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Running head: ESTABLISHING SAFE SCHOOLS

Pepperdine University
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

ESTABLISHING A SAFE SCHOOL CULTURE: AN EXAMINATION OF CURRENT
PRACTICES IN K THROUGH 12 LEADERSHIP

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Zanita V. Kelly

April, 2017

Farzin Madjidi, Ed.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

Zanita V. Kelly

under the guidance of Faculty Committee and approved by its members has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION IN ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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VITA

PROFILE**Zanita Kelly, Ed.D.**

Solutions-focused, motivate education professional with a comprehensive background in education and student development is seeking an opportunity to share expertise in a learning environment with other passionate and highly versatile professionals.

EDUCATION

Pepperdine University, Graduate School of Education and Psychology Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership Dissertation Title: <i>Establishing Safe School Culture: An Examination of Best Practice in K through 12 Schools</i>	May 2016
National Louis University Master of Education <i>Curriculum and Instruction</i>	June 1997
University of Illinois Bachelor of Science in Education <i>Elementary Education</i>	June 1994

CREDENTIALS

Illinois State Board Standard Elementary Teaching Certification	August 2000
Illinois State Board Administrative Certificate	March 2005
California Clear Administrative Credential	March 2017

CAREER BACKGROUND

Saint Mark's Episcopal Parish Day School, California (K-6) (2012 – Present)
Upper School Head

Primary administrator for the upper elementary program, enrichment classes, and teacher intern program. Responsible for effective management of all upper elementary faculty and staff. Supervising administrator for curriculum, instruction, discipline, and after school activities. Conduct meetings with parents, consultants, therapists, tutors, and students. Work closely with school's student support team and senior administration at Saint Marks. Facilitate standardized testing program and interpret Education Records Bureau annual test scores, and present assessment forums to community stakeholders. Serve as school liaison on elementary program committee of the Board of Trustees and various parent committees. Set and monitor grading policies and practices, classroom structures and teaching methodologies to ensure school wide consistency. Communicate effectively orally and in writing with parents, staff, School Board and other constituencies. Plan and implement professional development for

teaching staff. Establish personnel policies and standards of conduct in conjunction with the administrative team.

Equitas Academy Charter School Los Angeles, California (K-2) (2010 – 2012)
Principal/Director of Curriculum and Instruction

Develop school systems and structures that maximize student learning. Evaluate academic achievement through detailed data analysis. Provide all necessary resources, training and materials to the teaching staff to effectively raise student achievement. Mediate and manage conflicting demands of the teaching staff. Prepare and submit timely reports and evaluations to all external agencies and funding sources. Design the school's academic standards, benchmarks, assessments and curriculum to align with state and national standards. Set and monitor grading policies and practices, classroom structures and teaching methodologies to ensure school wide consistency. Communicate effectively with parents, staff, School Board and other constituencies. Plan and implement professional development for teaching staff. Establish personnel policies and standards of conduct in conjunction with the administrative team. Set and monitor teaching schedule for the core faculty. Coordinate administration to students of all standardized evaluations including six-week assessments, CST test, CELDT and national norm-referenced exams.

Champaign Unit District No. 4, Carrie Busey Elementary School (K-5) (2006-2010)
Principal

Maintained full accountability for overseeing a full-range of education-centered services for students and staff at Carrie Busey Elementary. Created and integrated growth initiatives and developed targeted educational strategies. Collaborated with a diverse team of teachers and support staff to facilitate the integration of a key instructional program for a diverse student body. Applied strategic planning, prioritization and project management skills toward consistently achieving critical deadlines while maintaining high quality standards. Maintained a safe and positive learning environment for students to promote education and social responsibility.

Champaign Unit District No. 4, Stratton Elementary School (K-5) (2005-2006)
Student Services Coordinator

Provided ongoing support and assistance to the Principal to promote student learning and development, as well as coordinate a diverse range of instructional programs. Ensured the integration of best practices, analyzed normalized test results for improvement and adjustment of instruction, and developed curricula. Served as a key staff member responsible for the integration of general and supplemental instructional programs including enrichment, acceleration, gifted education, early childhood (Pre-K), and special education services. Liaised between instructors, parents, students and the Principal to analyze program results, implement positive incentives and behavior plans, and implement innovative solutions for continuing improvement of curricula.

Champaign Unit District No. 4 Schools (K-5) (1994-2005)

Classroom Teacher/Enrichment Specialist

Developed and executed individualized and innovative long-term educational plans to best achieve organizational goals and objectives. Visited and evaluated classes regularly and provided feedback to the instructional staff. Performed ongoing instructional staff meetings and supported students and teachers with issues involving misbehavior, discipline or academic problems. Liaised between students, instructors, outside agencies and support staff to ensure students were provided with all necessary and available services.

GRANTS AND AWARDS

- Illinois Spotlight School Award for Academic Achievement, 2006, 2007, 2008
- Achieved AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress), 2006, 2007, 2008
- Illinois State Board of Education “Those Who Excel Award”, 2004
- Champaign Urbana Schools Foundation Award, 2004-2005
- Tepper Electric grant award “Experiencing the Arts through Literacy”, 2004-2005
- Phyllis A. Wilken Scholarship Award, 2002-2003

PRESENTATIONS

Gwin, Z. (2015) “Global Academic Partnership Program: Filling in the Education Opportunity GAP” Belize Partnership Presentation, Pepperdine University Irvine, California

Gwin, Z. (2015) “Tinkering Toward Authenticity: Facilitating Change in School Organizations” EDOL Presentation, Pepperdine University, West LA Campus, Culver City, California

Gwin, Z. (2015) “Successful Interviewing Strategies” California State University Dominguez Hills, Sociology Department Career Day Presentation, Carson, California

Gwin, Z. (2014). “Leading Teachers toward Social Justice: Implementing a Pedagogic Framework for Teaching Diverse Learners in Independent Schools” National Association of Episcopal Schools (NAES) Biennial Conference Presentation, Anaheim California

Gwin, Z. (2013). “The Joy Factor in Social and Emotional Learning” In-services Presentation Crestview Preparatory School La Canada Flintridge, California

PROFESIONAL DEVELOPMENT SEMINARS

National Association of Independent Schools

Annual Conference

Boston, Massachusetts

Spring, 2015

National Association of Episcopal Schools

Biennial Conference

Anaheim, California

Fall, 2014

Education Records Bureau (ERB) Conference

Fall, 2013

Annual Conference

San Diego, California

SELECTED ACHIEVEMENTS

- Awarded a \$19,000 Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Grant which allows school to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables to serve to students as an alternative to unhealthy snacks.
- Maintained high API scores (Academic Performance Index) weighted 3-year average score: 881 at Equitas Academy Charter 2010 through 2012
- Maintained high academic achievement standards and achieved AYP Status (Adequate Yearly Progress) as measured by the Illinois Standards Achievement Test four consecutive years (2006 through 2009).
- Earned an Illinois Spotlight School Award for Academic Achievement 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 "for exemplary performance in closing the achievement gap, meeting high standards, and opening a world of opportunities."
- Partnered with community organization to minimize summer learning loss by offering summer reading and social skills program to struggling students.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

California Association of
Independent Schools (CAIS)

National Association of Elementary
Principals (NAESP)

HONORS/AWARDS

- Illinois Spotlight School Award for Academic Achievement, 2006, 2007, 2008
- Achieved AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress), 2006, 2007, 2008
- Illinois State Board of Education "Those Who Excel Award", 2004
- Champaign Urbana Schools Foundation Award, 2004-2005
- Tepper Electric grant award "Experiencing the Arts through Literacy", 2004-2005
- Phyllis A. Wilken Scholarship Award, 2002-2003

ABSTRACT

School improvement plans and major reform initiatives most often target core academic competencies. They might include strategies to improve the physical safety of school campuses, but they rarely include discussions about creating psychologically safe environments. School safety has garnered national attention in the aftermath of violent high profile shootings on K through 12 campuses across the country. The Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Department of Education have offices dedicated to providing schools with funding, training and resources to improve security and develop strategic crisis plans. There are a variety of resources available about lessening physical vulnerabilities as related to school safety. There is however, far more to establishing a safe school culture than physical safety and secure facilities. It is equally imperative to ensure that schools are psychologically safe spaces for children. Very little work has been done to provide resources on practices for creating a culture of school safety related to student resiliency and well-being. This research examines best practices of K through 12 school leaders in establishing a culture of school safety - specifically targeting student resiliency and social-emotional well-being.

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

School safety continues to be a priority for state and federal legislators because of the number of high profile, fatal school shootings from 2012-2014 on K through 12 campuses across the country as said by the Council of State Governments Justice Center (CSG; 2014a). Understanding why these events take place and more importantly, how they can be prevented is at the root of the national dialogue. Post Columbine, school safety regulations resulted in policy and programs related to improving security and responses to threats on school campuses. Well intentioned interventions such as the National School Resource Officer Program, which brought armed uniformed police officers to middle and high school campuses, decreased physical risk but had the unintended consequence of escalating fear and anxiety in the children it was designed to protect (Sneed, 2015). There are many resources available to school leaders with suggestions for how to decrease physical vulnerabilities related to school safety. According to the Justice Center's School Discipline Consensus Project (CSG, 2014a), two governmental agencies, the U. S. Department of Education and the Department of Homeland Security, have offices dedicated to providing schools with funding, training and resources to improve security and develop strategic crisis plans involving multiple first response agencies. They do not address best practices and strategies in creating a culture of school safety linked with psychological resiliency and well-being. There is far more to establishing a safe school culture than physical safety and secure facilities. It is equally important to ensure that schools are psychologically safe places for children (Gunzelmann, 2004).

Background

Until recently, efforts to promote school safety focused on developing regulations to increase building security, enhance fire safety regulations, and develop emergency plans for natural disasters. Student mental health concerns emerged in the mid 1980s with a national focus on suicide prevention along with federal dollars designated to fund such programs (Guetzole, 1988). In the 1990s, national school antiviolence programs were supported as a part of the war on drugs and gang violence in the inner city. Youth violence was not contained to urban settings, as rural and suburban communities experienced significant incidences of well publicized school fatalities from the late 1990s until present (Kaplan, 1998; Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 1999; M. Roberts, 2015).

School violence and the problems associated with it are widespread, irrespective of social class. Although the number of fatalities associated with urban and suburban schools have decreased since the early 1990s, nonfatal victimization and violence in schools continues to be problematic (Neuman, 2015). Physical safety is only part of the issue in most schools across the United States. Thomerson (2000) reports the chances of a student fatality due to violence at school is less than one in a million. With that said, adolescents are most likely impacted by acts of nonfatal victimization resulting in depression, anxiety and somatic disorders among other psychosocial ailments (Crews, Crews, & Turner, 2008).

Children attending schools in low socioeconomic status communities are widely recognized as vulnerable for a range of social, emotional, and psychological problems (Taylor, Stagman & Smith, 2012). The pathology within lower

socioeconomic status school communities among urban youth has a well documented historical context (McWhorter, 2000). The expression *at-risk youth* is most often associated with those from low socioeconomic status families. Increasingly, comparable concerns have been seen at the other end of the economic spectrum. Burgeoning research from the late 1990s to present in what is called the *paradox of privilege* (Levine, 2006) presents a rising concern for the mental health and well-being of children growing up in affluence. Establishing safe school environments is becoming the focus of violence prevention and intervention strategies in response to child and adolescent antisocial behavior in both affluent and impoverished communities. Research indicates that nurturing social environments, positive peer influences, and effective practices that encourage pro-social behavior skills serve as protective factors and decrease child and adolescent delinquency (Kilian, Fish, & Maniago, 2006).

Implications for Schools

The mounting epidemic of social-emotional and psychological angst among youths in suburban and urban areas is resulting in large numbers of mental health issues including debilitating feelings of worthlessness, despondency, despair, generalized anxiety disorder, and abuse of narcotics in greater rates than what is expected for adolescents (Levine, 2006). More alarming than increased numbers of adolescents diagnosed with psychological disorders are the substance abuse and premature mortality rates associated with these illnesses. Gunzelmann (2004) views safety in schools as encompassing much more than ensuring the physical safety of the facility and having a crisis plan. Although school disaster plans are essential, there are

less apparent threats that impact students' well-being and ultimately their ability to think, learn and understand content material. Kadel, Watkins, Follman, and Hammond (1999) broadened the research in safe school environments with introducing the concept of nonfatal victimization or psychological threats in the school environment that place children at risk in ways violence prevention programs do not address. Many factors threaten school safety and negatively impact school culture (e.g., harassment, relational aggression, exclusion, and other psychologically disruptive behaviors) causing as much harm as acts of physical violence. A comprehensive approach which includes methods to address the hidden dangers in school environments is essential for establishing a framework for a safe school culture (Gunzelmann, 2004).

Comprehensive Responses to School Violence

There are a few suggested responses to school violence that integrate students' social-emotional needs. Kadel et al. (1999), developed a comprehensive approach combining intervention as well as prevention strategies to promote resiliency in children. The research suggests a framework for schools to work with outside agencies within the community "to reduce factors that place students at risk of committing violence or becoming victims" (p.7). The framework should include the whole school community and meet the specific needs as defined by the school.

Another comprehensive framework developed by the Urban Education Collaborative (2010) involves assessing student health and school safety to determine a suitable response designed to fit to the specific needs of the learning institution. The components of the framework require the school to develop a vision of school safety, conduct a needs assessment, create school safety goals, identify

key leaders, define how the vision translates into practice, determine what type of data to collect and design an evaluation. The process creates systemic change over time and is tailored to the context of the school environment.

Although both approaches are inclusive, are holistic, and potentially create an environment that promotes a safe school culture, they are not widely used. School safety plans typically do not give high priority to matters of social-emotional safety (Adelman & Taylor, 1997). Effective school leaders proactively address the physical needs as well as the psychological needs of students (Osher et al., 2007). However, a truly safe school culture is one that promotes psychological resiliency equally and alongside physical safety (Reeves, Kanan, & Plog, 2010). Effective organizations, including schools, should make building a culture of safety an intentional and deliberate effort. School leaders have many different roles and responsibilities to assure overall efficacy and success. Among all the other roles and responsibilities of a school leader, establishing a positive and psychologically safe school culture is imperative.

The Problem

There is limited research in best practices to establish psychologically safe schools. As such, it is critical that school leaders are strategic and deliberate about creating a culture of school safety. School leaders need a comprehensive response to ensure a safe school culture.

The Purpose

There is much to be learned from collective knowledge in the field of education as it relates to creating psychologically safe schools. Accordingly, the purpose of this

study is to learn the practices employed by school leaders in southern California to create a culture of school safety and the challenges these leaders face. The study also identified how school leaders in southern California define a successful safe school culture and provides recommendations for future sustainability of strategies and best practices.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the strategies and practices employed by school leaders in K through 12 schools in southern California to create a culture of school safety?
2. How do you define a successful safe school culture?
3. What challenges are faced by school leaders in K through 12 schools in southern California in implementing safe school strategies and practices?
4. What recommendations would you make for future sustainability of strategies and practices to create a safe school culture?

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is the contribution it will make in the area of K through 12 school leadership toward creating psychologically safe schools in southern California. Typically, schools allocate more resources to ensuring the physical safety of students than protecting their emotional well-being. School violence comes in many forms and creating safe schools requires leaders to address hidden as well as obvious dangers.

The brain's number one priority is safety. It does not distinguish between physical or psychological threats. When people are in a state of fear, whether the threat is real or perceived, the ability to learn stops. Research in human development and the brain confirms the connection between states of hypo arousal or fear and processes associated with learning such as attention, emotion, motion, and communication (Porges, 1995). In short, the neurological response to fear is to shut down all other processes until the threat no longer exists. Prolonged states of hypo arousal are psychologically harmful, resulting in debilitating feelings of emptiness, isolation, depression, anxiety disorders, and substance abuse (Levine, 2006). Moore (2015) summarized that feelings of depression and anxiety block learning. It is significant to note that children in states of dysregulation cannot learn.

The purpose of schools since the founding of this country is to educate, inform, and enlighten the citizenry. Thomas Jefferson, (as cited in Peterson, 1970) stated:

An enlightened citizenry is indispensable for the proper functioning of a republic. Self-government is not possible unless citizens are educated sufficiently to enable them to exercise oversight. It is therefore imperative that the nation see to it that a suitable education be provided for all its citizens.

(p. 1014)

K through 12 school leaders are charged with the responsibility of providing a *suitable education* by delivering learning outcomes within a safe environment. All school organizations have a mission statement designed to fundamentally guide the institution's practices, policies, and procedures. Schools should give priority to establishing a safe school culture - that priority should be reflected by what is valued

at the school and in alignment with the stated mission. Establishing a safe school culture will create higher quality learning environments for both children and adults (Reeves et al., 2010).

The role of the school leader is vital to school culture and climate (Reeves et al., 2010). Lately, there has been a lot of discourse about the need for more robust and rigorous study to call attention to the significance of social and emotional learning in schools. This research is important because it provides K through 12 school leaders in southern California with best practice strategies in establishing a safe school culture that integrates the physical and social-emotional needs of their students.

Furthermore, the study adds to the burgeoning research in wellness and psychological safety for children. A SEL curriculum provides a common language, process, and procedure for addressing the needs of learners as well as educators. The benefits related to the findings of this study are the compilation of best practices employed by school leaders in southern California to create a culture of school safety, how to overcome challenges to the process, and recommendations for future sustainability of strategies and practices.

Definition of Terms

- Nonfatal Victimization – psychologically violent acts that do not result in death but intentionally harm the victim. These acts include but are not limited to harassment, relational aggression, exclusion, and other psychologically disruptive behaviors (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).
- Psychological Resiliency – refers to a person's capacity to cope with stress and adversity. A resilient person perseveres through challenges and expands

or develops positive coping mechanisms in the face of difficulties (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Rutter (2008) contended that resilient people have mastered the skill of effectively incorporating coping mechanisms to navigate through crisis. Resilience is a process that can be learned and developed; it is not necessarily an inherent character trait.

- Psychologically Safe Schools – schools that purposefully attend to the social-emotional needs of students to the same degree that they monitor physical safety (Noonan, 2004).
- School Culture – the pervasive policies, practices, and norms that define the cumulative daily experiences of children and adults. School culture and school environment are used interchangeably in this research (Cohen, Pickeral, & McCloskey, 2009).
- Social Emotional Learning (SEL) – the acquisition and application of skills to self-regulate, show empathy, make pro-social behavior choices, and sustain healthy relationships. (Collaborative for academic, social, and emotional learning, 2015).
- Social and Emotional Learning Program – programs or curriculums used to provide direct instruction in identifying emotions, managing feelings of distress, marshaling positive emotions, and developing skilled relationships (Goleman, 2006; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004).

Summary

Schools can be holistically safe places for children. K through 12 school leaders should broaden the definition of safety to include social-emotional well-being in addition

to ensuring their facilities are free from physical hazards. Psychologically safe schools focus both on obvious and hidden threats to the school environment, thereby fostering psychologically resilient children who become neither victims nor perpetrators. Pollack and Sundermann (2001) suggested a safe school framework that is comprehensive and involves the entire school community. They believe that a comprehensive approach to creating a safe school culture results in improved academics, reduced behavioral infractions, a higher quality learning environment, happier faculty and staff and better allocation of resources. Other suggested frameworks for creating a safe school culture focus strictly on SEL interventions (Zins et al., 2004). These models emphasize a safe school design that involves a coordinated, sustainable, and systemic approach with multiyear and multi-component aspects.

The research suggests that one approach cannot be viewed as better than another because SEL models should be individualized to the specific school environment in which they are implemented (Osher, et al., 2007; Pollack & Sundermann, 2001; The urban education collaborative, 2010; Zins et al., 2004). Most compelling evidence for all effective frameworks includes eight core structures:

1. The initial phase of the framework process consists of identifying needs and reviewing theory and research based SEL programs with empirically validated practices.
2. Develop school and community partnerships by collaborating with city officials, and community leaders. The manner in which schools and communities collaborate should be highly specific to the school and the partner.

3. Conduct a comprehensive needs assessment to ascertain the problem, identify existing efforts, and make data driven decisions to institute change.
4. Develop a comprehensive school plan based on the challenges that have been identified through the needs assessment data.
5. Prioritize problems and create measureable goals and objectives, then identify interventions and implement programs that address the goals and objectives.
6. SEL program components should provide instruction in a variety of social and emotional skills that are applicable to daily life. The suggested skills include identifying and regulating emotions, empathy, impulse control, responsible decision making, and relationship building skills.
7. The program should also address affective learning to build a sense of belonging to the school community. Affective learning encourages engagement and participation in the school community and nurtures a sense of safety, support, and security (Zins et al., 2011).
8. Conduct an evaluation of the determined program components with the goal of informing the school about what is working and what is not working. Outcomes are then shared and adjustments are made based on an evaluation of stated outcomes (Osher et al., 2007; Pollack & Sundermann, 2001; The urban education collaborative, 2010; Zins et al., 2004).

A safe school framework is central to establishing a psychologically safe school culture and must be purposely developed and managed. Research suggested effective school frameworks help school leaders improve school culture by providing a tool to address vulnerable areas in individual school environments. Offering a school-wide SEL program that speaks to the weaknesses in the school culture improves practices related to teaching, learning, and behavior intervention (Sundermann, 2001).

