figure 1 shows the principals definitions.



Figure 1

The Principals' Definitions of School Climate

As Figure 1 indicates, most of the leaders understood climate as being a feeling that changes, comparing it to the weather. Mary exemplified the sentiment of the group when she said: *"The climate of the school is like the weather, it can change quickly, the mood can feel cloudy and gloomy, or clear and joyful."* Mark spoke about the climate as *"being many things, such as the feeling people get when they are in same spaces as their colleagues, beliefs in one another, and having common goals."* Andrew added that the climate change based on *"what people bring in from outside, like their moods, what is on their minds."* James saw climate as *"the temperature of the building, the heart rate."* Peter had similar thoughts and added that for him climate had *"an equity tenet to it, making sure everyone is equitably treated and served."* Lastly Cindy shared that the climate could change in seconds, because *"it is the comment someone makes, the e-mail teachers received, the gossip that is going around, the lack of communication."*

reflective, and being able to willing to have difficult conversations with anyone disrupting the climate.

When prompted to share what a positive school climate was and how they created it, Mary emphasized the critical role communication played in a creating positive climates. She said: *“Communicating often, clearly and with transparency, to all stakeholders is key. For us that means translating in several languages the communications that are sent home.”* Martin added that *“communication also means that teachers and staff members feel safe to disagree, to have conflicts, and are open to express concerns because they feel safe to do so. It often means teaching them to have conflicts to avoid fake positivity.”* Julie and Cindy focused on listening to their teachers and found this strategy vital to boosting people’s moods and affect school climate. Cindy exemplified the importance of listening when she said: *“Sometimes, all the teachers need is for me to listen, they know they can find that in me, so they come and find me to just listen and then they feel better. I believe by listening I unintentionally avoid the formation of gossips.”* Mark agreed that communication was key and as a result, he decided to *“send less e-mails and find a better balance between sending e-mails and bringing people together, so that teachers did not feel inundated by e-mails while also losing the personal touch and connection.”*

According to these leaders, the pandemic helped them to recenter on what was important: their people. Mark said: *“the people is the crux of the work. Whether, they are small or big people, students, and adults.”* Several leaders spoke about the importance of having relationships based on trust. Mark maintained that *“leaders need to value their staff, teachers, students, and families. We need to prioritize people in our system.”* To intentionally focus on building robust relationships, Mark had a calendar and a structure in place by which he kept track of which teacher he talked to and who he needed to touch base with. This system allowed this principal to check in and deliver positive messaging to teachers every day no matter what else he had to tackle. He shared his strategy because he strongly believed that *“People are at best when they feel valued, wanted, and supported. I try to intentionally do that so that they can feel good about what they do and be at their best to serve our kids.”*

They all stated that in order to learn and teach well, leaders needed to focus on the people first, as Julie said, *“Maslow before Bloom.”* Matthew and Jeff mentioned the need for leaders to focus on celebrating wins, small or big, and always valuing their teachers and staff. Participants shared having put in place appreciation boards for their teachers, making shout-outs during meetings, writing hand-written notes, visiting with teachers, and treating them with small gifts or meals to show their appreciation. Matthew purposefully carved time out of his day to *“make teachers feel valued and recognized. He thought this was important now more than ever because people are tired and more fragile because of COVID-19.”* Recognizing the effect of the pandemic on teachers, Julie and Mark were intentional about offering some resources and professional learning to promote the social emotional well-being of the adults in their buildings. They offered workshops on work-life balance, mindfulness and provided additional resources to avoid anxiety and burnt out. Mark purposefully modeled work-life balance when he took *“the week-ends off to focus on family.”* Mark also made sure to keep meetings to a minimum, scheduling them on early start day, starting and ending meeting on time, being flexible, leading with grace, recognizing that

most educators are women who balance their career, sometimes children, and other obligations. He also provided substitute when a teacher needed to leave early.