An SEL program provides a common language and a research based method for decisions related to discipline. What is more, it provides instructional strategies for teaching and establishing a positive school culture. School leaders are the drivers of school culture and should lead constituents in selecting the SEL model that best meets the needs of their school community. Reeves et al. (2010) emphasized the connection between the school leader and the school's culture and climate. This research adds to the critical conversation about the value of social and emotional learning in schools. The study also encapsulates a discussion of strategies and practices used in K through 12 school leadership to establish safe school cultures that integrate the physical and social-emotional needs of students.

It bears repeating that K through 12 school leaders have many different roles and responsibilities to assure the overall efficacy and success of the institution. Of all the other roles and responsibilities, establishing a positive school culture is imperative. It is the school leader's responsibility to make building a culture of psychological safety an intentional and deliberate effort.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Safety is a priority for school leaders and parents alike. Creating safe schools is an important concern that involves more than policy, access control, and security technology. Threats to safety can come in physical and psychological forms. The brain responds the same way to both forms of threatening behavior, making learning almost impossible under stressful circumstances (Goleman, 2006). Children that learn in psychologically safe and physically secure environments have increased resiliency and improved academic outcomes (Sparks, 2013). Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculums offer school leaders a framework for building safe school cultures (Kilian et al., 2006).

Theoretical Concepts

This research rests on the work of Goleman (2006) in the field of emotional intelligence, which he defines as the capacity to understand, name and apply emotions to guide behavior and relationships within four domains: (a) being self aware, (b) being able to self-regulate, (c) demonstrating empathy, and (d) maintaining positive relationships. Goleman (2006) puts forth that schools should provide direct instruction in social and emotional skills continuously in a systematic way. He argues that the emotional intelligence continues to develop because it is in the last part of the brain to develop. He further states that because the brain is plastic it continues to change over time based on repeated experiences; therefore, children need repeated opportunities to master social-emotional skills. Goleman asserted that schools should provide direct instruction in social and emotional skills repeatedly, over time, and in a systematic way. He argued that the area of the brain responsible for emotional intelligence has the

capacity to continue to develop and grow over time because of plasticity. He further stated that changes in the brain form new neural pathways that directly impact behavior. This assertion lends further support to the importance of providing children with repeated opportunities to master social-emotional skills.

Children that lack fundamental social-emotional skills such as empathy, positive decision making, and compassion can demonstrate acts of violence throughout adolescence and into young adulthood. Gilligan (1996) produced foundational work in violent behavior and addressing the role of early education as a preventative measure. According to Gilligan, programs that help students be more empathic will serve to promote pro-social behavior and lessen the tendency for adolescents to respond to challenges with violence, thereby making them more resilient. The concept of resilience stems from work in the field of adolescent psychology centered on children and their ability to bounce back from traumatic experiences and significant stressors faced during their lifetime. Further research supporting this work focuses on identifying specific behaviors and characteristics that promote protective and recovery factors (Kilian et al., 2006).

Luthar and D'Avanzo (1999) developed some of the theoretical underpinnings illustrating the importance of establishing a social-emotional curriculum in schools, furthering the understanding of resilience can be learned. Corresponding research conducted by Yeager and Dweck (2012) worked to develop the core concept of growth over fixed mindsets relating to students' beliefs about personal characteristics that lead to social-emotional well-being and psychological resilience. Equally important to the field of research supporting SEL curriculums in schools is the research conducted by

Duckworth et al. (2007) illuminating the foundational knowledge that persistence and perseverance in the face of adversity have greater impact on positive outcomes for children than intelligence. As noted previously, social-emotional skills support the development and application of empathy, positive decision making, and compassion. Without such skills, children tend to use acts of violence toward themselves and others as a coping mechanism or to solve life challenges (Gilligan, 1996).

Youth Violence and Maladaptive Behavior

Violence in schools is a considerable concern and is being addressed by professionals from a range of disciplines (Gilligan, 1996; Kadel et al., 1999; Levine, 2006; Small & Tetrick, 2001). The U.S. Department of Education (USDE, 2015) monitors national data on school safety and spearheaded the establishment of systems for tracking issues and incidents related to school violence. Statistically, school related violent deaths are infrequent. The USDE indicates that there was a total of 45 deaths because of violence in schools in the United States between July 1, 2011 and June 30, 2012. Conversely, nonfatal student victimization reports indicate that students between the ages 12-18 experienced about 1.4 million violent crimes in schools including but not exclusive to threats, intimidation, theft, and aggravated and simple assault.

As reported by the Constitutional Rights Foundation (CRF, 2015), school violence is a multi-faceted issue with a diverse set of causal factors. Access to weapons, drug and alcohol use, cyber abuse, and gang related activity all contribute to the risk factors that result in youth aggression and violent behavior (Small & Tetrick, 2001). Surprisingly, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other euphemisms for pathologies in poor and urban communities can contribute to but are not exclusive

indicators of risk for anti-social violent behavior in youth (CRF, 2015; Levine, 2006).

Comparatively, affluent youths struggle with maladaptive behaviors and tend to be less resilient than their lower socioeconomic status peers.

One of the first empirical studies revealing concerns with suburban youth was a comparative analysis of lower socioeconomic status 10th graders and their higher socioeconomic status counterparts (Luthar & D'Avanzo, 1999). The study intended to explore the differences between suburban and urban youths' ability to cope with problems such as depression and anxiety and their substance use. The study also explored substance use related to relationships with peers and academic achievement. The research concluded that on more than a few measures of maladjustment; mean scores of urban youths were significantly lower than their suburban peers (Luthar & D'Avanzo, 1999). Affluent youths reported considerably elevated levels of angst, depression, substance use, and psychosomatic disorders. Shockingly, children from more affluent homes looked much worse in every significant indicator for risk than inner city children from less affluent backgrounds.

Subsequent studies exploring maladaptive behavior in affluent suburban youth reveal disturbing patterns related to substance use and higher rates of clinically depressive and anxiety symptoms (Luthar, 2003). Adolescent girls from affluent families are showing depression rates significantly higher than the national rate for their peer group. Boys from wealthy families also have higher rates of anxiety and depression (Levin, 2006). Although boys' symptoms are less pronounced than girls in early adolescence, the more troubling fact is the consistency with which they

self-medicate by the time they enter eleventh and twelfth grade. According to Levine (2006), this is particularly disturbing because adolescents who use drugs to self-medicate rather than experiment are at higher risk of becoming long term abusers.

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The research is clearly finding that children of privilege show signs of psychological distress and maladaptive behaviors that are in some cases prevalent in higher rates than among children of poverty. It is astonishing that adolescents that are growing up with every imaginable advantage struggle with psychosomatic issues far greater than or equivalent to children living in poor urban communities across the country. "It is now clear that children of privilege are exhibiting unexpectedly high rates of emotional problems beginning in junior high school and accelerating throughout adolescence" (Levine, 2006 p. 21). Increasing numbers of studies have shown that children with financially comfortable parents struggle emotionally. Blum et al. (2000) suggested that scholastic achievement and the quality of peer and family relationships

are more important indicators of at risk behavior than socioeconomic status. CRF (2015) confirmed that communities, peer groups, families, and school environments have the greatest impact on influencing youth behavior and attitudes.

Building Resiliency and Risk Protective Factors

An expanding community of researchers suggests that building psychological resilience serves as a risk protective factor and is one of the most effective approaches to preventing maladaptive behaviors among youths (Duckworth, 2007; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Kadel et al., 1999; Levine, 2006; Tough, 2012). Duckworth (2006) defined psychological resilience as a person's capacity to cope with stress and life challenges. Onwuke (2010) posited that a resilient person can persevere through challenges and expands or develops positive coping mechanisms in the face of difficulties, challenges, or traumatic events.

Gritty individuals are resilient in that they can adapt and persist in achieving a goal when confronted with setbacks and disappointment (Duckworth, 2006). Rutter (2008) contended that resilient people have mastered the skill of effectively incorporating coping mechanisms to navigate through crises. Resilience is a process that can be learned and developed; it is not necessarily an inherent character trait. Masten (1994) suggests that grit and resilience are a consequence of the capacity to navigate one's environment in a way that supports well-being and guards against the negative influence of risk factors.

Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) agreed that psychological resilience is a protective factor and is a required positive adaptation in response to life's adversities. Their research offers a broader view of the concept of psychological resilience beyond

healthy relationships and academic success. They provide a more inclusive perspective and propose understanding positive adaptation within the contextual framework of different cultures. Fundamental to their review of psychological resilience is that adversity and potentially traumatic events are not culture or age specific and appropriate positive adaptations to adversity manifest differently based on cultural context.

Within the context of youth and school culture, Yeager and Dweck (2012), maintained that because challenges are ever-present, resilience is critical for academic achievement and success in life. Their work suggests that communities and families cultivate mindsets in children that promote resilience as a risk protective factor. Psychological resilience and grit play an important role in countering the risk factors involved in youth violence and maladaptive behaviors in both affluent and impoverished communities and should be taught within the school setting.

Hawkins, Catalano, and Miller (1992) strategically illustrated the role of protective factors in buffering risk, decreasing maladaptive behavior, and promoting psychological resilience. This method emphasizes the importance of students forming connections with schools and embracing the school community norms as protective factors that decrease the potential for engagement in maladaptive or violent behavior. Benard (1991) recommended directly instructing students in behaviors associated with resiliency and the protective factors that foster such resiliency.

Research has consistently supported three factors that contribute to resilience and successful student achievement: (a) parental and or community involvement and expectations, (b) individual attitudes about schooling and peer group affiliation and (c)

school practices including teacher pedagogy and SEL curriculum that fosters a growth mindset, resiliency, and grit (Duckworth, 2006, Dweck, 2006; Goleman, 2006; Kadel et al. 1999; Ogbu, 2002). Additional researchers such as Horn, Chen, and Adelman (1998), Price (2002), and Sampson (2002) provided instructive key analysis on persistence and other causes that promote psychological resilience among students.

Parental Involvement

Decades of research support family involvement as a key factor in student scholastic achievement and emotional well-being, irrespective of ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic status (Gronlick, & Ryan, 1989; Henderson, 1987; Sampson, 2002). Sampson (2002) theorizes that variations in African American family dynamics and home environments account for the consistently lower academic performance between African Americans and their peers. He pointed out in interviews with high achieving students of color that family is the factor that is consistently mentioned as crucial to success. Price (2002) also indicated that family is critical to successful student achievement. He reported that students who discuss schoolwork with their parents and live in a home where reading materials are widely available read on a higher level than children who do not have regular access to a literacy-rich home environment. The research leads to the conclusion that family is the number one influence on student achievement.

Benard (1991) found that fostering resiliency within the family involves parental practices that promote care and support, communicates high expectations through high-warmth and low-criticism parenting, and provides opportunities for participation that encourage children to meaningfully participate and contribute to the family. Horn et al.

(1998), McWhorter (2000), and Ogbu (1992) have all critically examined the issue of student achievement and confirmed parent involvement in school and parental expectations correlate with higher academic outcomes and are essential to social and psychological health and scholastic success.

Still, parents should be cautioned that over involvement or helicopter parenting styles can also have an adverse effect, thus hindering neurologically typical growth and psychological development (Dweck, 2006; Lythcott, 2015). Segrin, Givertz, Swiatkowski, and Montgomery (2014) defined over parenting in a recent study:

Over parenting involves the application of developmentally inappropriate parenting through the use of excessive advice, problem solving, and provision of abundant and unnecessary tangible assistance, combined with risk aversion, anxiety, and parental involvement in the child's emotional well-being to the point of enmeshment. (p. 2)

Ultimately, helicopter parenting or over parenting has significant and long-term negative consequences for the mental health and well-being of children (Marano, 2014).

Although parents feel they are acting in the best interest of their children, a considerable amount of research finds the effect of this intrusive style of parenting is resulting in impaired young adults with a host of mental health issues (Levine, 2006; Lythcott, 2015; Segrin et al., 2006). Gallagher (2013) described current trends in college counseling centers and problems and challenges faced in the area of mental health among college students. Gallagher conducted a survey of 203 counseling centers from colleges and universities across the nation to gather data to determine the range of concerns, clinical issues, and innovative solutions to the growing need for psychological support for

students on college campuses. State, public, and private institutions responded with staggering results.

The 203 counseling centers surveyed represented 1.8 million students eligible for services. A reported 11.4% of the students received direct services on their campus. Indirect services such as mental health related workshops, presentations, and counseling orientations were provided to an additional 33% of the students from the surveyed schools (Gallagher, 2013). When asked about their experience, counseling center service directors stated the following:

- 88% feel there is an increase in the number of students on psychiatric medication.
- 95% believe that growing number of students are diagnosed with significant psychological problems.
- 73% reported increases in crises requiring immediate response.
- 48% reported an increase in illicit drug use.
- 41% saw an increase in treating students for self-injury issues.
- 24% of the directors reported increases in eating disorders.

Survey information reported by students supports the data from Gallaher's (2013) survey of college mental health center directors. The American College Health Association (2013), a national research organization, conducted a survey with a student reference group of over 32,000 respondents. When asked about their mental health experiences within the last year, the students reported the following:

- 30% felt debilitating depression
- 51% felt overwhelming anxiety

- 44% felt things were hopeless
- 35% felt overwhelming anger
- 7% seriously considered suicide
- 5% intentionally injured themselves

Lythcott (2015) believes the data suggest a correlation between over parenting or helicopter parenting style and the rise of students with mental health challenges. Segrin et al. (2014) conducted research that confirms a positive and significant association with overly intrusive parenting styles and a child's ability to function well as a young adult. These results contribute to a growing body of research confirming the negative implications of over parenting when applied to young adults (Sergin et al., 2014).

Dweck (2006) believed the balance between appropriate parent involvement and over parenting can be achieved by messages parents send their children regarding the way success or failure is acknowledged and communicated. Dweck counseled parents to avoid messages that communicate a fixed mindset versus a growth mindset. According to Dweck, a fixed mindset communicates that an individual has permanent traits or inherent qualities like intelligence and talent that are predetermined at birth. Conversely, a growth mindset communicates that an individual's talents, intelligence, and other qualities can be developed through effort. Individuals with fixed mindsets see failure as a character flaw, whereas, a person with a growth mindset views failure as an opportunity to learn and build skills. A growth mindset implies that an individual can grow smarter and improve at difficult tasks. Intelligence is dynamic and fluid and can be developed through learning experiences. A fixed mindset, in contrast, sees intelligence

as finite, viewing intellect as having a certain capacity and beyond which individuals cannot achieve.

Research in the areas of intelligence, resiliency, and grit conducted by Duckworth (2006) and Duckworth et al. (2007) suggests that typical measures of intelligence (e.g., intelligence quotient, long-term memory, and the ability to think abstractly) alone are not enough to determine “higher academic and social functioning” (Duckworth, 2007, p. 3). Duckworth (2013) believes that teaching children about growth-mindsets is the best method for building grit. When children are given direct instruction in growth mindsets and understand that the brain changes and grows in response to difficult tasks, they persevere over failure because they don’t believe it is a lasting state.

Parental involvement and expectations are risk protective factors in the social-emotional health and long term well-being of children (Gronlick & Ryan,1989; Henderson, 1987; Sampson, 2002). Dweck (2006) encourages parents to foster growth mindsets in their children by remembering that each word and action from parent to child sends a message declaring if talent, intelligence, and other character traits are permanent or developing. The research concludes that praise should focus on the process the child used while being successful: their effort, strategies, and choices. Constructive criticism in light of failures offers feedback that will help children understand how to fix something. Dweck went on to say that if parents set goals for their children, they should “focus on expanding skills and knowledge” (p. 205). Parental involvement that fosters growth mindsets is fundamental to protecting children from risk factors and helping them fulfill their potential.

Family Resiliency

The concept of family resilience supports the current understanding of resilience, which at one time was thought to be an individual character trait or personal quality. Current research clarifies that resiliency is a teachable adaptation that can be developed and fostered through learning experiences (Duckworth et al., 2007; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Family resiliency is when the family unit demonstrates traits that result in successful adaptation in response to potentially traumatic events, significant stressors, or other adversity (Walsh, 2004). Viewing families as resilient has implications for clinical practice, including helping families recognize and build pathways to strengthen the unit (Hawley, 2010).

Resilient families “share beliefs and narratives that foster a sense of coherence, collaboration, competence, and confidence,” which are critical to developing coping mechanisms and the capacity to withstand significant life stressors (Walsh, 1996, p. 261). Patterson (2002) offered a view of family resilience as a process rather than identifying indicators for resilience capacity. Walsh (2004) provided a framework to distinguish significant factors that enable families to overcome persistent stressors. The family resilience process developed by Patterson utilizes the Family Adjustment and Adaptation Model, a framework to build family resilience, to help families determine the meaning or significance of an identified risk and make “conceptual and operational distinctions between family system outcomes and family protective processes” (p. 349).

The key message to emerge through the literature on family resilience, whether viewed through the lens of process or capacity, is that resilient families give children additional coping strategies and protection in response to negative influences in their

environment. Resilient families have greater potential for increasing positive outcomes for children and healthy responses to challenges (Patterson, 2002; Sampson, 2002; Walsh, 2004).

Individual Attitudes and Peer Group Affiliation

Students' attitudes about schooling and peer group affiliation were also noted in the research as having a significant influence on educational outcomes and student resiliency. Kaufman and Chen (2001) conducted an in-depth study demonstrating peer group effects on student achievement. The researchers reported the importance that friends attributed to learning activities such as studying, academic achievement, and pro-social responses to peer pressure and school related stress. Compared to students who reported having no friends or few friends with college plans, the odds of enrolling in postsecondary education were four times higher for those reporting that most or all their friends planned to enroll in a 4-year college. Alienation, delinquency, and favorable attitudes toward antisocial behavior constitute individual and peer group risk factors.

Sampson (2002) addressed the issue of peer relationships in his study of student achievement. The study emphasized the significance of peer group influence and suggests that parents prepare their children to learn despite obstacles such as adopting an attitude of indifference about school. Successful students either ignored or resisted peer pressure to engage in antisocial or maladaptive behaviors.

Steinberg (2015) asserted that there are lessons to learn from brain research relating to learning and social-emotional well-being. The accumulated knowledge will support school communities and others who work with young people to be more strategic and effective with interventions. The neuroscience of the child and adolescent

brain advances understanding of how the brain develops and which systems are particularly impacted during adolescence when peer relationships play a significant role.

It is important to know that the brain is not fully mature until the age of twenty-five. It was once thought that the brain stopped maturing at the end of childhood, when it reaches its full adult size. The adolescent brain does not grow or develop physically; however, changes in the brain that are particular to that period are “not so much about growth as they are about reorganization” (Steinberg, 2015, p. 96). Particular to adolescence is that the brain’s reorganization takes place in the two regions that regulate emotion and decision making: the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system. The challenge of this stage in human development is learning how these two regions work together. To illustrate the point, Steinberg (2015) uses a car metaphor. The three phases of development are as follows:

1. Phase one: starting the engines – the limbic system is more easily aroused, which causes big waves of emotions. Adolescents are more sensitive to criticism of others and seek “exciting and intense experiences” (p. 96).
2. Phase two: developing a better braking system – the prefrontal cortex becomes more organized, which results in improved executive skills functioning like problem solving, planning, and decision making.
3. Phase three: putting a skilled driver behind the wheel – the interconnection between the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex works more efficiently.

This is a process that goes from middle adolescence until age 25. Steinberg (2015) explained that the interconnectedness of the two systems begins to work in concert more efficiently when conditions are ideal; however, they are deeply

impacted when they are dysregulated. Steinberg stated, “Being upset, excited, or tired interferes more with prefrontal functioning in adolescence than during adulthood because the relevant brain circuits aren’t fully mature” (p. 97). It is vital for school community members to appreciate that adolescents’ capacity for self-regulation and pro-social behavior choices can be strengthened by the environments that adults establish for them. Adolescent brains can function better when they are relaxed, and know that they will not be defined by their inevitable impulsive behavior choices with their peers (Steinberg, 2015).

Compelling research emphasizes the importance of fostering growth mindsets in both parents and children (Duckworth, 2006; Dweck, 2006). Studies from various science communities provide the behavioral and neurological rationale for direct instruction in the neuroscience of how the brains of children and adolescents develop (Kadel et al., 1999; Lythcott, 2015; Steinberg, 2015). Porges (2011) revealed that the physical structure of the brain changes when children have repeated experiences that foster psychological resilience and risk protective factors. The implications of this body of research for building resiliency within the school environment are profound. Schools can have an impact on changing the daily experiences of children by utilizing the most effective approaches to preventing maladaptive behaviors in youths and creating psychologically safe school environments.

Fostering Resiliency within the School

A third factor influencing student resiliency and achievement is school practices, including teacher pedagogy and SEL curriculum that fosters a growth mindset and grit. School practices are consistently identified as protective factors for improving student

attitudes about school, developing resiliency, and promoting a growth mindset (Duckworth, 2006; Dweck, 2006; Spiegel, 2012; Tough, 2012; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Studies suggest that practices such as teacher expectations, pedagogy that addresses various learning styles, along with rigor, cultural relevance, and building relationships, have an overwhelmingly positive impact on education and affective outcomes that promote positive scholarship identity and reduce the potential for maladaptive and violent behavior in schools.

Ladson-Billings (1994) conveyed the significance of an educator's ability to utilize the students' culture to make the curriculum more relevant and connect with the child, resulting in the practice of culturally relevant teaching. Teaching that relates to students directly and resonates with them culturally is a powerful tool in that it helps students make the connections necessary to engage and invest in the education process. Academic engagement and a scholarship identity are foundations for the skills necessary to experience long term success.

Ladson-Billings (1994) emphasized the importance of appropriate culturally relevant instruction and more significantly the set of values and beliefs held by educators. She contended that successful teachers teach in a culturally relevant way that protects the integrity of children's cultural values and identity. Delpit (1995) spoke about the significance of teachers utilizing aspects of students' culture to manage their classrooms effectively and motivate students to learn. The author commented on the effectiveness of establishing relationships that earn student respect, establishing a standard of achievement that enables students to achieve, and incorporating multicultural education into the curriculum. Teachers can engage their students by

making learning matter through creating context and connecting content with what resonates with their students (Moore, 2015).

In addition to relevance and relationships, schools that teach how to fail through high standards and academic rigor are setting the stage for high student engagement and attachment to the community. Moore (2015) stated,

To learn well you have to care. What you're learning has to matter to you in order for you to be willing to take risks, to dig deep... You have to be willing to try again, fail again; and fail better. (p. 36)

Engaging and relevant content not only supports student motivation but also builds the type of relationships that inspire attachment and create an emotional connection to the school community. Speaking about social motivation and social relationships, Cozolino (2014) compared the biochemical systems in the brain that regulate relationships to the same systems that operate the pleasure centers. Being in a relationship activates the "central reward circuitry modulated by dopamine and norepinephrine" (p. 127). This research further describes the brain as a social organ that constantly seeks connection and attachment. On a fundamental level, attachment describes a sense of safety via proximity or connection with others in our environment. Cozolino's research posits that early relationships play a central role in building the brain, including the release of endorphins that enhance energy, produce a sense of elation, and reinforce the value of social connection. Connection and attachment raise serotonin and dopamine levels and increase a sense of well-being and happiness in the brains of both children and adults. In short, *affective* education is *effective* education (Moore, 2015).

Affective education, as described by Moore (2015), fits well with the brain based theory of attachment style teaching presented in Cozolino's (2014) work. Both researchers emphasize the important role that connection through relationships with children plays in creating psychologically safe learning environments. McNulty and Quaglia (2007) epitomized three defining characteristics of effective teaching: rigor, relevance, and relationships. They concluded that teachers must be sure to include all three elements as a framework to examine pedagogic practice as well as curriculum planning prior to instruction and assessment. These three elements are integrally connected and are best practice strategies for preparing students for success in school and in life. Moore (2015) built on this theory by including brain based teaching and learning practices and emphasizing confidence, connection, and context as being fundamental to effective education practice.

Contributing to the discourse on emotions and learning, Immordino-Yang (2015) asserted that emotion and learning are inextricably connected by "interdependent neural processes" (p. 4). The research further explained that it is neurobiologically impossible to build memories, engage in complex thoughts, or make meaning without emotion, which explains why emotions such as anxiety are debilitating to student achievement. The relationship between learning and emotions has significant implications for schools. Learning environments can be designed strategically to improve mindfulness and self-regulation. In addition to mindfulness, relevant or contextualized curriculum that addresses what matters to children coupled with positive relationships can result in increased motivation and deeper understanding, all of which are hallmarks of effective teaching and learning.

Tough (2012) researched school practices that increase resiliency and engagement. He suggested that conventional schooling has emphasized a narrow band of cognitive skills that result in children who become great test takers but lack the inner strength to deal with challenges in life. Tough identified a different set of skills that matter as much as IQ in determining student success. Like the conclusions drawn by both Duckworth (2006) and Dweck (2006), Tough (2012) recommended teaching character building skills that can't be measured by a standardized test such as curiosity, persistence, creativity, and self-control. This research argues that students should receive direct instruction that teaches how to fail, how to succeed, and how to think.

Tough (2012) asserted that resiliency is born out of failure and children need to be taught how to manage failure and put it into the proper context. He went on to say that children should be taught that failure is a temporary condition necessary for learning and building resiliency. The set of soft skills that result from such learning serve as a protective factor for improving student outcomes and building character and grit.

Tough (2012) maintained that there are two optimal times in a child's life to develop character-building skills: (a) in early childhood due the plasticity and malleability of the brain, and (b) during adolescence because of the ability to engage in metacognition. The suggestion is that it is better to take advantage of the earliest stages in development in order to change habits and build resiliency for this reason:

It is in early childhood that our brains and bodies are most sensitive to the effects of stress and trauma. But it is in adolescence that the damage that stress inflicts on us can lead to the most serious and long-lasting problems. (p. 21)

The consequences for impulsive behavior during early childhood and elementary years are much less severe than the results of impulsive behavior choices made during adolescence.

Conversely, Kelleher (2015) wrote that neuroplasticity, or the brain's ability to adapt and change based on repeated experiences, exists throughout an individual's lifetime. He concluded that teachers working with children from all stages of development should use the developments in brain and education science to inform their practice. Kelleher recommended that schools pay attention to the debilitating effects of stress on the brain and learning and then deliberately create supportive environments that help manage stress levels. His research states that schools should incorporate stress-balancing elements into their curriculum and instruction. Some suggested practices include: "identity validation, choice, novelty, humor and music, storytelling, engaging in acts of kindness, movement, expressing gratitude, and achieving challenges" (p 100). Stress in life is inevitable. However, schools can build resilient students that manage stress effectively by infusing coping strategies into daily teaching and instructional practices. By so doing, schools create supportive environments that develop a healthy stress-response system and support resiliency.

Neuroscience and Psychologically Safe School Environments

Kelleher (2015) and Immordino-Yang (2015) agreed that emotion is inextricably connected to learning. To create psychologically safe school environments teachers and administrators are encouraged to understand how neuroscience informs school practice and utilize brain research to begin the process of improving the day to day

experiences of children. Ultimately, schools cannot be effective if they are not psychologically safe (S. Roberts, 2015).

When the brain detects a threat, safety becomes its number one priority. The brain makes no distinction between physical and psychological threats or if the threat is real or perceived (Porges, 1995). S. Roberts (2015) articulated that “our brains and nervous systems are wired for survival and thus hyper-attuned to potential threats to our safety” (p. 94). When an individual is highly anxious or in a state of fear, the systems that guide judgment, decision making, and executive functioning are diminished and the body is flooded with the stress hormone cortisol, which significantly impairs one’s ability to learn. To help educators understand how detrimental threats are to the brain and to learning environments, Roberts stated:

It’s the limbic system, or emotional brain that registers such threats, triggering a cascade of physiological responses known as the flight-or-flight response.

Stress hormones flood the body preparing it to do battle or run like hell, while the cortical regions of our brains where higher order thinking takes place go offline altogether. (p. 94)

Neuroscience consistently confirms the effects of stress and anxiety on the brain and the connection between states of hypo-arousal or fear and processes associated with learning, such as attention, emotion, and communication (Porges, 1995; S. Roberts, 2015). The neurological response to threats in the environment is to abate the function of all other processes until the threat is removed. Prolonged states of hypo-arousal or prolonged periods of stress and anxiety are physically and psychologically harmful, resulting in debilitating feelings of emptiness, isolation,

depression, anxiety disorders, and substance abuse (Levine, 2006). Dysregulated children who feel overwhelmed and anxious are not available for learning.

Educators and school administrators are urged to be aware that modern threats within the school setting such as harassment, micro-aggression, cyber-bullying, parental and academic demands, and other acts of psychological violence that seem minimally traumatic, set off the same neurological fight-or-flight response as if they were a physical threat or a physical act of violence (S. Roberts, 2015). Thus, schools are advised to expect that several students will arrive in states of hypo-arousal. Such students may behave in a manner that is disruptive; they may also appear distracted or disengaged. However they appear, these students are not available for learning and the school's response should be therapeutic rather than punitive. A therapeutic response requires the schools to engage in psychologically safe practices, teaching skills in self-regulation and calming the nervous system.

Research in the neuroscience of SEL presented by Davidson (2010) has shown that behavioral interventions change the brain's function and structure and can produce adaptations to cognitive and emotional functioning as a consequence. Davidson upholds that repeated experiences in early childhood create changes in brain structure. He expresses that the brains of children are being molded and shaped by their daily experiences particularly by factors in affective environments such as home and school. Children's brains are constantly being shaped by their experiences, particularly by factors in affective environments such as home and school. This research suggests that SEL is a central vehicle through which schools can be intentional about promoting positive brain changes and cultivating healthy social and emotional habits. His research

puts forward that all behavioral interventions are biological because they produce changes in brain functioning. According to Davidson, behavioral interventions can produce more specific brain changes than medication because behavioral interventions have the capacity to affect highly specific brain circuitry in ways that modern medicine cannot.

Four areas of the brain reviewed for the purpose of determining the implications of SEL and brain functions: (a) the orbital frontal cortex, which controls emotional judgments, (b) the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, which dictates the capacity to guide decision making through positive emotions, (c) the amygdala, which is part of the subcortical region or lower brain that detects threats and (d) the anterior cingulate cortex, which controls cognitive and emotional conflict resolution in the brain circuitry. In an experimental setting, children were shown pictures of an infant with a tumor growing out of its eye in order to provoke a negative reaction. Dramatic differences occurred in the amygdala if the child learned to actively reappraise the negative stimulus in a way that promotes a more positive and adaptive response. Children who did not learn a healthy reappraisal of the negative stimulus had an extended response or took longer to down-regulate the amygdala. The goal of social and emotional learning is to teach a child to self-regulate following disappointment, failure, or any emotional upset. Thusly, a child is better able to self-regulate his or her emotions permitting more effective thinking. This research indicates that when children are provided with healthy ways to process negative events, they are better able to self-regulate and return to a state where their capacity to guide decision making and positive emotion is increased (Davidson, 2010).

Additional studies conducted by Davidson (2010) highlight the impact of stress and anxiety on adolescents' physical health. Davidson measured levels of the stress hormone cortisol in adolescents based on brain profiles relative to their ability to moderate stress. The young adults who were most effective at down-regulating their amygdala based on brain profiles had lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol. This finding is significant in that high levels of cortisol accumulated over time impair brain functioning in the areas of emotions as well as learning and memory.

Anxiety also impairs brain functioning. When adolescents were asked to perform a task involving working memory, their ability to complete the task successfully was greatly diminished when anxiety-producing elements were introduced. The more anxious a person was, the worse he/she performed. It turns out that anxiety produces changes in the prefrontal cortex, which controls emotional judgments and executive skills functioning in the brain. When the participants were taught stress and anxiety reducing skills, positive changes in the prefrontal cortex manifested, yielding improved emotion, cognition, and working memory. The implication is if one can lower anxiety and stress one can improve the function of the prefrontal cortex and working memory, which is the basis for most academic learning. It turns out that strategies for emotional regulation are good for both the brain and the body (Davidson, 2010).

S. Roberts (2015) and Davidson (2010) both researched the impact of stress on the brain and reached similar findings. Roberts reviewed magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of subjects whose brains were exposed to chronic stress and found that "stress is toxic to the brain" (p. 92). Roberts described the variances in the MRI scans of

participants who had healthy brains versus those who had experienced profound levels of stress:

Neurons in the brains of healthy control subjects show many robust branches and connections while those in subjects exposed to chronic stress resemble frayed and broken threads... Stress shrinks the brain and expands the belly and causes inflammation throughout the body. (p. 92)

Roberts believes that chronic stress should be a greater public health concern and addressed on many levels especially for children and adolescents. Stress is more harmful to youths because it establishes a pattern of lifelong physical and psychological problems. Schools should be on the front line, providing training and education about the neuroscience of stress and proactively creating school environments that teach children how to cope with and manage stress and challenges in life.

Approaches to Promoting Social-Emotional and Academic Growth

Given the extensive development in the frontal lobe during early childhood through young adulthood, K through 12 education is the optimal time to have the greatest impact on developing emotional intelligence (Davidson, 2010; S. Roberts, 2015; Steinberg, 2015). The frontal lobe cortex is the part of the brain that controls executive functioning skills including self-control, organization, planning, and making pro-social choices. Steinberg (2015) described the frontal lobe cortex as the “foundation for non-cognitive skills such as perseverance, determination, and the delay of gratification,” (p. 97) all of which are key traits in developing resilience or grit. Resilience or grit are developed as a function of a growth mindset and is more of an indicator of positive learning outcomes than intelligence and talent (Duckworth, 2016;

Dweck, 2007; Steinberg, 2015). Steinberg recommended that schools incorporate instruction that encourages prefrontal cortical development so “students will have additional strengths beyond those conveyed through conventional academic instruction” (p. 97).

Steinberg (2015) argued that a curriculum that deliberately focuses on improving self-regulation has value beyond the competencies necessary for academic achievement. He maintains that fostering emotional intelligence has the “added advantage of cultivating the sorts of inner strengths that help protect against the development of problems such as depression, obesity, delinquency, and substance use” (p. 98). Providing direct instruction in impulse control, body regulation and mindfulness along with academic skills is not only an effective proactive strategy to prevent hidden violence in schools, but also helps promote children’s physical and psychological well-being (Steinberg, 2015).

There are many approaches to increasing self-regulation skills, and at this point no single approach has been endorsed over another. Some small studies have been conducted, but not enough scientific and rigorous testing has been done to unequivocally state that a specific program is most effective (Steinberg, 2015). Within the body of research, there are similar recommendations and general principles to guide schools in creating psychologically safe environments through the vehicle of SEL.

Know the Neuroscience

First, because it is important to garner parental support and involvement as well as engage the faculty and staff, schools ought to begin holding conversations about

the neuroscience behind social emotional development in children and adolescents. Steinberg (2015) suggested incorporating brain development into the curriculum and parent education programs. He further noted that parents and children find the information fascinating, and with this knowledge, parents can be better parents and interact more intelligently with their children. Professional development covering brain science, emotional intelligence, and SEL are cornerstones to any approach to establishing a psychologically safe environment.

Intellectual Engagement

Vital to positive psychological development is exposing students to rigorous content placed within a context and made relevant to the children's experiences. Establishing a standard of achievement that challenges students to stretch to reach their academic potential and providing culturally relevant material stimulates prefrontal cortex development and supports positive psychological development (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Steinberg, 2015). Moore (2015) suggested that teachers engage their students by deepening student understanding of content through creating context and connecting content with what resonates with their students. Moore substantiated that learning is related to caring about what is being taught. "What you're learning has to matter to you in order for you to be willing to take risks, to dig deep" (p. 36).

In addition to relevance and relationships, schools that teach students how to fail and have high standards and academic rigor are setting the stage for high student engagement and attachment to the community. Steinberg (2015) confirmed this by stating, "It is through challenge - even if it means occasional failure - that students

acquire the ability to manage themselves... and persevere in the face of obstacles, skills they will certainly need in college” (p. 98).

Mindfulness

In recent years, neurobiologists, clinical researchers, and mental health professionals have discovered how cultivating mindfulness practices helps with a host of emotional difficulties stemming from anxiety and depression to relationship struggles (Siegel, 2004). According to Dan Siegel (2004), the central aspect of therapeutic mindfulness practice is to focus one’s awareness on the present moment without judgment of one’s thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

Support is mounting for practices that promote mindfulness in schools (Diamond & Lee, 2011; Flook et al., 2009; Jennings, 2015). Research shows that mindfulness activities improve children’s executive skills functioning, thereby building brain systems that regulate self-control, creativity, flexible thinking, and discipline (Diamond & Lee, 2011). Mindful awareness activities address the area of brain development in children that is the seat of motivation for most human behavior from childhood onward, throughout their adult life (Flook et al., 2009). Building executive function skills in children impacts both emotional intelligence and academic functioning (Blair, 2002). Mindful awareness practices externalize innate interaction patterns for students who manifest behaviors akin to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorders, and aggressive behaviors related to impulse control problems such as bullying and other disruptive behavior (Diamond & Lee, 2011; Flook et al., 2009).

The network of neural systems responsible for executive functioning and emotional intelligence is interconnected. A deficit in one of the systems may negatively impact functioning in another system, and strengthening an area in one of the systems can translate to benefits in other areas (Flook et al., 2009). The wide-ranging development in the prefrontal cortex from early childhood through adolescence suggests that the time to have the greatest impact on developing emotional intelligence is during primary and secondary school (Davidson, 2010; S. Roberts, 2015; Steinberg, 2015). For this reason, designing school practices that promote executive skills functioning in K through 12 curriculums has long term implications for improving children's social-emotional and academic growth (Diamond & Lee, 2011; Diamond & Taylor, 1996; Flook et al., 2009).

Mindful awareness activities involve exercises that teach participants self-regulation skills through heightened attention to their internal state in the moment (Siegel, 2007). A variety of practices support children in learning how to achieve this state of internal awareness; Tai-Chi, Tae Kwon Do, belly breathing, yoga, and some forms of meditation are a few of the widely recognized activities (Diamond & Lee, 2011; Flook et al., 2009). Children who receive traditional martial arts training are given instruction in how to attend to their mind using their senses, personal space, and strategies for responding to emotional stress (Steinberg, 2015). Diamond and Lee (2011) emphasized the impact of traditional martial arts over standard physical education related to executive skills function:

Children getting traditional Tae-Kwon-Do training were found to show greater gains than children in standard physical education on all dimensions of EFS

studied (e.g., cognitive [distractible-focused] and affective [quitting-persevering]). This generalized to multiple contexts and was found on multiple measures. (p. 3)

Children in grades K through 5 also showed gains in working memory on math related tasks. Older children and boys showed the greatest gains. In a similar study with adolescent juvenile delinquents receiving traditional martial arts training versus standard physical activity, those in the martial arts group showed less anxiety and aggression and improved social skills (Diamond & Lee, 2011).

Evidence for the benefits of mindfulness training in schools is consistent. In another study, mindfulness practices were taught to 7-9 year olds with low executive functioning skills. The sessions included meditation, exercises to increase self-regulation skills, attention regulation, and empathy training. As a result of the training, teachers and parents reported improvements in their children's ability to sustain focus and engage in flexible thinking, which suggests that the findings can be generalized across contexts (Diamond & Lee, 2011).

Siegel (2012) presented the case for schools to embrace the wisdom of neuroscience and provide education practices that promote self-regulation through mindfulness and neural integration. His research focuses on reflection, relationships, and resilience. Siegel believes that children can develop the capacity to name and manage their feelings through reflective practice. He asserts that when one understands and has the ability to manage one's own feelings, one is better able to understand others. Empathic individuals have healthier relationships, which is the basis of emotional and social intelligence. His research suggests that the number one

correlate of well-being and mental health is positive relationships and healthy connections to other people. Siegel concludes that people thrive when they have healthy relationships, as well as kindness and compassion for themselves and others. Because of the benefits of mindfulness training, he advises schools to begin teaching children how to be reflective, foster empathy, and build resilience beginning in kindergarten and throughout adolescence.

Research supports the finding that mindfulness practices build social and emotional intelligence (Diamond & Lee, 2011; Siegel, 2012; Zins, et al., 2004). Zins et al. (2004) agreed that schools are better able to accomplish their education mission when they integrate social and emotional learning along with academic competencies. They further stated that social and emotional learning play a significant role in interpersonal skills, and also have a critical role in scholastic achievement and improving attitudes about learning.

Social Emotional Learning

The research is clear that the brain seeks connections in order to learn. Accordingly, learning is a social process that takes place in partnership with peers, with teachers, and within families (Cozolino, 2014; Hippel, 2014; Siegel, 2012; Zins et al., 2004). Social and emotional dynamics can hamper or facilitate learning and dictate positive or negative outcomes for students. Hippel (2014) argued that seemingly trivial mental abilities such as self-regulation, a function of the frontal lobes, play a critical role in enabling socially intelligent behavior and support people in making appropriate choices in challenging situations.

Habib (2015) spoke to the importance of schools incorporating practices that promote emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence includes skills fostered by mindfulness practices such as empathy, self-regulation, self-awareness, and relationship skills. Goleman (2006) defined emotional intelligence as an individual's capacity to self regulate and show empathy. He further stated that an emotionally intelligent person should have the ability to name their emotions appropriately and apply that information to behave accordingly.

The research clearly points to the need for a SEL component in school curricula that teach specific strategies to increase mindfulness skills that empower children and increase mental health and well-being (Diamond & Lee, 2011; Goleman, 2006; Habib, 2015; Hippel, 2014; Siegel, 2012;). Zins et al. (2004) defined SEL as "the process through which children enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behaving to achieve important life tasks" (p. 194). Their research points to the connection between evidence-based SEL programs and school success. SEL interventions that are comprehensive, consistent, and systematic, in addition to being designed with a developmentally appropriate scope and sequence, are found to yield the greatest gains.

Steinberg (2015) asserted that social and emotional learning should be incorporated into school curriculum to build emotional intelligence. SEL curriculums provide instruction in managing stress, regulating emotions, and considering the feelings of others before acting. Many SEL programs were initially designed to decrease behavior problems such as impulsiveness and aggression in troubled youths. However, they have also shown effectiveness in improving self-regulation in children that do not struggle with such problems. Successful SEL programs are holistic integrated

approaches that address academic and pro-social behaviors that foster social skills and attitudes that lead to improved scholastic performance and increase psychological safety in the school environment (Zins et al., 2004). Positive academic outcomes are achieved by integrating rigorous behavior and academic standards with the same levels of support from faculty, staff, and administration (Osher et al., 2007). The researchers found that successful schools enhance social, emotional, and academic achievement through supports provided to children and adults to help them realize the expectations for the conditions for learning. The first condition is physical and emotional safety. Osher et al. described objective and subjective components of physical and emotional safety. Objective safety involves actual risk and subjective safety implies the perception of risk. According to Osher et al. both objective and subjective safety concerns can be reduced by implementing social and emotional learning practices. Other conditions for learning include SEL capacity building, students' feelings of acceptance and support from the school, and having high expectations for achievement and behavior that all constituent share.