Julie asserted that community was important in times of crisis and that she saw a positive impact on the school climate when she started to organize community events for the teachers such as *“breakfast fellowship, optional gatherings after school for those who felt comfortable sharing a meal in a restaurant, walking groups, or book club.”* Cindy also felt that the building space influenced the school climate. As a result, and to foster more positivity among her school community, she purposefully moved her office to be at the center of the school rather than near the entrance, away from classrooms, students, and teachers. She affirmed:

“This move has had a real impact on school climate because teachers come see me all the time, I get firsthand news from them, or students and I am able to fix issues before they fester and become toxic gossips. I can see also how this move increased the trust teachers have in me because they see me more, observe me more, and we interact more. It is amazing how a small change like that can affect the mood of the building.”

Peter influenced his school climate by disseminating climate surveys to his teachers, parents, and staff members. He also conducted focus-groups with students and later look at the data to determine what were the root causes of some challenges related to diversity, equity, and inclusion that impacted the climate. He was then able to collaboratively find solutions to the issue and sustained a positive climate. Peter said:

“Too many times in education, we shoot arrows everywhere without targeting the real causes for an issue we have, we look at the next best thing, we try something, let it go and move on to something else when in reality if we take the time to ask, listen, pause and find the root cause of an issue, we can fix the problem for good and maintain positive school climates that way.”

Mary also focused on fostering robust relationships with all families and students, no matter their race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or other identity markers. She said:

“And a lot of the families are from Honduras, and they leave in a specific area of town. At first, they didn't want to come to our school because they were nervous because of their immigration status. We had to reassure them that we had nothing to do with immigration. We went their neighborhood and talked to them in Spanish and told them that we just wanted to help their children. We started going to the community once a month and brought cookies or pizzas, and we just started to talk to students and parents. Kids recognized their teachers and that is how we strengthened those relationships. Now they trust us, and it has improved our climate. We all have grown because of this experience.”

In addition to focusing on communication and relationships, Martin affirmed collaborating on core values was essential to promote a healthy school climate. In his principalship, he had to *“teach people how to work together little by little. Along the way, I made sure that I celebrated wins and built on the positives.”* Mary agreed with Martin and stated, *“For the climate to be*

conducive to learning and well-being, teachers, staff, and parents have to be on the same page, working towards same goals and mission, and we all have to be accountable for it.” For Jeff, “Being student-centered at all times was the key to positive climate” while Peter perceived having teachers volunteer for extra work as being proof that the climate was suitable. He said: “We have voluntary meetings to talk about the climate of the building, voluntary equity meetings and the attendance is high among teachers, even among veteran staff, that tells me they want to be more involved, and they like to be at school.” Lastly, Martin shared that he knew when the climate of school was healthy when “the students’, teachers, and staff needs are met and when we advocate for all students, no matter their race or other identity markers.”

Mary stated: *“I set the tone for a positive climate. I have high expectations of happiness for our building and in fact we are often teased in the district as being the happy school.”* Mary continued by saying: *“I leave my personal issues at home and when I set foot in the building, I focus on modeling what I expect of others, so healthy interactions, honesty, transparency, collaboration, student-centered mindset. I build my work and behavior on our core values.”*

Martin also talked about leaning on his building core values to “set the mood and to have difficult conversations with those who disrupt the positive climate. He shared:

“If someone is doing something that is not in alignment with our core values and that is disrupting our climate, I do not avoid the conversations. I go towards the disgruntled people because it affects and infects others if I do not. I then go back to the building values and remind the person that those are our rules of engagement. I listen and try to find a solution with the person.”

Another strategy Mary accounted for her positive school climate is her ability to hire teachers and staff that match the diversity of her student population. As a result of her intentional hiring, students were able to see themselves in their teachers, whether they were of Hispanic or African descents. The principal stated: *“We hire very intentionally because we serve a diverse student population. We hire well, we formed partnerships with universities so that we can have diverse educators in the building. I believe this adds to our positive climate because families and student can see themselves in their educators.”* Because all leaders saw *“a direct relationship between climate and school improvement”*, they found ways to maintain and sustain positive climates despite the numerous challenges they faced during COVID-19.