In aggregate, the conditions for learning make up a school's culture. Effective schools have a culture that supports the conditions for learning through the values, norms, traditions, and beliefs that create the cumulative daily experience of the members of the school community (Osher et al., 2007). Establishing a safe school culture contributes to successful and effective learning environments.

Frameworks for Safe and Successful Schools

The attributes of effective schools have been examined comprehensively. Lezotte and Snyder (2010), two pioneers in effective school research, articulated

seven correlates of effective schools, irrespective of racial and socioeconomic demographics. Of the seven correlates outlined, the number one factor is safety:

An effective school must first be a place where students can feel safe, physically and emotionally. It must be a supportive community where kids—and teachers—of all backgrounds can focus on learning. To create a climate of safety, halls and classrooms must be free of behavior like fighting, bullying, and harassment. That said a safe environment is not created merely through punishment. (p. 15)

Thompson (2011) suggested that building learning environments that allow children to reach their full potential academically requires that schools implement interventions that focus on social-emotional skills as well as core content. Lezotte and Snyder (2010) advocated for similar interventions and offered concrete steps for how strategies can be operationalized within a school setting. According to Lezotte and Snyder, all stakeholders within the education environment (teachers, parents, and administrators) are responsible for shaping the culture by treating schools as a sacred place and placing a high value on school culture.

Gunzelmann (2004) posited that school culture is crucial to identifying and addressing problems that are not obvious but contribute to micro and macro aggression in schools. According to Gunzelmann, climate can directly affect learning outcomes and is essential to meeting the safety needs of children. An unsafe school climate can result in anxiety disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and depression, and can be a factor in learning challenges. Crews et al. (2008) suggested that problems associated with school safety and culture are multi-dimensional; all aspects of the school community are impacted. Resolving the problems associated with a negative school

climate allows students to focus on productivity and learning outcomes. Time spent minimizing violence in schools takes away from academics and can impact the budget by diverting funds away from curricular material to go toward violence prevention programs.

Pollack and Sundermann (2001) suggested a safe school framework that is comprehensive and involves the entire school community, as well as members of government agencies, community groups and church affiliated organizations. They believe that a comprehensive approach to creating a safe school culture results in improved academics, reduced behavioral infractions, a more positive learning environment, and a better allocation of resources. Pollack and Sundermann (2001) introduced a

six-step strategic process for establishing a safe school culture:

1. Develop school and community partnerships by collaborating with public officials and community leaders. The way schools and communities collaborate should meet the needs of the school and the partner.
2. Conduct a comprehensive needs assessment to ascertain the problem, identify existing efforts, and make data driven decisions to institute change.
3. Develop a comprehensive school plan based on the challenges that have been identified through the needs assessment data. Schools should prioritize problems and create measureable goals and objectives.
4. Identify and implement a program to address the goals and objectives outlined in step three.

5. Conduct an evaluation of the determined program components with the goal of informing the school about what is working and what is not working.
6. Share outcomes and adjust based on the evaluation outcomes.

Pollack and Sundermann (2001) concluded that their strategic process in designing a safe school culture goes beyond creating a crisis response plan.

Comprehensive safe school plans recognize the complexity of school violence and the need to go beyond a single focus response. Establishing a safe school culture requires a plan that “supports the development of social skills and a school environment that helps students manage anger, solve problems, and treat others with respect” (p. 23). A school that engages in strategic and comprehensive planning is more likely to minimize the risk for violence and create a culture that fosters a safe environment.

Another suggested framework for creating a safe school culture focuses strictly on SEL interventions. Their model emphasizes a safe school design that is a coordinated, sustainable, and systemic approach with multiyear and multi-component aspects. The initial phase of the framework process includes identifying needs and reviewing theory and research-based SEL programs with empirically validated practices. The SEL program components should provide instruction in a variety of social and emotional skills that are applicable to daily life. The suggested skills include identifying and regulating emotions, empathy, impulse control, responsible decision making, and relationship building skills. The program should also address affective learning to foster an attachment to the school community. Affective learning encourages engagement and participation in the school community and nurtures a sense of safety, support, and security (Zins et al., 2004). The second phase in the framework for

creating a safe school culture is to establish leads to coordinate, integrate, and link programming to academic outcomes. These steps include reviewing the policies, practices and procedures for less structured nonacademic times during the school day (e.g., arrival, dismissal, transitions, playground, dismissal, and lunch); coordinating efforts with ancillary service providers such as resource teachers, counselors, and afterschool care providers; and integrating SEL and academic development. Zins et al. (2004) went on to suggest as a third phase that schools address institutional policies to ensure they align with SEL goals and provide training and support on an ongoing basis. Ongoing support includes providing leadership opportunities, professional development, coaching support, and feedback for faculty, staff, and administration. Fourth in the framework model is involving parents and community partners to ensure SEL strategies and dispositions are applied at home and in the community.

The final phase in the framework design includes continuous improvement based on outcomes and evaluation. The purpose of the evaluation is to monitor progress toward goals and make changes to the program design if needed. Evaluation results are shared with stakeholders and the implementation process begins again with updated program goals and outcomes. Zins et al. (2004) drew the conclusion that “there is a growing body of scientifically based research supporting the strong impact that enhances social and emotional behaviors can have on success in school and ultimately in life” (p. 208).

SEL programs are the hallmark of safe school cultures (Zins et al., 2004). School leaders are charged with making school safety a priority as a part of the national education agenda. Schools have implemented a variety of programs to address school

safety with varied results (Thomerson, 2000). Research shows that a comprehensive approach to establishing a safe school culture is the key to effective and sustainable intervention (Pollack & Sundermann, 2001; Thomerson, 2000; Zins et al., 2004).

Summary

It is the responsibility of a school leader to create an environment that reflects a commitment to a vision of academic rigor and safety. It is understood that schools should be places that challenge, extend, and enhance a child's capacity to learn. It is now widely known that it is equally important to ensure that schools foster a child's capacity to build healthy relationships, self-regulate, engage in positive decision making practices, and develop empathy toward others. These soft skills were once thought of as character traits that are inherent from birth. However, research in cognitive psychology now provides a narrative explaining that these skills can be developed from childhood and throughout adolescence. For these reasons, K through 12 education settings should provide a comprehensive research-based SEL program (Davidson, 2010; S. Roberts 2015; Steinberg, 2015).

Neuroscience teaches that repeated experiences over time change the brain because of neuroplasticity (Goleman, 2004). A community of cognitive scientists strongly advocate for schools to regularly teach SEL skills over time in a systematic way with the same frequency that core academic subjects are taught (Goleman, 2004; Pollack & Sundermann, 2000; Zins et al., 2004).

Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, and Schellinger (2011) presented findings from a meta-analysis of hundreds of schools implementing comprehensive social and emotional learning programs involving K through 12 students versus similar schools

without a SEL program. The schools with an SEL model reported that anti-social behaviors such as disruptions in class, physical altercations, and bullying behavior decreased by 10%; pro-social behavior and positive attitudes about school increased by 10%; and academic achievement scores went up 11%. SEL programs address academic and pro-social behaviors simultaneously. The brain circuitry that controls cognitive functions is inextricably connected to the circuitry that controls non-cognitive skills such as executive functioning and emotions (Immordino-Yang, 2015; Kellher, 2015; S. Roberts, 2015). SEL programs foster social skills and attitudes that lead to improved scholastic performance and increase psychological safety in the school environment (Zins et al., 2004).

Ultimately, the responsibility lies with school leaders to prioritize school safety and develop a framework that is the best fit for the school. Research shows that a comprehensive approach to establishing a safe school culture is critical to successful and sustainable interventions (Pollack & Sundermann, 2001; Thomerson, 2000; Zins et al., 2004). Safe school cultures address physical and social needs of students, thus allowing children to reach their full academic potential. Building learning environments to improve the quality of education for all children requires schools to implement interventions that place an equal value on building social-emotional skills with the same rigor as core content (Reeves et al., 2010; Thompson, 2011).

Psychologically safe schools provide environments where children thrive, develop talents, learn resilience, and become prepared to face life's ever-present challenges. Within the context of youth and school culture Yeager and Dweck (2012) offered that resilience is an essential life skill. School communities with an established

SEL program foster the development of mindsets in children that promote resilience as a risk protective factor. Safe school communities play an important role in response to the multitude of risk factors connected to youth violence and maladaptive behaviors in both affluent and impoverished communities.

Schools can be holistically safe places for all children, irrespective of economic status. K through 12 school leaders who include social-emotional well-being into the framework of establishing a safe school culture are experiencing positive outcomes such as increased pro-social behaviors and decreased incidences of school violence (Durlak et al., 2011). The research is clear that schools with social and emotional learning curriculum in place are seeing improved outcomes from students in academic and behavior standards. Students in schools with SEL programs have better attendance, reduced discipline referrals, and improved standardized test scores by an average of 11 percentile points (Habib, 2015; Immordino-Yang, 2015; Shaffer, 2014).

Psychologically safe schools are places that seek to address both obvious and hidden threats to the school environment, thereby fostering an atmosphere conducive to developing competencies in emotional intelligence and psychological resiliency. Schools need to teach more than core academic content. Shaffer (2014) believes that providing children with SEL programs which includes instruction in life skills that promote self-awareness, healthy relationship skills, methods for connecting and engaging with others, and responsible decision making improves learning and creates a better psychological climate in schools.

This research provides a description of the practices utilized by experienced K through 12 school leaders to create safe school cultures recommended by Shaffer

(2014) and other researchers in mental health, wellness and social emotional learning. Additionally, the results of this study provide specific strategies and practices offered by experienced school leaders as they work to establish and implement school wide systems that promote psychologically safe environments for students. School leaders are ultimately responsible for school environments that reflect a commitment to physical and psychological safety as well as academic rigor. It is equally important to ensure that schools implement curriculum designed to build skills that support a child's capacity to build healthy relationships, self-regulate, engage in positive decision making practices, and develop empathy toward others.

Researchers in the fields of neuroscience, behavior, and psychology fear that we have enabled a generation of victims who do not have the skills to cope with challenges in healthy and rational ways. Our children are reduced to violence, depression, anxiety, self-harm, and psychotropic drug use as coping mechanisms instead of being resilient and gritty in the face of difficulties (LeVine, 2006; Luthar, 2003; Lythcott, 2005). Neuroscience research and cognitive psychology provide school leaders with vital information to transform schools into places that develop these skills from early childhood and throughout adolescence in the same way we develop cognitive skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics. K through 12 school leaders are better able to fulfill their mission and accomplish goals when they integrate social and emotional learning seamlessly into academic competencies. Social and emotional learning influences have a critical role in bettering academic performance and improving attitudes about learning.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

The aim of this qualitative research was to identify the practices employed by school leaders in southern California to create a culture of school safety and the challenges faced. The study also sought to understand how school leaders in southern California define a successful safe school culture and provide recommendations for future sustainability of strategies and practices. The primary investigator will use a phenomenological approach to collect the expertise of K through 12 school administrators and look for patterns in those experiences to create a framework for establishing safe schools.

Chapter 3 specifies the elected methodology and why it was preferred for this study followed by a detailed explanation of the sampling method and population. Interviewing techniques along with a description of the protection of human subjects are presented. This chapter also provides the data collection method and the development of interview questions in conjunction with an analysis by a panel of experts. Then, an explanation of the primary investigator's bias is offered and validity and reliability are examined. Finally, the strategy for data analysis and findings are explained.

Nature of the Study

The study used a qualitative research design as the basis for gathering data and answering the questions that drive this study. Qualitative research focuses on the participants' perspectives within the context of the setting. It concerns itself with the discovery of common patterns or themes that emerge from the data rather than strict statistical interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2013). Richard and Morse (2013) state

that “all qualitative research seeks understanding of data that are complex and can be approached only in context” (p. 4).

Qualitative methodology was selected for this study to determine the common practices employed by school leaders in southern California to create a culture of school safety. The chosen method also helped to better understand the participants’ overall perspective on safe school culture and if challenges changed the way they originally envisioned implementing the framework. The study also sought to understand what common processes are engaged to ensure sustainability of a safe school culture and any common external or internal resources necessary to facilitate the process of establishing the framework design. In short, the research aimed to analyze the experiences of K through 12 administrators to discover themes regarding strategies and practices they have followed and challenges overcome.

According to Richards and Morse (2013), making sense or creating meaning through qualitative research involves putting together the experiences of those who participate in a given phenomenon. Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, and Namey (2005) go on to say that the power of qualitative research is its capacity to describe the way individuals experience an occurrence. It allows the researcher to provide a descriptive narrative that richly illustrates how people who have lived a common experience think feel or believe. Mack et al. (2005) further state that qualitative methods are also useful in uncovering elusive dynamics, such as sex, race or religion, which may not be obvious in the research.

Another strength in qualitative designed outlined by Creswell (2013) is that knowledge is constructed based on the various meanings of individual experiences with

the purpose of revealing an emerging pattern or perspective or both. This research study used a constructivist perspective and as such, certain assumptions exist and provided an implicit agenda for this work. These assumptions are:

- Individuals create their own meaning as they engage with the world; therefore, reality is subjective and experiential (Creswell, 2008; Macleod, 2009).
- The researcher is part of the system and has the goal of understanding and structuring meaning from data collected within the participant's setting. Therefore, findings are co-created between the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2008; Macleod, 2009).
- The research is exploratory in nature and focuses on process and meaning derived through participant responses to open ended interview questions.
- The participants are encouraged to elaborate on their responses and in return researchers can engage participants in a more complex dialogue than a simple yes or no response (Mack et al., 2005).

Sofaer (2002) suggests that qualitative research methods support efforts to plan improvements; identify best practice and gather experiential data; and document how services are provided so implementation strategies can be measured and linked to outcomes. The research problem under study fits the design characteristics. There has not been a robust amount of research in current practices to establish psychologically safe schools. This phenomenon needed to be explored further to ascertain the processes that school leaders can implement to construct a culture of school safety.

Restatement of the Purpose

A lot can be learned from collective knowledge in the field of education as it relates to creating safe schools. Accordingly, this study's aim was to determine the practices employed by school leaders in southern California to create a culture of school safety and the challenges they face in doing so. The study also identified how school leaders in southern California define a successful safe school culture and provided recommendations for future sustainability of strategies and practices.

Research Questions

The study answered the following research questions:

1. What are the strategies and practices employed by school leaders in K through 12 schools in southern California to create a culture of school safety?
2. How do you define a successful safe school culture?
3. What challenges are faced by school leaders in K through 12 schools in southern California in implementing safe school strategies and practices?
4. What recommendations would you make for future sustainability of strategies and practices to create a safe school culture?

Methodology of the Study

This study used a phenomenological design. Phenomenological research is a descriptive approach that incorporates interviews and content analysis. The goal of this methodology is to describe the meaning of lived experiences from the lens of someone who has experienced the concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology is also a philosophical perspective that requires the researcher to

suspend his or her own beliefs to gain insight into the participants' understanding and experience with the inquiry concept (Mack et al., 2005).

A phenomenological approach differs from a narrative inquiry in that it provides a common narrative for the meaning of a shared experience or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The phenomenon studied in this work is the collective experiences of K through 12 school administrators establishing a culture of psychological safety. Also, this work explores the obstacles overcome in the process of implementing safe school practices and recommendations for sustainability. Insights into these experiences can only be understood through the lens of these current administrators within the context of their school setting.

Phenomenological designs permit themes to emerge from narrative descriptions. Nonrestrictive instructions and open-ended questions allow fuller descriptions from participants. Researchers may want to provide follow up questions that clarify and maintain the focus of the research questions. The information gathered is intentionally subjective to provide understanding of the context and the participants' behaviors through developing themes that emerge from the data (Creswell, 2013).

Research Design: Participant Selection

Farag-Davis (2015), it takes 3-5 years to effect positive change within a school culture. The ideal participants for this study were K through 12 school administrators who have held top leadership positions (i.e., principal, superintendent, or head of school) in their school or district for at least 3 years. Additionally, to obtain a range of perspectives and experiences, participants were selected based on maximum diversity

where possible including race, gender, and student population served. The following process was used to develop a sampling frame:

- The researcher used the California Association of Independent Schools' (CAIS) 2015-2016 K through 12 School Administrators' Membership Directory.
- The directory is an annual publication accessible online to the public. The directory lists the CAIS WASC accredited K through 12 schools. The researcher obtained a copy of the list through the annual mailing distribution.
- The CAIS directory includes a list of WASC accredited K through 12 schools along with public contact information including the school administrator's name, title, length of service, physical school address, email address and phone number.

The following criteria were used for inclusion and exclusion in this study:

- The participants had to be K through 12 school administrators who held a top leadership position (i.e., principal, superintendent, or head of school).
- The participants were required to have held a top leadership position within their school or district for a minimum of 3 years.
- The participants had to be available for an interview during the month of February or March 2016.
- The participants had to be willing to provide informed consent.
- Exclusion from participation was based on not being available for an interview during the month of February or March 2016.

- Further criteria for exclusion in participation were participants who have been in their positions for less than 3 years.
- Participants who were school leaders but held a middle management title such as assistant principal or division head were excluded.
- Participants who were unable or unwilling to provide informed consent were excluded. Also excluded were participants who believed that participation in the study would be psychologically or socially harmful.

Approximately 300 member schools serve a variety of student demographics within the association. The criteria for inclusion and exclusion were applied as follows to obtain an appropriate sample size with maximum variation:

- The researcher identified a purposive sample of CAIS members who have held a top leadership position (principal, superintendent, or head of school) for no less than 3 years using a maximum variety selection process to help ensure the diversity of school leaders selected.
- The researcher eliminated from consideration all CAIS members with less than 3 years of service indicated in the membership directory.
- The researcher eliminated from consideration all CAIS school leaders who held a middle management position such as assistant principal or division head.
- The selection process was limited to CAIS WASC accredited school leaders within a 75 mile radius of Altadena, California to ensure the principal investigator's accessibility to a face to face on site interview and to maximize the demographic diversity of the student population served.

- This process narrowed the selection to approximately 50 member schools.

The literature suggests that qualitative methodologists do not agree on a specific number of sample sizes needed; however, they agree that it is necessary to have enough interviews to achieve saturation. De Paulo (2016) suggests that a qualitative sample must be large enough to assure that most or all the perceptions that might be important to the research are heard, or until new insights are no longer being presented. However, De Paulo (2016) admits that such rules are not solidly grounded and do not really tell what an optimal qualitative sample size may be. Mason (2010) instructs that a phenomenological study based on descriptive analysis is likely to have a smaller sample size because of the level of detail involved in the analysis. For phenomenological studies, Mason (2010) recommends ranges of approximately six to 10 interviews. Creswell (2005) recommends between one and 40. Based on the application of the participation selection criteria, this principal investigator considered a final sample size of 15 respondents. This sample size was small enough to ensure that the interview content would be manageable during data collection and analysis and large enough so that a diverse range of demographics, perspectives, and experiences could be explored. The researcher sought participants that fit the expressed criteria because of their awareness of and unique ability to describe the strategies used to establish safe school environments and provide insight on challenges faced through the process as well as recommendations for sustainable results.

Sources of Data

As noted previously, the researcher had access to the CAIS WASC accredited K through 12 school administrators' roster through participation in professional

development activities and membership. The CAIS WASC list served as a rich source for potential research participants. Data for the study were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 15 participants who were selected through a purposive sampling approach.

Oliver (2006) defined purposive sampling as a form of criteria based sampling supported by a variety of decisive factors that may include specific knowledge of the research issue, willingness or capacity to participate in the study, or individuals who would most likely contribute relevant and rich data. Purposive sampling is powerful because of the depth of information gleaned about issues central to the research from a small but expert sample. According to Patton (1990), purposive sampling is particularly effective when the primary data are obtained from a very specific group of participants or when members of certain professions can only contribute to the study; such was the case with this research.

Protection of Human Subjects

Ethical issues related to qualitative research focus primarily on the protection of the interactions between human subjects and the researcher (Mack et al., 2005). To that end, the central concern is the well-being of the participants and ensuring that participants' needs have priority over the research. Fundamental research ethics principles, as noted by Mack et al. (2005) are:

1. Respect for persons – requires researchers to ensure the autonomy, dignity, and protection from potential exploitation of participants.

2. Beneficence – requires researchers to articulate the ways that participants' risks associated with the research are minimized and how the benefits of participation in the study are maximized.
3. Justice – requires researchers to ensure that participants benefit from the knowledge gained from the study.

In addition to these established principles, Pepperdine University's research ethics policy as cited by Fraizer (2009) states, "All research involving human participants must be conducted in accordance with accepted ethical, federal, and professional standards for research and that all such research must be approved by one of the university's Institutional Review Boards" (p. 138). The researcher took every precaution to follow established ethical principles related to protection of human participants including completing the Human Participation Protection Education for Research Teams online course (see Appendix A), soliciting participation using a recruitment script, and giving Informed Consent (see Appendix B). Once the proposal was approved by the dissertation committee, an application was filed with the university's Institutional Review Board for an exempt review because the research activities in this study presented no more than a minimal risk to human subjects.

Data Collection

The data collection process started with a robust examination of the literature as outlined in Chapter 2 of this study. Research questions, interview questions, and the criteria for participation were informed by the literature. As described in the discussion on participation selection, the participants in this study were K through 12 school administrators who hold or have held top leadership positions (i.e. Principal,

Superintendent, Head of School or Division Head) in their school or district within the previous 3 years. In addition, the researcher selected participants based on maximum diversity where possible, including population served, race, gender, and age. From this population, a sample of 15 participants was invited to participate in interviews.

The researcher contacted each participant through an introductory telephone call followed by an electronic email obtained through the WASC list of accredited K through 12 schools membership directory. Phone calls were made during business hours between 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Only one initial electronic contact was made following the first telephone contact unless the participant requested electronic correspondence to establish interview dates and times.

Following the approved recruitment script, each participant was invited to participate in the study. Once accepted, the participant's preferred contact information was requested, the researcher sent a copy of the participant consent form, and a personal interview was scheduled for the month of February or March 2016. The researcher arrived 20 minutes prior to the scheduled interview time with two digital recording devices. Upon the participant's arrival, the researcher reviewed the Informed Consent form with him/her, requested verbal consent, and began the interview. The researcher concluded the interview by providing a hand written thank you note to the participant that included the researcher's personal contact information and instructions to follow up with any additional information or concerns.

Interview Protocol

What follows is a copy of the final interview protocol for this study, as reviewed by the preliminary review committee and finalized and approved by the dissertation

committee. The methods of establishing reliability of the data collection instrument are detailed in the validity and reliability section of this chapter. The interview with the researcher contacting the participant based on the criteria described in the discussion on participant selection. As stated previously, the initial contact was made by phone and followed up by an email. Once participation was confirmed, the participant's full contact information was requested, and the researcher sent a copy of the participant consent form. Once the signed participant consent form was returned, an interview time and location was arranged at the participant's convenience. The preferred location was the participant's school facility. Interview questions were provided prior to the interview to facilitate the structure and efficiency of the interview process. If the participant agreed, the session was digitally recorded. If permission to record the session was not granted then only handwritten notes were taken. A transcript was provided to the participant in the weeks following the interview for his/her approval. Participants could approve the transcript as written or provide clarification.

Interview Techniques

According to Turner (2010), best practices in qualitative interviewing include structuring the interview like a friendly conversation to establish trust and rapport by beginning with a general question and saving sensitive or controversial questions after rapport has been established. Further advice includes practicing good listening skills. Active listening or genuine listening is considered a good listening skill or communication technique that involves maintaining eye contact, showing interest in the participant through positive body language, and remaining neutral or nonjudgmental in follow up responses by re-stating or paraphrasing the response in one's own words.

Creswell (2013) stressed the importance of the relationship between the researcher and interviewee. The nature of the interview should be an open, free dialogue between equals. The researcher and the participant should engage in a collaborative discussion with an equal and shared agenda. This can be accomplished by structuring questions to encourage an open ended and free flowing dialogue.

Instrument

Designing the type of interview questions described by Creswell (2013) that encourage a collaborative discussion can be accomplished in part through the structure of the instrument. The instrument or the interview protocol was carefully crafted by the researcher with the techniques in mind. The protocol questions were designed to be collectively exhaustive and mutually exclusive. The first research question was addressed by questions one through six, which dealt with strategies and practices employed by leaders in K through 12 schools to create a culture of safety. Questions seven and eight spoke to how school leaders define a successful school culture, which relates to the second research question in the study. Questions nine and 10 spoke to the third research question concerning challenges to establishing safe school cultures. The fourth research question focused on recommendations for future school leaders and processes for ensuring sustainability, and was addressed by the protocol questions 11 through 13. The following 13-question interview protocol was used for data collection:

1. How do you define a safe school culture?
2. What are the practices you employ to create a safe school culture?

3. What external or internal resources did you need to facilitate the process of creating a safe school culture?
4. What strategies or process did you use to you engage parents in the process of establishing a safe school culture?
5. What strategies or process did you use to you engage faculty and staff in the process of establishing a safe school culture?
6. What strategies or process did you use to you engage students in the process of establishing a safe school culture?
7. How do you determine/know that a school has a successful safe school culture?
8. How do you evaluate your school culture?
9. What have been the challenges to establishing a safe school culture?
10. Did challenges change the way you originally envisioned implementing a safe school culture?
11. What recommendations would you make to a new school leader related to creating a safe school culture?
12. What process do you engage to ensure sustainability of a safe school?
13. Is there anything else you can share about your experience relevant to this study?

Recordings of all interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Validity and Reliability

Creswell and Miller (2000) suggested that qualitative inquiries need to demonstrate their credibility. Thus, common procedures for establishing validity in

qualitative research are routinely employed. The authors further stated that the use of one procedure over another is guided by the researcher and his/her philosophical assumptions. Validity of the instrument for this study was established to ensure that the questions on the protocol adequately addressed the constructs in the research questions. To facilitate this method, the researcher followed a three-step validation process: (a) prime facie validity, (b) peer review validity, and (c) expert review validity.

Step 1: Prime facie validity. According to Phelan and Wren (2005), prime facie validity seeks to establish that the measure appears to be assessing the intended construct. The author designed interview questions that were believed to be appropriate and meet the goal of ascertaining data directly related to the research questions central to this study. The 13-question interview protocol is shown in the instrument section.

Step 2: Peer review validity. Creswell (2013) suggested that peer review provides an external check of the research process to ask hard questions, be a sympathetic listener, provoke thoughtful debate, and test the strength of the researcher's methods, meanings, and interpretations. The peer review validity process for the interview questions first involved the construction of a table to demonstrate the relationship between each research question and the corresponding interview questions, as shown in Appendix C. The table was then reviewed by a preliminary panel of reviewers consisting of three researchers who are currently doctoral students in the Organizational Leadership and Learning Technologies programs at Pepperdine University. These students were also conducting their doctoral dissertations at Pepperdine University and employing similar research methodology in their own

research. The panel members had all completed a series of doctoral level courses in quantitative and qualitative research methods and data analysis.

The panel was given a package that included the abstract of this research paper, a copy of the table in Appendix C, and instructions to follow to assess if the interview questions adequately addressed the constructs investigated in the research questions. The following instructions were provided:

Please review the summary statement attached to familiarize yourself with the purpose and goals of the study. Next, refer to the table below and read each research question carefully. Next, review the corresponding interview questions. If you determine that the interview question is directly relevant to the corresponding research question, mark “the question is directly relevant to research question 1 – keep it.” If you find the interview question irrelevant to the corresponding research question, mark “the question is irrelevant to research question 1 – delete it.” Finally, if you determine that to be relevant to the research question, the interview question must be modified, mark “the question should be modified as suggested” and in the blank space provided for you to recommend additional interview questions for each research question.

Step 3: Expert review validity. According to Berk (1990), expert judges should play an integral part in developing and assessing the protocol. Therefore, expert judges were employed to determine the merits and validity of the interview questions. The researcher presented the results of the work of the preliminary review panel to the dissertation review committee consisting of three faculty members: Drs. Farzin Madjidi, Chairperson, Lani Fraizer, and Gabriella Miramontes. Recommendations of the preliminary review panel were then examined and approved or modified by the

dissertation committee. In instances where a majority did not agree on a recommended modification, the committee chair had the final vote.

Data Analysis

According to Strauss (1987), researchers who wish “to become proficient at conducting qualitative analysis must learn to code well” (p.3). He further asserted that the quality and rigor of the research is contingent on the excellence of the coding. Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) referenced Moustakas’s outline of a procedure for phenomenological data analysis that is both rigorous and accessible to the inexperienced researcher. Guided by this systematic procedure, the researcher first suspends or sets aside personal experiences, judgments, and knowledge of the phenomenon to achieve epoche. The epoche process is done prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews to mitigate potential preconceptions that may contaminate the research process.

Once the data are collected and the researcher has transcribed recordings from interviews, a second review of the interview transcripts takes place to become familiar with the data and gain a deeper understanding of the respondents’ experiences. Next, the researcher uses the following multi-level system for coding recommended by Hahn (2008):

1. Level 1, initial coding– initial coding is a method of reducing data into small themes that initially describe the phenomenon (Given, 2008). During this process, the researcher reviews the data for commonalities that could suggest categories or themes.
2. Level 2, focused coding and category development – the second coding reexamines the level 1 initial categories to further focus data. During this process, the researcher begins

an initial classification of the data by looking for similarities and differences between comments. Similar comments, incidents, or events are grouped together to form categories. The second level coding process involves focusing the data further to reveal subsequent patterns or categories. Hatch (2002) suggested characterizing emergent patterns by similarities, frequency, correspondence, and causation.

3. Level 3, axial or thematic coding – the categories formed during the second focused coding set the stage for axial coding to determine relationships between and within categories and to develop refined themes. Initial codes can be refined, relabeled, subsumed by other codes, or dropped altogether at this level in the process (Hedlund-de Witt, 2013).
4. Level 4, theoretical concepts – once the categories and themes have been saturated, the final stage in the process allows the researcher to determine the larger concepts that emerge from the analysis. Hedlund-de Witt (2013) suggested that themes or concepts are progressively abstracted from categories and are the result of analytic reflection and contemplation.

Inter-rater reliability was established using a co-reviewer process discussed in the next section. In short, a panel of two co-reviewers individually assessed the researcher's coding. The co-reviewers then discussed the themes and key-phrases with the researcher and recommended changes and modifications as appropriate. The researcher then reviewed the co-reviewers' recommendations with one of the members of the dissertation committee before finalizing the coding process. Major constructs and their descriptions and sample participant quotes are reported in Chapter 4.

Inter-rater Reliability and Validity

Consistent with Phelan and Wren (2005), the purpose of inter-rater reliability is “to evaluate the degree to which different raters agree in their assessment decisions. Inter-rater reliability is necessary because observers do not always interpret responses in the same way” (p.26). They went on to say that the panel of raters may not always agree how well various responses to questions fit certain standards. It is especially useful when using subjective material or criteria such as the case in this study. The following steps were followed to ensure inter-rater reliability.

Step 1. Data were coded by the principal investigator, who initially coded the data individually utilizing a multi-level system for coding and created a data table where the major themes or categories arrived at through the content analysis were identified as column headings. Each column contained key words or phrases that were used to arrive at the theme. Inter-rater reliability was established using a co-reviewer process.

Step 2. Peer review validity was obtained through a panel of two co-reviewers who individually assessed the researcher’s coding. The goal of the peer review was to arrive at consensus regarding the initial coding results. The co-reviewers then discussed the themes and key phrases with the researcher and recommended changes and modifications as appropriate.

Step 3. Expert review validity was employed if there was no consensus. The researcher reviewed the co-reviewers’ recommendations with one of the members of the dissertation committee and arrived at final coding results. If there was any disagreement, the committee member had the final say.

Statement of Personal Bias

The researcher is an elementary school administrator with a passion for fostering social and emotional growth and development in children. Some biases are evident as far as advocacy for inclusion of social-emotional curriculum in schools. The researcher adopted the concept of bracketing, as introduced by Creswell (2013), to prevent her personal bias from entering the analysis. Bracketing is a strategy of phenomenological inquiry that requires intentionally and deliberately putting aside what one already knows about a subject prior to and throughout the investigation (Carpenter, 2007).

The researcher used bracketing throughout the process from initiation to data analysis to suspend personal experiences and to remain curious and reflective. Reflexivity is a thinking activity that helps identify the possible influence of the researcher's personal values and beliefs on the research work (Ahern, 1999). For example, the author purposefully omitted the names of specific programs in the literature review to allow the research related to the impact of such learning to speak for itself. It is suggested to keep a reflexive journal to further develop bracketing skills and facilitate decision making during the process of a phenomenological investigation (Chan, Fung, & Chen, 2013). Bracketing was at the forefront of the researcher's mind throughout the data collection and analysis process. For instance, one-to-one semi structured interviews were used for data collection. The aim of this approach was to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences using open ended questions to avoid leading or guiding the responses. The strategy for bracketing during data analysis is to use a hermeneutic or interpretive approach to gain an understanding of the participant's natural attitude about the phenomenon experienced.

Summary

The selected methodology was specified along with an explanation for why it was chosen for this study. Next, a detailed explanation of the sampling method and population were presented. Interview techniques along with a description of the protection of human subjects were provided. Additionally, the data collection method, the development of interview questions, and an analysis by a panel of experts was discussed. Finally, an explanation of the primary investigator's personal bias was outlined and validity and reliability were examined. The chapter ended with the method of data analysis and preparation for the findings.

Chapter 4: Findings

This study examined the work to design safe school culture that promotes student's psychological wellness. Physical safety is important and school administrators are responsible for protecting children from physical hazards, yet there are unapparent dangers in school environments that are not easily addressed. There is an art and science to ensuring student social and emotional well-being. The focus of this research was to learn from the collective experiences of school leaders as they engage in the work of creating safe school culture.

The results of this phenomenological research provide: (a) the strategies and practices employed by school leaders in K through 12 schools in southern California to create a culture of school safety, (b) how school leaders defined a successful safe school culture, (c) the challenges faced by school leaders in implementing safe school strategies and practices, and (d) recommendations for sustainability of strategies and practices employed to create a safe school culture. Open ended one-to one conversations with 15 participants supported the findings presented in this chapter and the foundation for the primary investigator's conclusions and recommendations discussed in Chapter 5. In short, this research indicates that school environments should attend to social and emotional development with the same rigor used to ensure academic growth.

The first research question asked was how do school leaders define a successful safe school culture? Six interview questions addressed research question 1: (a) How do you define safe school culture?, (b) What are the practices you employ to create a safe school culture?, (c) What external or internal resources did you need to facilitate the

process of creating a safe school culture?, (d) What strategies or process did you use to engage parents?, (e) What strategies or process did you use to engage faculty and staff in the process?, and (f) What strategies or process did you use to engage students in the process?

The next research questions asked how school leaders defined a successful safe school culture. The interview questions asked to address research question 2 were: (g) How do you determine that a school has a successful safe school culture? and (h) How do you evaluate your school culture? The third research question was designed to determine the challenges faced by school leaders in implementing safe school strategies and practices. The 2 interview questions asked to address the third research question were: (i) What have been the challenges to establishing a safe school culture? and (j) Did challenges change the way you originally envisioned implementing a safe school culture? The final research question asked participants for recommendations for sustainability of strategies and practices employed to create a safe school culture. The 2 interview questions used were: (k) What recommendations would you make to a new school leader related to creating a safe school culture? and (l) What process do you engage to ensure sustainability of a safe school culture? In addition to presenting the findings, this chapter also presents demographic information for all participants. Furthermore, an analysis of the data collected according to each of the research questions is presented.

Participants

The recruitment of participants for this study involved a maximum variation selection process to obtain a range of perspectives, experiences, and diversity where

possible including race, gender, and student population served. The recruitment process began with the consideration of K through 12 school leaders listed in the CAIS 2015-2016 Administrators' Membership Directory. Over 300 member schools serve a variety of student demographics listed in the directory from all over the southern California region. All school administrators who held their position for less than 3 years or who held a middle management role such as director or assistant principal were excluded because the research focused on school administrators who were in top leadership positions long enough to impact the school culture. Further exclusion criteria included administrators who were not available for interviews during the data collection period, participants who were unable or unwilling to provide informed consent, or participants who believed that participation in the study would be psychologically or socially harmful. Additionally, the selection process was limited to administrators at schools within a 75-mile radius of Altadena, California to ensure maximum diversity of school leaders and populations served and optimize potential for a face-to-face interview on the participants' campus. Therefore, a total of 20 K through 12 school leaders was considered for this study.

To ensure multiple perspectives, diverse experiences, and maximum variety of participants, the principal investigator selected school leaders from elementary, middle, and high schools whose leadership roles included superintendent, associate superintendent, head of school, and principal. A total of 20 school leaders was identified and selected for recruitment via a telephone call followed by a personal email. Of the 20 school leaders, a total of 15 agreed to participate in the study, yielding an overall response rate of 80%. Two school leaders agreed to be a part of the study, but later

declined due to an illness and a scheduling conflict during the research window provided. Furthermore, three other school leaders did not respond to the invitation.

The sample size determined for the study was 15 participants. This is small enough to ensure the interview content is manageable during data collection and analysis and large enough to provide a diverse range of demographics, perspectives, and experiences. It is important to note that although all participants remained in top leadership positions, five of the 15 school leaders interviewed relocated. One of the participants is currently leading a school in New York, two in Texas, and two in Illinois.

Table 1 shows grade levels of the population the participant served and their leadership roles.

Table 1

Participants in the Study, Grade Levels Served, and Their Respective Roles

Participant	Grade Levels Served	Role
School Leader 1	High School 9-12	Principal
School Leader 2	Elementary /Middle K-8	Head of school
School Leader 3	Elementary K-5	Head of School
School Leader 4	District K-12	Superintendent
School Leader 5	Elementary K-5	Principal
School Leader 6	Middle 6-8	Principal
School Leader 7	Elementary /Middle K-6	Head of School
School Leader 8	Elementary K-5	Principal
School Leader 9	District K-12	Superintendent
School Leader 10	District K-12	Superintendent
School Leader 11	Elementary pre-K-6	Principal
School Leader 12	Elementary pre-K-6	Head of School
School Leader 13	Elementary K-5	Principal
School Leader 14	Middle 6-8	Head of School
School Leader 15	Middle 6-8	Principal

Participant Profiles

Each of the 15 participants was assured that his/her anonymity would be protected. However, all agreed to provide some non-identifiable demographic

information about themselves and the school they serve. What follows is a summary of each school leader's profile listed in numerical order, based on information provided from the ice breaker question on the interview protocol and general demographic information from the school's website.

School leader 1: Principal, high school grades 9-12. School leader 1 began his career in education 17 years ago teaching high school English. There are 2,351 students enrolled at his school, with an average class size of 23 students per class. Twenty-seven percent of the students are classified as low-income and the school has a 95% graduation rate. This principal believes that school leaders should be the experts in establishing a positive school culture and should know that students and staff must feel supported and included in the process of creating a shared vision for a safe school.

School leader 2: Head of school, elementary and middle grades K-8. School leader 2 has been in the field of education for over 30 years. She began her career as an elementary school teacher and eventually became head of a small independent school in southern California. She retired after 20 years, but agreed to serve as an interim head for 2 years so her current school could engage in a thorough national search. The school has an average class size of 16 students in grades K through five and an average class size of 24 students in grades six through eight. The school is faith-based and includes religion and ethics as a part of the curricular offerings for students. This school leader believes in the importance of good communication and inviting other voices into the conversation about safe school culture in order to obtain the best results.

School leader 3: Head of school, elementary grades K-5. School leader 3 has 23 years of experience in the field of education. She has worked as a classroom teacher and a director of lower school, and is in her third year as the head of school. The average class size is 14 students per classroom with approximately 200 students currently enrolled. The commitment to fostering critical thinking skills and the positive interactions between teachers and students are what this school leader values most in her school.

School leader 4: District superintendent, grades K-12. School leader 4 is in her 32nd year in education. She taught for 7 years and has been an administrator for the last 25 years. She is currently serving as a superintendent in a K-12 district. Her work focuses on supporting 12 elementary schools, overseeing elementary teaching and learning, and student achievement. She believes that school safety is about ensuring students are emotionally connected, have healthy relationships with others in the school, have a space for their voices to be heard, and develop skills to resolve conflicts when they arise.

School leader 5: Principal, elementary grades K-5. School leader 5 currently serves as an elementary school principal in a K through 5 building. She began her career as an elementary school teacher, and then went on to become a high school assistant principal before taking time off to raise children. She returned to administration in 2011 and has thoroughly enjoyed supporting teachers, working with families, and creating a positive learning environment for students. There are 416 students enrolled at her school with an average class size of 18 students per classroom. Sixty-nine percent of the students that attend the school are low-income students and 13% are

students with disabilities. This school leader defines a safe school culture by the physical systems that need to be in place for people to go about their business and the social-emotional elements of a school environment.

School leader 6: Principal, middle grades 6-8. School leader 6 has worked as a middle school principal for 18 years. This school serves the most racially and socioeconomically diverse group of students in this study, with 82% of the students listed as low income; 59% of the students are Hispanic, 22% of the students are African American, 10% are White, 6% are Asian, 1% are American Indian, and the remaining 4% are of mixed race. The total enrollment is 500 with a 25:1 adult to child ratio. The participant believes that a safe school culture refers to the physical, social, emotional, and psychological safety of all members of the school community.

School leader 7: Head of school, elementary grades K-6. School leader 7 has accumulated over 20 years of experience in the classroom and as an administrator. There are 187 students currently enrolled in her school with an average class size of 15 students. Unique to this school is the inclusion of children who are deaf and hard of hearing into the regular classroom learning environment. This school leader feels that a safe school is one where children feel free to be themselves, share their thoughts, share their language, and take risks with their learning. She purposely focuses on creating a school environment that is inclusive and where students feel safe to be different.

School leader 8: Principal, elementary grades K-5. School leader 8 has 17 years of experience in both teaching and administration combined. He taught history and language arts in middle school before serving as an assistant principal at the high school level. There are 827 students currently enrolled at his school with an average

class size of 27 students. Twenty-two percent of the students qualify as low-income, 15% are students with disabilities, and 8% are English Language Learners. This leader says that his role is to establish a safe, supportive school culture where children enjoy learning.