Faced Challenges in Positive School Climate

The third research questions pertained to the challenges these principals faced in creating and sustaining positive school climates. The word cloud in Figure 3 shows the challenges principals face in creating positive school climates during COVID-19.



Figure 3

Challenges Principals Faced in Creating Positive School Climate

As seen in Figure 3 principals faced numerous challenges. Challenges pertained to the country's socio-political climate, lower classroom participation, students struggling with organizational skills, and the rise in mental issues. Leaders spoke about the climate of the country affecting their teachers' morale and having an emotional impact on the adults in their buildings. Jeff expressed this feeling when he said:

“It has been years of turmoil now, people have lost loved ones, a lot of people and students experience anxiety and traumas and yet we are testing as if nothing has happened. I think that is the reason why teachers and leaders resign, we are asked by the authorities and state to conduct business as usual when nothing has been as usual, some kids did not do schools for 18 months, did not socialize much except on their phones, and did not have to adhere to community rules necessarily.”

Matthew shared Jeff's concern and added:

“People fear COVID-19; it creates a lot of stress even among the vaccinated community. The consequences of COVID-19 are beyond what we could anticipate. We are all weathering the re-entry of students in school and are trying to re-establish standards we flex on during COVID-19 and that creates hardships among all stakeholders and affect the climate.”

According to Martin, the challenges were related to low classroom participation, students being less mature, higher levels of traumas and mental issues. This high school principal explained: *“Students have to do less group with social distancing, so they never learned how to work in group, they do not know how. The way they learned to do school is different. I have students whose last time they were face-to face was in middle school.”* While Martin and Matthew are proponent of

wearing masks, they heard from students that the mask was prohibiting participation because the mask made them shy, necessitated more efforts on their parts because they had to speak louder, and it made them uncomfortable.

Another issue that arose for leaders in middle and high schools and that limited participation pertained to phones. Educators noticed that they had to reteach how to use phones in class for the purpose of learning and that playing games as not allowed. Jeff noted: *“These kids were playing all day on their phones and now we have all these rules for them, it takes time to reteach and form new habits and that takes a toll on educators.”* In addition to reteaching students how to learn and behave in school, these leaders recognized that the students were less mature. Martin synthesized this feeling when she shared:

“They have a harder time staying organized, managing their workload, and keeping with assignments. They cannot take notes either. It seems that their executive functioning has been impacted by being remote for a while because these skills they learn them in 7th and 8th grade and some students were learned remotely during these years. As a result, teachers and leaders spend more time following up and that can affect the mood and climate of the school. That is why focusing on supporting and valuing teachers is key.”

Additionally, all leaders shared the rise in mental health issues among students. Students experienced more depression and suicidal symptoms than prior to COVID-19. These new challenges affected the school climate because they required teachers to fill in for colleagues at times and because teachers themselves were not *“as upbeat as a usual.”* For Matthew in the private system, a supplemental stressor surfaced when he had to reduce his workforce, affecting those staying employed when they saw colleagues being laid off due to lower enrollment. In large school’s such as Mary’s, challenges also pertained to having a lot of personalities to manage and while also dealing with some controversial state laws. She shared:

“As leaders, we are walking on eggshells because we have to talk about certain things because we are a diverse community, and we have to let go of the politics and controverse surrounding certain topics, and as a large school with close to 100 teachers, I have to navigate all these personalities and opinions because I want our climate to stay positive.”