School leader 9: District superintendent, grades K-12. School leader 9 began her career in secondary education teaching English. She designed curriculum during the summers for her school district and taught summer school. She later served as a dean, assistant principal, and principal at the middle school level prior to becoming a superintendent. Currently she oversees three middle schools, supervises the director of programming for English Language Learners, and steers the education excellence committee for the community and school district. She believes that creating safe school environments is more important than any other work administrators do because the school's reputation rests on it.

School leader 10: District superintendent, grades K-12. School leader 10 is in her 30th year of service in school administration. She began her career in education teaching high school. Later, she worked as a high school assistant principal and then became principal. Currently, she is the superintendent of schools overseeing two high schools, three middle schools, and 12 elementary schools. This leader defines a safe school culture based on students' outcomes. Student outcomes are measured by academics, discipline, and attendance data, as well as social-emotional standards. She also views school participation of the parents and community as indicators of success.

School leader 11: Principal, elementary grades pre-K-6. School leader 11 has served at the school she founded for 10 years. The school is 94% Latino, 4% African

American, and 2% White; 86% of the students attending qualify for free or reduced lunch. The founder believes that when students are engaged in rigorous curriculum along with direct instruction in social-emotional health, they are more likely to experience academic achievement and success later in life.

School leader 12: Head of school, elementary grades pre-K-6. School leader 12 has over 15 years of experience in administration. Prior to accepting the headship position at her current school, she was a middle school director and director of special projects. She also worked as an associate director of a K-12 program and director of diversity at a middle school. Her current school serves 350 students with an average class size of 23 students. This school leader believes that it is important for schools to be intentional about creating safe spaces where children can thrive and grow because they can be themselves and take risks while learning

School leader 13: Principal, elementary grades K-5. School leader 13 has worked in education administration for over a decade. She has been both a middle and elementary school principal during her tenure. She currently works as an elementary school principal serving 450 students with an average class size of 25 students. This leader believes that a positive school climate begins with the adults. If the teachers are happy and they enjoy coming to school, they will feel ownership, be engaged, and set the tone for the students to do the same.

School leader 14: Head of school, middle grades 6-8. School leader 14 has worked with middle school students for 20 years. She began her career in the classroom and has spent the last 13 years as a middle school head at a prestigious private school. There are approximately 475 students enrolled with 22 students per

classroom. This school leader believes that a safe school culture is a place where kids can be their authentic selves and maximize their interests and gifts.

School leader 15: Principal, middle grades 6-8. School leader 15 has worked as a middle school principal for 6 years. She began her career in education as a classroom teacher and has taught at both the middle and elementary school levels. Her current school serves 200 students, with 97% qualifying as socioeconomically disadvantaged. Despite having a large population of students with limited resources, the school was named a Gold Ribbon School by the California Department of Education. This leader believes that a safe school culture is one in which kids are physically safe and are comfortable with expressing positive and negative thoughts and feelings because they are accepted by staff and other students in the school community.

Data Collection

The data collection process was accomplished through one to one semi-structured interviews conducted by the principal investigator. The interviews were face-to-face whenever possible and ranged from 30 minutes to no longer than 1 hour. The interview protocol (see Appendix C) was reviewed by a panel of experts and then modified based on the feedback and recommendations provided. All 15 participants received a copy of the dissertation abstract, interview protocol, and informed consent (see Appendix B) prior to the scheduled interview.

Five of the interviews were conducted in person on the school leaders' campuses and 10 interviews were conducted over the telephone. All the participants gave the principal investigator permission to record the interview digitally. The principal investigator concluded each interview by thanking the participant for sharing his/her

experience and time, as well as for his/her support. The principal investigator also mailed a handwritten thank you note to each participant with a reminder that a summary of the data's findings would be sent upon completion of the study.

Data Analysis

The principal investigator used a service to obtain an initial transcription of each of the 15 interviews. The transcribed interviews were then reviewed while listening to the recording to ensure accuracy of the document and to gain a deeper understanding of the insights and perspectives shared by the school leaders. Then, the principal investigator prepared a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with two tabs. One tab contained a table for the initial coding of each interview question and a second tab contained a table for major themes that emerged from the initial coding of each interview question. The headings across the top of the first tab were the interview questions. Each interview question heading formed a column that numbered one through 15, representing each interviewee's response. The coded responses were placed under the corresponding column heading in numerical order from one to 15. The Microsoft Excel spreadsheet became the template for the raw data files and served as the master file for each of the raw data transcriptions.

Coding Procedures

After the spreadsheet was prepared, the principal investigator used a multilevel system for coding the data, as recommend by Hahn (2008). Level one was the initial coding or open coding. During this level, the principal investigator reviewed the participants' responses to each interview question to reduce the data into small one to two word themes or categories. These themes were written on the spreadsheet in the

appropriate column under each interview question heading. This process was repeated for each question and each participant's response.

Level two involved focused coding. During this level, the principal investigator sought to reexamine the initial themes created in level one to further develop categories and drill down the data. The primary investigator looked for similarities and differences among comments, narratives, and events for each response to each interview question. Common themes or words that could be grouped together were highlighted. The highlighted words and themes helped the principal investigator visualize emergent patterns and form relationships between frequently repeated words and phrases.

Axial coding or thematic coding was the third level of the multistep process implemented by the principal investigator. The categories formed during level two coding set the stage for refining the themes and a closer examination of previously determined relationships and categories. At this point, the primary investigator stepped away from the research for a week to be able to interpret the data with fresh eyes and further refine the initial codes and categories. After the axial coding process, the primary investigator dropped some themes because they were not indicating a clear and consistent pattern as previously thought. Some codes were relabeled or subsumed by other codes.

The final level in the process required the principal investigator to determine three to four large theoretical concepts that emerged from the axial coding analysis. The theoretical concepts were written under the second tab of the excel spreadsheet. Each interview question was used to create a vertical column with row headings. There were 13 interview questions; therefore, there was one column with 13 rows. Under each

row heading, the primary investigator placed the three to four theoretical concepts that emerged from the final level in the coding process. Next, the primary investigator created column headings with a number to correspond with each interview. There were 15 participants, therefore; there were 15 column headings. The principal investigator wrote the refined code for each participant's response that correlated with the larger theoretical concept derived from the final level of the coding process.

Reliability and Validity

Inter-rater reliability was established using a co-reviewer process. Two co-reviewers individually assessed the primary investigator's coding. The co-reviewers provided recommendations and suggested modifications to help further refine and clarify the primary investigator's themes and key phrases. Consensus was obtained and the principal investigator made the suggested modifications based on the co-reviewers' feedback.

Data Display

The final stage of the data analysis process was to connect the results of the school leaders' collective knowledge, shared experience, and understanding of establishing safe school cultures to the four research questions for this study:

1. What are the strategies and practices employed by school leaders in K through 12 schools in southern California to create a culture of school safety?
2. How do you define a successful safe school culture?
3. What challenges are faced by school leaders in K through 12 schools in southern California in implementing safe school strategies and practices?

4. What recommendations would you make for future sustainability of strategies and practices to create a safe school culture?

A summation of the data analysis is displayed according to the research question and corresponding interview questions from the interview protocol. Participants were assured anonymity, so there is no identifying information connecting the participants with their statements or their school organization.

Research question 1: what are the strategies and practices employed to create a culture of school safety? As previously stated, the following interview questions addressed research question 1:

IQ1: How do you define safe school culture?

IQ2: What are the practices you employ to create a safe school culture?

IQ3: What external or internal resources did you need to facilitate the process of creating a safe school culture?

IQ4: What strategies or process did you use to engage parents?

IQ5: What strategies or process did you use to engage faculty and staff in the process?

IQ6: What strategies or process did you use to engage students in the process?

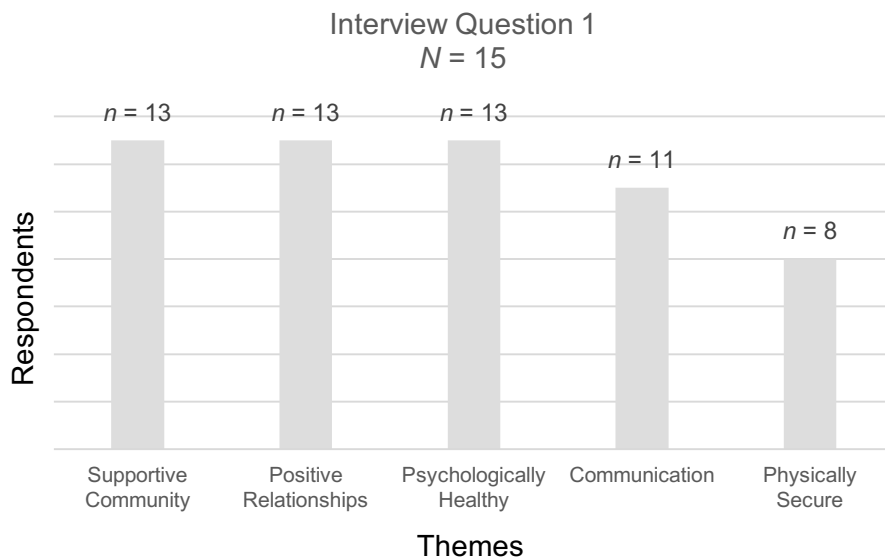


Figure 1. IQ1: How do you define safe school culture?

Interview Question 1: How do you define safe school culture?

Supportive community. The first theme to emerge from the participants' definition of a safe school culture was operating within a supportive school community. The school community includes teachers, parents, other high level administrators, support staff members, and neighbors or civic partners that have an interest in the school's well-being. Essentially, all the individuals that make up the adult school community were included in this definition. Thirteen participants discussed the importance of a supportive school community when defining a safe school culture. P12 described that being part of a community means that the members support one another and suggested school leaders invest the time to create opportunities for gathering as a school community to foster a sense of belonging. Community was mentioned in the discussion with P10 who defined a safe school culture by the "Outcomes of students and participation of the parents and community at the school" (P10, Personal Communication, March 15, 2016).

A supportive community was also viewed as individuals outside of the school who take interest in the school's well-being. For example, P8 articulated that members of the neighborhood surrounding the school would call to inform the participant if something happened in the neighborhood over the weekend or during the evening that may impact the school day. P8 stated, "When community members feel safe enough to talk to an adult in the building when something is going on, you are on the right track" (P8, Personal Communication, March 2, 2016). P3 discussed the value of including the neighborhood community in the establishment of a safe school culture by stating, "Many of us are trying to create safe spaces in unsafe communities with people that are damaged, spooked, and/or resistant. If we are serious about establishing and maintaining safe schools, we must be just as serious about extending this work into the communities that we serve as well. Children that are only safe at school are not safe at all" (P3, Personal Communication, March 1, 2016).

A supportive community that includes the faculty, staff, parents and students at the school as well as the people from the neighborhood surrounding the school is essential to the definition of a safe school culture.

Positive relationships. Building positive relationships was also essential to defining safe school culture. Thirteen participants discussed the importance of relationships related to this discussion. P1 stated that building relationships with parents, teachers and students is the foundation of trust. "Trust builds that safe and secure environment for people to feel like they can take risks..." (P1, Personal Communication, March 1, 2016). P7 said that building relationships and making connections is vital to safe school culture. Teaching the skills needed to build positive

relationships with others were also mentioned in the interviews. P6 suggested that school leaders should provide the tools and skills for having healthy relationships because everyone comes to the learning environment with a different understanding of what a healthy relationship means. This participant further stated, “When teachers and students are able to respect each other, the academic and social emotional curricula flow nicely” (P6, Personal Communication, March 9, 2016).

Psychologically healthy environment. Participants included psychologically healthy environments in their definition of safe school culture. Some of the following terms and phrases were used to describe psychologically healthy environments: safe spaces to talk and share, places where people feel accepted, places where risks can be taken, vulnerable, sharing language, able to bring whole-self to school, comfort, and compassion. P4 said, “Safe school culture is defined as a place where students can feel like they can bring their full self to school no matter what their cultural background, or family background may be. They don’t have to check that at the door, but they can be fully themselves in a school. And we [school leaders] should give them cues that they can do that...” (P4, Personal Communication, March 1, 2016).

P2 also discussed aspects of a psychologically healthy environment. P2 stated that “Safe school culture is one in which a child feels free to be themselves and share their thoughts, their language, and take risks with their learning” (P2, Personal Communication, March 1, 2016). Psychologically healthy environments were also described as schools that are inclusive and diverse. Participants discussed differences in gender identity, sexual orientation, learning styles and abilities, and ethnic diversity as

differences that when respected; promote psychological safety and well-being in the school environment.

Communication. Also, vital to how participants defined a safe school culture is authentic, frequent, and respectful communication. Eleven participants defined a safe school culture by how important information is conveyed in addition to how individuals within the school community communicate with one another. P3 said, "... This definition includes interactions between and among community members off school property, after school hours and in cyberspace" (P3, Personal Communication, March 1, 2016). P7 said, "It is constant communication and real communication with kids and [adults] listening and not just supervising and observing" (P7, Personal Communication, March 7, 2016). P13 described a designated time during the week called community circle. This is a structure where students are taught to communicate both positive and negative thoughts with peers and adults. Safe school culture was also defined by effective written communication. P5 spoke about having open and transparent communication with parents as a method for promoting understanding and engagement. This open and transparent communication is facilitated by a weekly newsletter informing the school community of initiatives and other important happenings. The newsletter is interactive and often has survey questions to gather community feedback. P1 reported, "Communication is seen as a way for people to feel connected to the school which then cycles and becomes a safety net for everybody. The safer you feel the more you trust" (P1, Personal Communication, March 1, 2016).

Physically secure environment. Participants noted both physical and psychological aspects of safe school culture. 8 participants defined safe school culture

in terms of both physical and SEL. P6 stated, “School safety aligns to any aspect of a student or staffs’ well-being. It means ensuring the space is secured as well as a place where teachers can teach and students can learn...” (P6, Personal Communication, March 9, 2016). P9 said, “Safe school culture is defined by physical systems being in place so people can move about the building in a physically safe way...” (P9, Personal Communication, March 13, 2016). P8 suggested that concerns for the physical safety of the building should be shared by parents and students. Their concern is another way to determine safe school culture.

When I look at safe schools, I am looking at the building and facilities and things being nailed and in place. Safe school culture also means that students understand why it’s important for doors to be locked and parents understand why they must get buzzed in and need to stop in the office to get a name badge (P8, Personal Communication, March 2, 2016). Securing the physical environment is an obvious way of ensuring safety. The more difficult task is ensuring the psychological safety of students because the dangers are much less obvious.

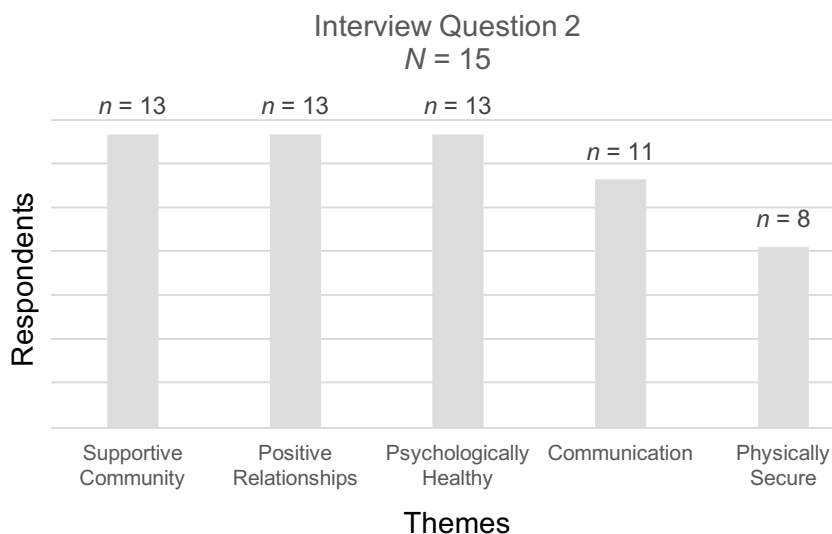


Figure 2. IQ2: What are the practices you employ to create safe school culture?

Interview Question 2: What are the practices you employ to create a safe school culture?

Social – emotional learning program or curriculum. SEL programs were mentioned more frequently than any other practice employed by school leaders to create a safe school culture. There are a variety of SEL programs available depending up the age range and the specific concerns of the school. Participants agreed that the best program is the one that meets the needs of the individual school environment. Thirteen participants mentioned specific programs they are implementing to teach social and emotional skills. P3 uses a program called Positive Behaviors Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and has enlisted the community partnership of the local police department to provide instruction on “cyber safety to students and families to apprise of the dangers of social media, cyber etiquette, and relevant law” (P3, Personal Communication, March 1, 2016). P 10 stated that he has “invested a significant amount of resources with Positive Behavior Facilitation (PBF)” and is requiring all faculty and staff to participate in the training (P10, Personal Communication, March 15, 2016). Several school leaders mentioned using Responsive Classroom curriculum as a school wide approach to teaching content and SEL skills. P7 uses the Responsive Classroom curriculum and stated that “you have to arm kids and adults with tools and strategies to continue to develop social and emotional understanding and this [Responsive Classroom] curriculum provides that” (P7, Personal Communication, March 7, 2016).

Structures, routines and buy-in. Twelve participants discussed various school wide systems, routines and community buy-in as practices that foster safe school culture. Structures, routines and buy-in all relate to having a shared vision, norms, agreed upon common goals and a system for follow up and follow through. P3 stated, We establish and reinforce behavioral expectations by discussing them... To encourage and ensure a focus on positive reinforcement, we have created systems, protocols, schedules and routines for recognizing and celebrating students. However, consistency in this area is an ongoing struggle. To improve these internal processes, I am adjusting the job expectations and priorities of key staff members... (P3, Personal Communication, March 1, 2016).

P9 elaborated on this theme by stating, "...systems and logistics are key for coming up with a campus plan. Then, the structures and routines will complement the plan you have in place" (P9, Personal Communication, March 13, 2016). P10 works collaboratively with the Board of Education to establish goals and communicate expectations to the community. Other structures and routines mentioned that foster buy-in were weekly meetings with faculty and staff, community coffees with parents, and established parent education events. These systems were also used to ensure clear communication with community stakeholders.

Professional development. Professional development was viewed as a vital practice employed by school leaders to create a safe school culture. School leaders believe it is essential to provide training and other professional development opportunities that align with the school's vision for a safe school culture. P10 said, "Professional development addresses the adult mind set and how best to understand

and intervene with children that may be experiencing difficulties” (P10, Personal Communication, March 15, 2016). P2 discussed that all staff is trained in the SEL program used by the school as a contingency for employment. P3 said that professional development and training in school initiatives to promote safe school culture is no longer optional. Professional development was described to ensure that everyone is on the same page and can then be held accountable for implementing the strategies.

Accountability. Participants discussed the value of having methods for monitoring progress or accountability measures in creating safe school culture. P10 stated that he/she have a “solid achievement and assessment framework that clearly communicates learning standards and monitors student performance” (P10, Personal Communication, March 15, 2016). Other accountability measures include teacher professional learning communities (PLC) that require teachers to work in collaborative groups to problem solve issues that impact their grade level team or tackle a school wide concern. P1 suggests that school leaders build the expectation that staff work collaboratively with one another. This is a strategy used to build in peer accountability. P1 believes that teachers will support one another and keep each other accountable if the structure is built into the school culture.

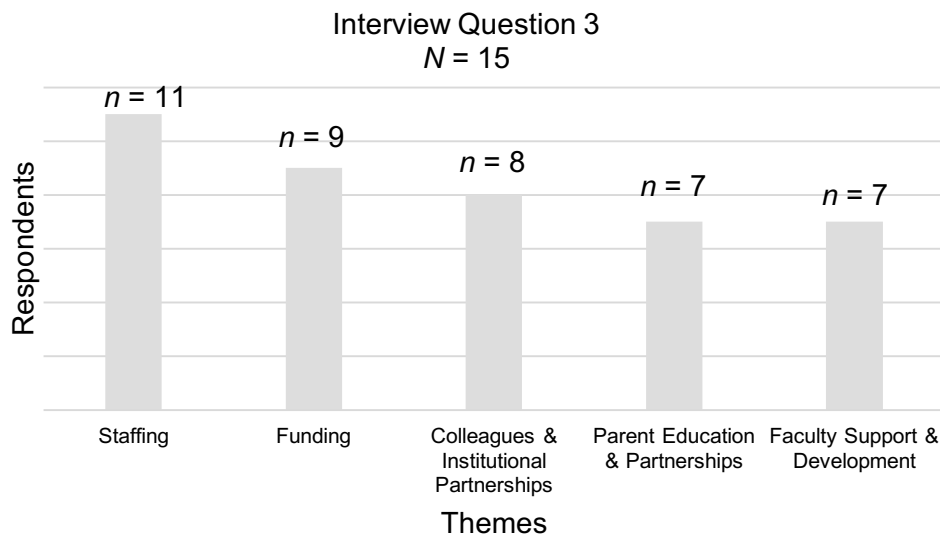


Figure 3. IQ3: What external or internal resources did you need to facilitate the process of creating a safe school culture?

Interview Questions 3: What external or internal resources did you need to facilitate the process of creating a safe school culture?

Staffing. Staffing was an internal resource needed by school leaders in the process of creating a safe school culture. The specific staff needed to facilitate the process was based on the school organization's needs. Some school leaders discussed the need for social workers and counselors to support students with social and emotional disorders. Other leaders discussed supporting teachers with pedagogical practice through academic coaches, or increasing the number of teachers on staff to ensure the appropriate amount of coverage during less structured non-academic periods. The common concept was having the right people at the right time in the right places is a critical internal resource needed to facilitate the process of creating safe school cultures. P11 stated,

I am currently requesting an additional two counselors, right now; our population is 2500 and will increase to 2700 next year. I need the additional staffing to support our growth, to support our model, and support student services (P14, Personal Communication, March 15, 2016).

Funding. Funding was another internal resource that participants believed was necessary to create a safe school culture. Most responses indicated that it required funding to train faculty, purchase curriculum, hire the appropriate staff, and work with consultants to improve practice. P7 said, “when programs prove to be effective and parents get behind them, they can be very persuasive and encourage budgetary decisions about how resource are allocated” (P7, Personal Communication, March 7, 2016). P4 felt the values of the school community are reflected by where money is spent. P4 stated,

It takes funding so we need to find the places in our budget, I’m a believer that when you look at the schools operating budget, it tells a story. And for me, it tells a story of the school’s priorities (P4, Personal Communication, March 1, 2016).

P7 described the need to be creative when finding money to support safe school initiatives, “I have to pull money from something existing so teachers can be trained. I have had to re-prioritize professional development at this school” (P7, Personal Communication, March 7, 2016).

Colleagues and institutional partnerships. School leaders also described the importance of their faculty having opportunities to network with other teachers and build relationships with organizations and institutions that support them in advancing common goals (See Figure 3). P 15 stated:

Reaching out to other schools to find out what has worked and not trying to build from scratch is valuable. Other colleagues can share an effective instructional program, a grant opportunity, ideas for staff development, or helpful and healthy ways to involve parents (P15, Personal Communication, March 24, 2016).

P7 partners with a mental health center to provide additional services for the student support team and give additional suggestions for classroom accommodations.

Partnerships bring valued resources into the school community and are necessary for smaller schools that cannot afford additional services.

Parent education and partnerships. Parent education and partnering with parents were important external resources that participants felt supported them in creating a safe school culture. P3 hosts parent education events to share school initiatives and teach parents the strategies used in the classrooms. P4 stated, “I am in favor of parent education. We have a healthy line item in the budget for it. Especially for this generation of parents” (P4, Personal Communication, March 1, 2016). Most responses indicated the need to partner with parents in their effort to create safe school culture. The partnership is supported by information, education, and communication. P13 stated, “You have to bring parents along. The only way to do that is having a constant dialogue and giving them some resources where they can have an ah-ha moment” (P13, Personal Communication, March 21, 2016). Participants believed that educating parents about school initiatives created and enhanced school-to-home partnerships with parents.

Faculty support and development. Having a supportive faculty and providing professional development was a theme mentioned by 7 participants when describing

external resources needed to create safe school culture. P10 felt that professional development for faculty/staff is critical to addressing adult mind set and understanding how to intervene with children who may be experiencing difficulties, “Adults set the tone for school culture with every interaction” (P10, Personal Communication, March 15, 2016). P4 believes it is important that faculty and staff are all on the same page because they set the school culture. One of the ways mentioned to get faculty on the same page is through providing the resources needed to support their development. Faculty support and development is an external resource that participants found necessary to the process of creating a safe school.

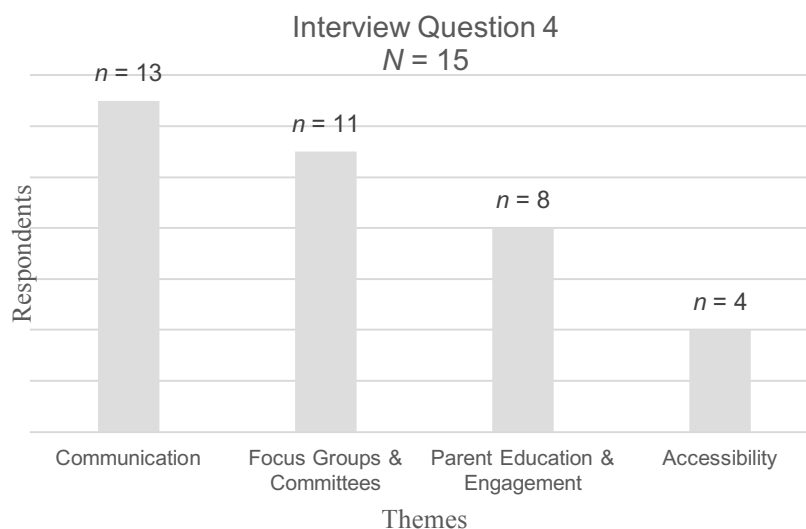


Figure 4. IQ4: What strategies or process did you use to engage parents?

Interview Question 4: What strategies or process did you use to engage parents?

Communication. Communication was a key theme that emerged when discussing strategies for engaging parents in the process of creating a safe school culture. Participants felt it was necessary for parents to be involved in every aspect of the conversation about safe school culture from the selection of the SEL model to the

training, implementation, and assessment of the program. Communicating with parents through formal and informal methods was reiterated by 13 participants (See Figure 4) P12 described hosting a monthly coffee with parents, conducting training sessions, and parent education classes that are related to school initiatives. Furthermore, the participant sends a weekly newsletter, utilizes social media, and looks for opportunities to engage families in the decision-making process when making changes to programs, policies, and practices.

Focus groups and committees. Participants viewed the work of committees and focus groups as critical to engaging the parent community in creating a safe school culture. Committees and focus groups were mentioned by 11 of 15 participants. Committee work is believed to be an effective strategy to support shared ownership and increase parent support. P4 stated, “No one person can do it alone, so we have to have a shared vision and shared ownership. We do this by sharing the work” (P4, Personal Communication, March 1, 2016). Several participants mentioned parent led groups that are active on campus and support school initiatives. P5 has a parent association hosted community coffee on the first Friday of every month. The parent association holds a meeting immediately following the coffee to get updates and reports from other parent committees. P3 stated, “When developing school wide behavior expectations, we engaged a small group of parents that actively participate on our school leadership team” (P3, Personal Communication, March 1, 2016). Parent committees and focus groups help with buy-in and foster trust in the school.

Parent education and engagement. Participants discussed the value parent education courses had in fostering parental engagement in the school community.

Parent education events, town hall sessions, and other informal gatherings helped parents feel connected to the school and served as opportunities for their involvement and feedback. P7 stated, “We have parent meetings in the form of town halls. Parents gather information about initiatives and can volunteer to serve where needed” (P7, Personal Communication, March 7, 2016). P1 stated that she starts early on with family engagement practices. “We build in time for family engagement, we have a social worker that goes into the home to meet all new families and we have library time where parents are invited to check out books with their children” (P1, Personal Communication, March 1, 2016).

Accessibility. Being visible and accessible was another theme to emerge as a strategy to support parent engagement in the school community. P3 believed that parents need to know the school leader and have opportunities to engage with that person both formally and informally. The participant further stated when describing the impact of being more accessible, “Parents have become invested and involved in these efforts and regularly offer to chaperone field trips, dances, and propose additional ways to offer support” (P3, Personal Communication, March 1, 2016). P6 felt that having an open-door policy supported visibility and accessibility and improved parent engagement with the school.

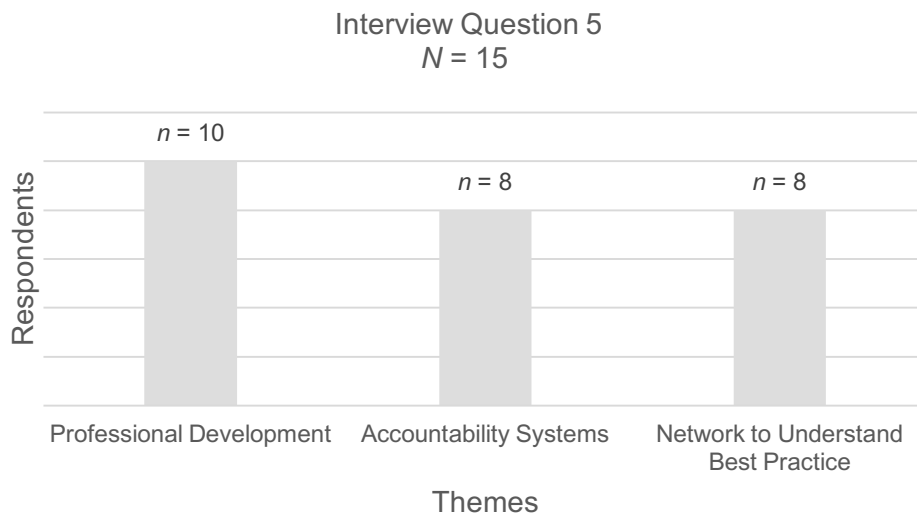


Figure 5. IQ 5: What strategies or process did you use to engage faculty and staff in the process?

Interview Question 5: What strategies or process did you use to engage faculty and staff in the process?

Professional development. Professional development emerged as a theme when participants were asked to discuss strategies used to engage faculty and staff in the process of creating safe schools. 10 out of 15 participants asserted that professional development was an important strategy for faculty and staff engagement as well as holding everyone accountable for their practice related to safe school culture. P9 believed that having the entire faculty trained in the SEL model has improved faculty practice and increased their understanding of program components. P11 discussed using time designated for staff meetings for professional development. Participants felt that professional development also supported buy-in and helped faculty, staff and administration to be on the same page.

Accountability systems. Implementing systems to connect safe school culture initiatives to faculty and staff accountability was a theme that emerged when participants were asked about strategies to engage faculty and staff in the process of establishing a psychologically safe school. Effective progress monitoring and evaluation tools to hold individuals accountable were mentioned by eight of the 15 participants. Participant 8 discussed that accountability systems were embedded in the annual evaluation process and in both formal and informal observations of classroom practice. P8 stated,

To ensure staff participation in our efforts and maintain a positive school environment, I purposefully connect our initiatives to our teacher observation and evaluation process. I have found that holding teachers accountable to clear, concrete, behavioral expectations regarding language and compliance with school-wide protocols has helped improve teacher engagement better than trying to change mind-sets (P8, Personal Communication, March 2, 2016).

Accountability systems were used to hold the entire school community accountable to goals and objectives.

Network to understand best practices. Participants expressed the value of providing opportunities for teachers to network in professional learning groups as a strategy used to engage faculty and staff in creating safe school culture. P1 discussed the work done with staff to help them become familiar with what teachers are doing around the country to have a positive impact on school culture. P3 explained why being in a cohort of people outside the geographic area was crucial because it provided an opportunity to make connections with other professionals. The participant further stated

that having networking opportunities for teachers has been invaluable. P8 stated, “We work with other schools and build relationships. Teachers learn from other teachers and work collaboratively to improve their skills” (P1, Personal Communication, March 2, 2016).

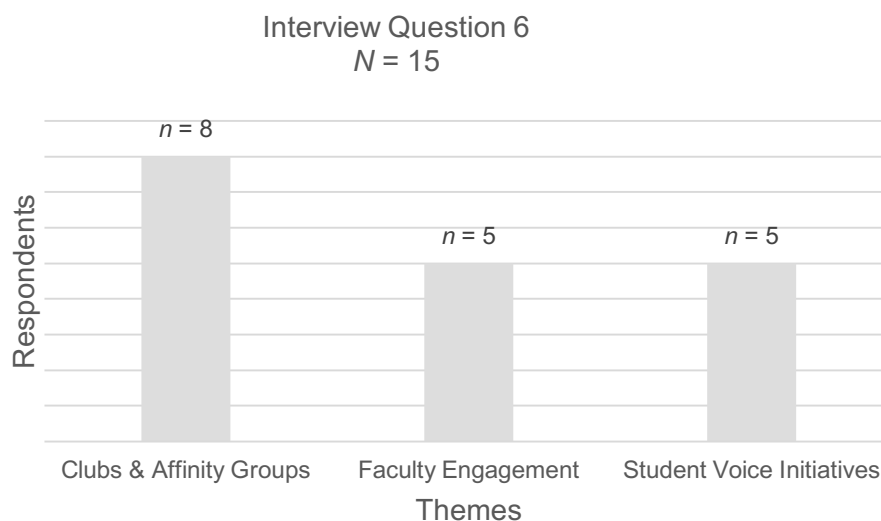


Figure 6. IQ6: What strategies or process did you use to engage students in the process?

Interview Question 6: What strategies or process did you use to engage students in the process?

Clubs and affinity groups. Participants believed that student interest groups and clubs were effective strategies used to engage students in the process of creating safe school culture. Eight out of 15 participants described various student organizations that were active on their campus. The activities sponsored by student groups support connection and a sense of belonging to the school. For example, P3 discussed allowing the student council to have a voice in some decisions while teaching the democratic process. P9 has a host of afterschool programs like chess club, Lego robotics clubs,

and book clubs. The clubs and groups support affective learning and provide opportunities for students to informally interact with faculty and staff.

Faculty engagement. Participants described faculty engagement as a strategy to involve students in the process of creating a safe school culture. For example, participants felt that faculty are the primary source for supporting students by providing direct instruction in social-emotional learning concepts, using SEL language when problem solving with students, and having the appropriate tools for intervening in student behavior. However, it was noted that more work needs to be done to bring students more fully into the process. P6 stated, “The students were a mere afterthought, they were *acted upon* rather than engaged in the planning process” (P6 Personal Communication, March 9, 2016). The participant also expressed that it was a goal to engage students more fully in this work.

Conversations with faculty about how to help students internalize SEL concepts that foster safe school culture were another strategy discussed by participants. P6 said, “The data often provides a platform for conversations about how to support our students and their success” (P6, Personal Communication, March 9, 2016). School leaders need to support faculty with skill building so they feel confident using SEL strategies to engage students.

Student voice initiatives. Student voice initiatives were described as activities such as lunches, round tables, and forums where students had structured opportunities to engage administrators in discussions and share their thoughts, ideas, and solutions for improving school culture and climate. P15 stated, “Student voice is important at the middle and high school level. There are several groups that align to topics of racial

identity, social justice, safe schools, and anti-bullying themes” (P15, Personal Communication, March 24, 2016). Participant 11 discussed providing opportunities for diverse groups of students to participate in team building activities with the faculty. This participant believes that the non-academic nature of the interaction builds relationships and fosters trust.

Research question 1 summary. This research question asked school leaders about the strategies and practices employed to create a safe school culture. Community engagement played a large role in how school leaders are able to set the tone and establish the desired environment. The school community includes parents, faculty and staff, students, and other external partners that support the school in achieving goals and fulfilling its mission. Professional development, parent education, and funding were also essential to creating safe schools. Training for teachers and parents was described as critical to moving the culture forward. Professional development for teachers improved practice and directly impacted student behavior and academic performance. Parent education increased engagement in the school and built trust in the institution. Funding played an important role because programs and training cost money. School leaders believed they needed to be savvy with resources, encourage parents to advocate for effective programs, and prioritize staff development by establishing a healthy line item for it in the school’s budget.

Research question 2: How do you define a successful safe school culture?

The following interview questions addressed research question 2:

IQ7: How do you determine that a school has a successful safe school culture?

IQ8: How do you evaluate your school culture and with what frequency?

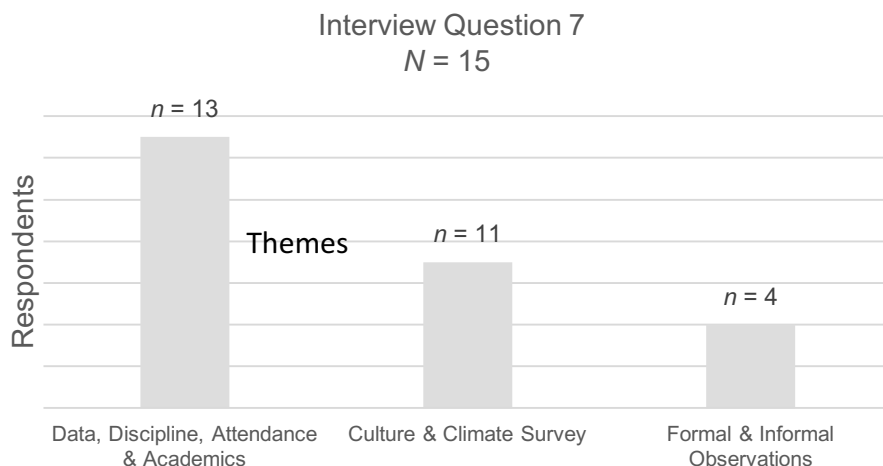


Figure 7. IQ7: How do you determine that a school has a successful safe school culture?

Interview question 7: How do you determine that a school has a successful safe school culture?

Adult and child interactions. When participants were asked how they determine that a school has a successful safe culture, 11 out of 15 described adult and child interactions as an important indicator. Examples like the adult's tone of voice and the use of language were discussed as indicators of a school's climate. Participants indicated that irrespective of the intent for the interaction, praise or punishment, the impact should be instructive and positive leaving the child with his or dignity intact. P6 discussed observing interactions between students and adults in the hallways at arrival, dismissal, during daily transitions, in the cafeteria, and in classrooms every day. Similarly, other participants restated the importance of observing and listening to how community members interact with one another as an indicator of culture.

Discipline, attendance and academic data. Data collection and review was another common concept participants described to indicate a successful school climate. Data points like attendance, academic records, and suspension reports or office referrals provide concrete evidence to substantiate more abstract information gleaned from observing and listening to interactions among community members. P7 stated, “I formally meet with guidance and counseling teams to review discipline data, attendance, and anecdotal information from teachers on a weekly basis” (P7, Personal Communication, March 7, 2016). P10 also discussed meeting monthly with building level teams to review attendance, discipline and academic achievement data.

Welcoming environment. Seven out of 15 participants described subjective indicators of a safe school culture such as a warm and welcoming feeling one has when entering a school organization. P13 said, “The building is warm and welcoming and you are greeted with a smile” (P13, Personal Communication, March 21, 2016). The respondent further stated that observations of how the office staff talks to people, how community members are greeted, and how conflict situations are deescalated serve as litmus tests for a successful safe school culture. Another participant described the role aesthetics plays in creating a welcoming and positive school environment. The participant discussed the cleanliness of the facility and the images displayed on the walls to describe the tangible elements of a warm and welcoming school culture. P6 illustrated,

You begin to see the culture of a school by what is celebrated. What symbols are on the walls? I told my staff that the little things matter. When you walk into our building our goal is to make sure that everyone feels welcome. We do not have a security team at

the front desk. We have a receptionist and a large welcome sign. We have a photo gallery of our heroes hanging in the main entrance (P6, Personal Communication, March 9, 2016).

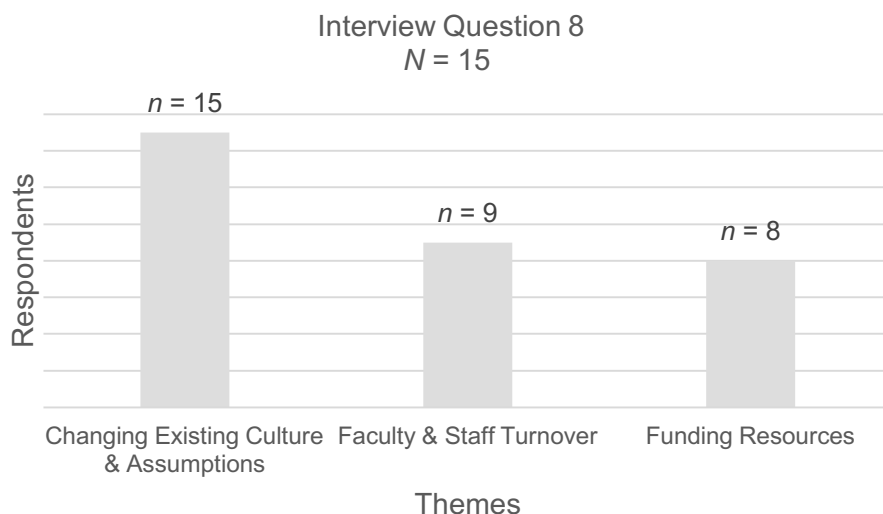


Figure 8. IQ8: How do you evaluate your school culture?

Interview Question 8: How do you evaluate your school culture?

Data, discipline, attendance and academics. Data collection and review was a method used by 13 out of 15 participants to evaluate school culture and climate. The type of data reviewed was attendance, grade reports, and discipline referrals. Some participants held weekly meetings with division heads to review data and others wrote annual or quarterly reports for their governing board or supervising superintendent. P3 stated, “I review discipline data referrals, attendance, anecdotes from teachers and complaints on a weekly basis” P3, Personal Communication, March 1, 2016). Participants suggested that data is crucial for informing goals and measuring the effectiveness of school wide initiatives.

Culture and climate survey. Surveys were used by seven out of 15 participants to evaluate school culture. Respondents discussed that surveys were an effective method for obtaining feedback from their students, parents, and faculty. P10 reviews building level data monthly, which includes attendance, discipline, and academic achievement outcomes and compares the data with climate survey results to determine shifts in culture and climate. The participant stated that survey data on culture and climate are reviewed annually. Therefore, several data points are viewed to create goals and improvement plans. P7 said, “Surveys are huge. We give a bullying survey every year and we partner with a University to facilitate a survey on culture and climate with our parent community” (P7, Personal Communication, March 7, 2016).