Finally, leader spoke about the polarizing events that can *“make or break the school climate anytime.”* They stated the polarizing events surrounding COVID-19, such as wearing the mask or not, getting vaccinated or not, getting the booster shot or not. They also cited the 2020 presidential election and the diverse movements such as Black Lives Matter. Matthew summarized the group’s sentiment when he shared: *“All the polarizing events impact teachers and our eco-system. Our job as leaders is to maintain a positive climate despite all these so that we can focus on student learning and well-being and the well-being of our adults.”* Despite these stressors and challenges, these leaders focused on sustaining a positive climate during COVID-19.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

This qualitative study was conducted to examine the experiences of 10 principals in creating and sustaining a positive school climate during COVID-19. Findings indicated that although the principals knew about school climate, they did not have a complete understanding of the concept. As a result, the researchers recommend that leaders read about school climate. Agreements can be made with academics that would give access to leaders to free online training. Because school improvement starts and is led by principals, providing school leaders with on-going professional learning would be beneficial and might augment leaders' retention and self-efficacy, particularly in times of crisis. In this context, the effective work of professional learning communities can positively affect the school climate. Supporting professional learning communities is the most important contribution of the principal to teachers. Creating a learning culture and climate, involving teachers in decisions, providing teachers with appropriate time and resources, arranging time for meetings and providing social support, motivating learning and communicating with them are the most meaningful contributions that a school principal can make to teachers (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016). Principals mentioned that professional learning communities can be effective in creating a positive school climate at school. At this point, the effective leadership of principals plays an important role. Smith et al. (2020) and Cohen et al. (2009) who found that knowledgeable and effective principals affect their schools positively. As principals learn and develop, this is reflected in teachers and the educational environment. It can be said that these studies are similar from this perspective.

This study demonstrated that a positive school climate is created and maintained with leadership, communication, and relationship. These principals developed communications and focused their work on building robust relationships with their stakeholders. Although Shore's (1997) research was conducted on students, it actually points to similar findings. Similarly, Showers (2019), Smith et al. (2014), Spicer (2016), Zincirli (2020) concluded that the leader and leadership are important in creating a positive school climate and that it is important to develop interpersonal relationships for a positive school climate. However, none of these researchers studied positive school climate during the pandemic. This study filled the gap in the existing literature while also providing practical ways leaders can create positive school climates in times of crisis. Principals also tried harder to create a positive climate and unity at school during the pandemic process, and they made more effort. Because the pandemic has brought many problems (like stress) with it. This is another element that distinguishes this research from other studies.

Pandemic studies refer to the importance of intra-school relations. Because a crisis situation that does not exist in school life has affected all school stakeholders (Brion & Kiral, 2021), it may be beneficial for the school, teacher, and student for school principals to make more efforts than before to create and maintain a positive school climate. The challenges experienced by this study's principals were low student participation, struggling with students' behavior, polarization, lack of socialization, fear of pandemic, and teachers' workload. These difficulties created stress for teachers, which in term had an impact on the schools' climates. In order to overcome difficulties, it may be beneficial for principals to develop their communication and relationship-building skills, to support teachers in various ways, and to make them feel important priority, and valuable. McCormick (2019) identified what specific actions and strategies principals can use to foster a

positive school climate that supports student achievement. Although he did not research the pandemic period, the strategies used by the principals are similar.

For a positive climate, it may also be important for principals to increase their mentoring skills and support stress management for teachers to sustain a positive school climate. In addition, various training, yoga, meditation, spending time together outside of school, breakfast, etc. could be offered to teachers in coping with stress. The fact that principals increase their communication and listening skills, sending messages and notes that will make teachers feel important can have a positive effect on teachers' perspectives of the school. Financial support can be provided by city school districts to principals and teachers who want to do master education such as leadership, communication, and administration.

As a result of the research, it was determined that school principals faced various challenges in order to maintain a positive school climate during the pandemic period. It was concluded that they solved these with leadership, communication, and positive relationships. With the pandemic, their importance has increased even more. Principals develop by learning and reading from each other's experiences. It is thought that this study will guide and benefit other principals.

This study was conducted with a small principal group in the US. For this reason, the results may not be generalized to other principal groups. Researchers believe, however, that the findings are valuable for current and prospective school leaders who seek to create and maintain positive school climates during times of crises. Future studies about climate can be conducted to compare with the US and other countries. In addition, further studies could be conducted quantitatively so that results can be generalized.

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