Formal and informal observations. Four participants discussed using formal and informal observations to evaluate school culture. A formal observation was defined as scheduled observations of teachers in the classroom. Observations of students during less structured nonacademic times such as recess and lunch were defined as informal. P8 stated, “I like to go where the students are and listen to their conversations. I want to know what they are discussing and how they are talking to one another” (P8, Personal Communication, March 2, 2016).

Research questions 2 summary. The data indicated that participants defined safe school culture by how the people in the school community interact with one another. Tone of voice and strategies used to regulate and deescalate students when they are emotionally upset were critical characteristics of how participants defined a psychologically safe school. Also, relevant to the definition of a safe school culture was the overall school environment. Participants discussed affective characteristics such as

how people are greeted on the phone and in person as indicative to a positive school climate. School climate surveys and data points such as attendance, discipline, and academic data were most frequently used for assessing school climate.

Research question 3: What challenges are faced by school leaders in K through 12 schools in southern California in implementing safe school strategies and practices? The interview questions to address the third research question were:

IQ9: What have been the challenges to establishing a safe school culture?

IQ10: Did challenges change the way you originally envisioned implementing a safe school culture?

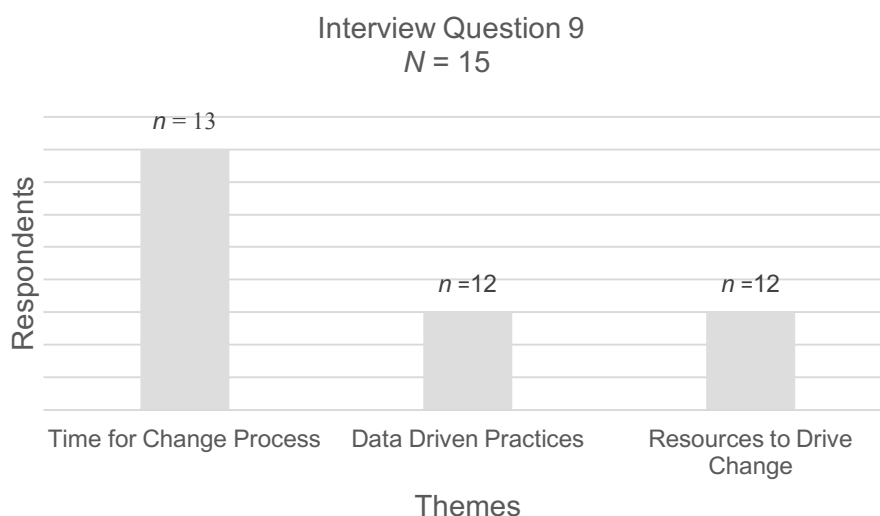


Figure 9. IQ9: What have been the challenges to establishing a safe school culture?

Interview question 9: What have been the challenges to establishing a safe school culture?

Changing existing culture and assumptions. Participants believed that changing existing culture and assumptions was a challenge to establishing a safe school culture. Related to the challenge of changing existing culture and assumptions,

P10 reported that adult mindset has been the biggest obstacle to overcome. P10 further stated that students need to have adults that believe in them and are willing to foster a positive relationship. Likewise, P6 suggested that adult mindset poses a challenge to establishing a safe school culture. The respondent explained that some teachers have low expectations for student behavior and many are intrinsically punitive, with an unwillingness or inability to change.

Faculty and staff turnover. Another challenge to creating a safe school culture described by participants was faculty and staff turnover. Effectively transitioning new hires was crucial for maintaining positive gains, ensuring faculty buy-in, sustainability of programs, and consistency and stability in the school culture and climate. P12 said, “It is necessary to pay attention to staff changes. Successful on boarding of new staff requires administrators to build systems that support collaboration and hold the expectation that members work in teams” (P12, Personal Communication, March 21, 2016). P7 required all new hires to attend a specific training in the use of the school’s SEL model as a condition of employment.

Funding resources. Funding was believed to be a challenge to establishing a safe school culture discussed by eight of the 15 participants. Directing resources to programs, professional development, and acquiring the appropriate staff to support the needs of the school were discussed. P3 stated that finding money sources has become a large part of her responsibilities. Grant writing and fundraising are methods to keep effective programs and initiatives alive. Innovative budgeting, shared resources with other schools and redirecting allocated resources were discussed as strategies to find necessary resources.

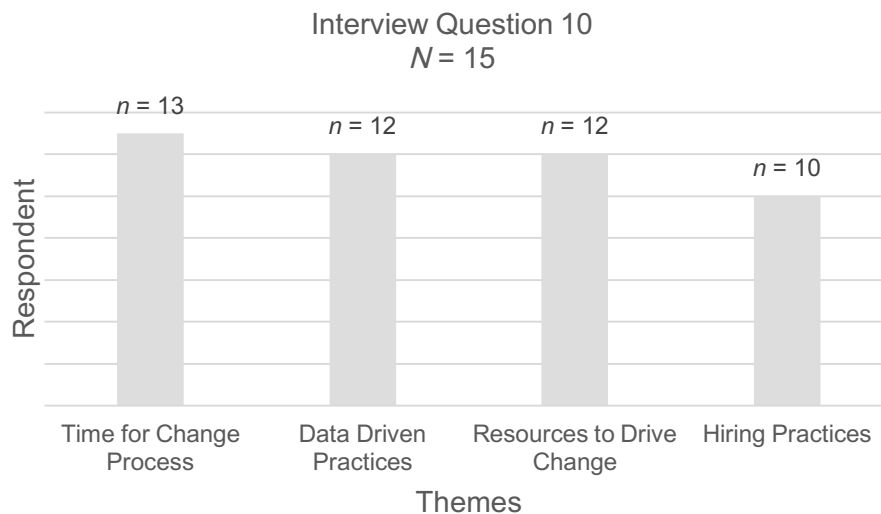


Figure 10. IQ10: Did challenges change the way you originally envisioned implementing a safe school culture?

Interview questions 10: Did challenges change the way you originally envisioned implementing a safe school culture?

Time for change process. Participants believed that allowing time for the change process to unfold was a challenge that changed the way they originally envisioned implementing a safe school culture. All participants described characteristics related to not being in a hurry to produce change, allowing time for change to take place, and trusting the process related to challenges. P4 advised school leaders to be patient with themselves and patient with the process. P12 described the importance of being patient and process oriented. The respondent discussed learning to be strategic about how to move a community forward and remembering that it takes time to impact a school culture. It takes time, programming, training, ongoing dialogue, and courage to make tough decisions. P10 restated the importance of having the right people in front of students in order to make the greatest difference in school culture

Data driven practices. Challenges related to not using data to drive practice changed the way participants envisioned creating a safe school culture. 12 out of 15 participants advised relating school initiatives to measurable goals. Goals that can be measured can be celebrated if achieved or altered if proven ineffective. P11 recommended, “Build your initiatives around systems and structures...” (P11, Personal Communication, March 15, 2016). P7 believes that faculty buy-in comes from sharing data and communicating program effectiveness. This participant also stated that data drives decisions and helps to focus solutions.

Resources to drive change. Participants believed that resource allocation was a challenge to creating a safe school culture that changed the way they originally envisioned implementing change. Professional development related to culture was an essential resource to drive change in schools. P6 felt that training in the selected SEL model was required work for any school. Several participants described the value of having the entire faculty and staff trained in the SEL model and the positive impact on school culture and climate. P5 stated that one puts one’s resources toward what one values. If one values a safe school culture, then one will find a way to fund the program and the training.

Hiring practices. Participants believed that hiring practices were a challenge to creating safe school culture and changed the way they originally envisioned implementing change. Hiring people who are a mission fit for the school was essential to school leaders. Participants recommended that school leaders be intentional and thorough with the hiring process. P2 felt it was important to hire slowly and follow a process to ensure input from others in the school community and thoroughness with

checking references. P10 believed that leaders should hire people who have a heart for the field and understand the full scope of the job. P10 stated, “One ineffective teacher can set a student’s progress back years” (P10, Personal Communication, March 15, 2016).

Research question 3 summary. The data indicated that allowing time for school culture and climate change is a necessary and essential part of the change process. It was important for participants to be patient and work through the change process for changes to be effective and lasting. Creating measurable goals related to school initiatives was also valuable to participants. Data helped to support engagement, buy-in and strategically target solutions. Resources to support school culture and climate were necessary components of the process to establish a safe school. Resources include the appropriate staff and funding for professional development. Finally, hiring people who are a good fit for the school environment and who will support advancing the mission was imperative to creating a safe school culture.

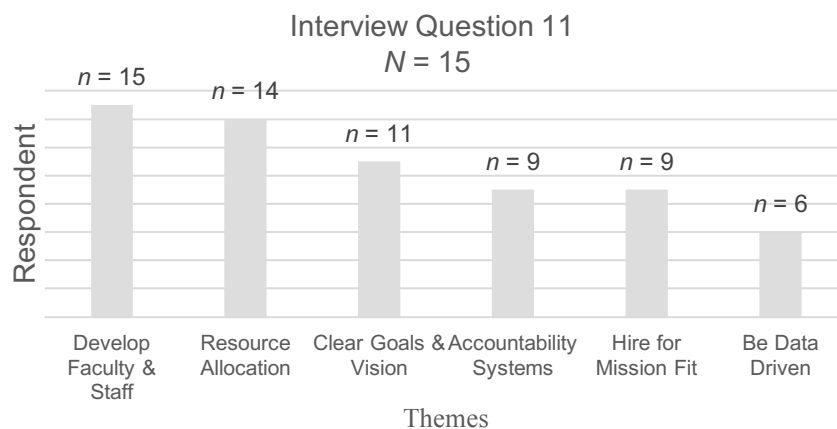


Figure 11. IQ11: What recommendations would you make to a new school leader related to creating a safe school culture?

Interview Question 11: What recommendations would you make to a new school leader related to creating a safe school culture?

Develop faculty and staff. Professional development was recounted as a vital practice employed by school leaders to create a safe school culture when asked about recommendations for school leaders. School leaders believed it was essential to provide training and other professional development opportunities that align with the school's vision for a safe school culture. P2 discussed that all staff was trained in the SEL program used by the school as a contingency for employment. Professional development was described as a method to ensure that everyone is on the same page and can then be held accountable for implementing the strategies.

Resource allocation. Participants recommended new school leaders ensure that the school values a positive culture by allocating resources toward programs and staffing to support initiatives. P4 discussed aligning goals with budgetary line items. Participants also talked about using data to support the mission and vision to foster buy-in, provide accountability, and determine resource allocation.

Clear goals and vision. Having a clear vision and clearly articulated goals was another recommendation from participants for new school leaders. Participant 6 discussed the importance of having a clear vision, pursuing it unapologetically and building initiatives around systems and structures that include accountability. P3 believed that school leaders should pursue their vision wholeheartedly and bring others in the community along through effective communication and data driven practice. P10 felt that clearly articulating expectations allowed for continuous improvement.

Have accountability systems. Participants made statements about giving teachers clear, concrete, observable, measureable, behavioral expectations that are consistently and fairly monitored and provide feedback. Another best practice recommended for new school leaders included holding individuals accountable with effective progress monitoring and evaluation tools. P8 believed that accountability systems should be embedded in the annual evaluation process and are ways to hold the entire school community accountable to goals and objectives.

Hire for mission fit. Participant 10 stressed the importance of hiring the right people, providing them with professional development, and holding them accountable. As previously stated, hiring people who are a mission fit for the school was essential to school leaders. P2 felt it was important to hire slowly and follow a process to ensure input and thoroughness. P10 believed that leaders should hire people who have a heart for the field and understand the full scope of the role and responsibilities of the job.

Be data driven. Participants recommended that new administrators use data to support decisions related to school culture and climate. Participants felt that data removed subjectivity away from decisions about programs, policies and practices. Participant 10 stated, “Leaders should invest time and energy into an evaluation instrument that addresses culture competency and effective instructional practices” (P10, Personal Communication, March 15, 2016).

Research question 3 summary: Recommendations for new school leaders related to establishing safe school culture were to develop faculty and staff, allocate resources to program goals, have clear goals and a vision, create accountability systems, hire for mission fit, and be data driven. Participants believed that professional

development was an essential element to ensuring accountability. Recommendations were made for new school leaders to be clear about their vision for the school and align resources with school initiatives related to creating safe schools. Finally, participants felt that creating measurable goals and reviewing related data should dictate decisions about safe school culture and move programs and people forward.

Research question 4: What recommendations would you make for future sustainability of strategies and practices to create a safe school culture? The

interview questions corresponding with research question four were

IQ12: What process do you engage to ensure sustainability of a safe school culture?

IQ13: Is there anything else you can share about your experience relevant to this study?

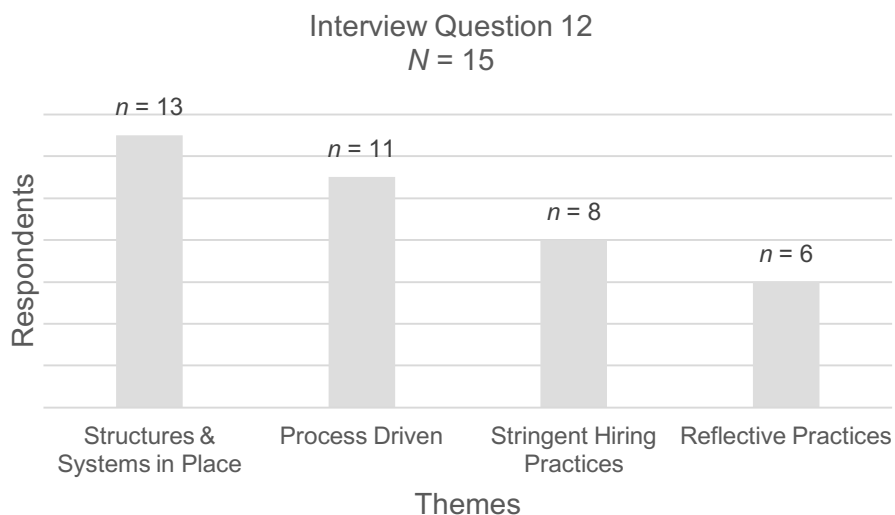


Figure 12. IQ12: what process do you engage to ensure sustainability of a safe school culture?

Interview question12: What process do you engage to ensure sustainability of a safe school culture?

Structures and systems in place. Participants discussed the importance of having structures and systems in place as a process they engaged to ensure sustainability of a safe school culture. Structures and systems were defined as the codified policies, practices, and procedures used by the school to ensure a safe school culture. P6 suggested that sustainability was a result of closely monitoring the systems and structures created to ensure a positive culture and climate. P3 felt that engaging committees to audit work and reflect on practice uncovered vulnerabilities and strengths, which lead to targeted improvements.

Process driven. P3 restated that ensuring that there are clear expectations, effective processes and procedures, and an accountability system allowed for continuous improvement. P4 believed that establishing safe school culture was a process that cannot be implemented in isolation. P4 stated that it takes time to allow the process to work and school leaders should be patient with themselves and with the process.

Reflective practice. P1 described the importance of being reflective and willing to change something that data indicated was not working. Maintaining the vision required committing resources to the process, hiring the right people, professional development, and ongoing dialogue. Data driven decisions meant establishing safe school culture was not about one person but a shared vision that outlasts changes in faculty, staff, and administration. Participants felt that engaging these processes ensured sustainability.

Have stringent hiring practices. Participants believed that hiring the right people was essential to sustaining school culture. Participant 10 stressed the

importance of hiring the right people, providing them with professional development, and holding them accountable. As previously stated, hiring people who were a mission fit for the school was essential to school leaders. P2 felt it was important to hire slowly and follow a process to ensure input and thoroughness.

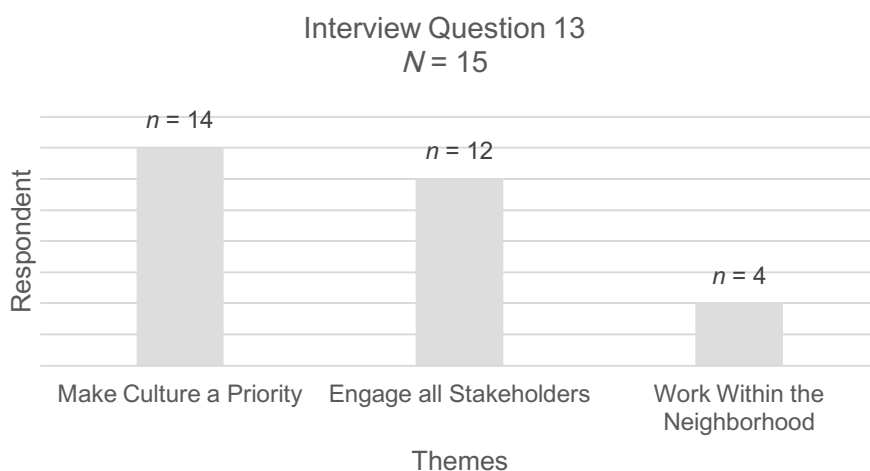


Figure 13. IQ13: Is there anything else you can share about your experience relevant to this study?

Interview question 13: Is there anything else you can share about your experience relevant to this study?

Make culture a priority. Participants believed that school leaders must make school culture a priority over all other roles and responsibilities. P8 said that culture was everything. Participants felt it was vital for schools to have a perception of safety in the eyes of their stakeholders because culture and climate can impact academic achievement.

Engage all stakeholders. Participants felt it was important to work with all stakeholders. P4 suggested engaging stakeholders early on and include them in

conversations to support buy-in. Stakeholders were defined as teachers, parents, students, and other community partners who help the school advance its goals.

Work within the neighborhood. Working within the neighborhood was defined as making home visits and being concerned with issues that take place off campus that may impact school culture. Most of the participants with pre-school programs had structures in place to visit homes regularly. One middle school participant surprisingly stated that if schools are serious about establishing and maintaining safe cultures, then schools must be just as serious about extending that work into the communities that they serve. Children that are only safe at school are not safe at all.

Research Question 4 summary. The data showed that participants reflected on engaging stakeholders, working within the neighborhood and making school culture a priority when asked if there was anything more related to this study they wanted to share. Community partnerships outside of the school were an important theme because partnerships can bring resources to the schools. Engaging stakeholders fostered needed buy-in and built trust and support for school initiatives. Finally, school culture and climate must be a priority for school leaders. Participants believed that culture impacted all other aspects of a school's functioning.

Summary

This study explored the practices employed by K through 12 school leaders to create a culture of school safety and the challenges faced in creating that culture. This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to more fully understand the applied nuances and lived experiences of seasoned school leaders as they effect positive change within a school culture (Creswell, 2003). The recruitment of participants

involved maximum variety selection process to obtain a range of perspectives, experiences and utmost diversity where possible including race, gender, and student population served. A total of 15 K through 12 school leaders participated.

The data collection process was accomplished through one to one semi-structured interviews conducted by the principal investigator. The initial data coding was accomplished by the principal investigator who used a multi-level system for coding recommended for novice coders (Hahn, 2008). The multi-level system included: (a) initial or open coding, (b) focused coding and category development, (c) axial or thematic coding, and (d) theoretical concepts. Results were compiled and inter-rater reliability was established using a two-panel co-reviewer process. The co-reviewers individually assessed the primary investigator's coding. The co-reviewers provided recommendations, and suggested modifications to help further refine and clarify the primary investigators themes and key phrases. Consensus was obtained and the principal investigator made the suggested modifications based on the co-reviewers' feedback. The following chapter reviews the findings of this study, discusses recommendations for future research related to the findings, and provides overall general conclusions.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Safe school cultures are vital to the teaching and learning process, and being an effective leader in K through 12 schools requires the knowledge, skills and disposition to ensure both physical and psychological safety. Shaffer (2014) articulated that students are provided with core academic nourishment in schools, but lack moral fiber, resilience, grit, and the skills to manage emotions, to connect with people, and consequently stand by indifferent to bad behavior. Missing from our educational offerings in schools are the skills to help students be empathic, contentious and connected to the school community.

There are a variety of resources available to guide school leaders in lessening physical vulnerabilities related to school safety, yet there is far more to establishing safe school culture than physically secure facilities. According to Shaffer (2014) 77% of middle school age students reported experiencing instances of verbal abuse at school and 80% reported experiencing abuse through social media. Students are feeling disconnected and disengaged resulting in acts of violence toward themselves and others. Schools need to teach more than core academic content. Shaffer (2014) agrees that schools need to provide children with SEL which includes instruction in life skills that promote self-awareness, healthy relationship skills, methods for connecting and engaging with others and responsible decision making. This study provides a description of the practices utilized by experienced K through 12 school leaders to create safe school cultures recommended by Shaffer (2014) and other researchers in the area of wellness and social emotional learning. Additionally, the results of this study offer strategies and practices for school leaders as they work to establish and

implement school wide systems that promote psychologically safe environments for students. This chapter discusses the conclusions and recommendations of the study. A discussion of the findings, implications for schools, recommendations for future research and overall general conclusions related to the study are also provided. The chapter concludes with final thoughts regarding the study.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to (a) determine the practices employed by school leaders in southern California to create a culture of school safety and the challenges faced by such, (b) identify how a successful safe school culture is defined by school leaders in southern California, and (c) provide recommendations for future sustainability of strategies and best practice. The literature review provided the theoretical underpinnings and conceptual background used to develop the research questions and guide the interview protocol. Qualitative methodology with a phenomenological approach was selected for this study to capture the shared experiences and common practices of K through 12 school leaders to create a safe school culture. To obtain a range of perspectives and experiences, participants were selected based on maximum diversity including age, race, gender, and student population served.

An interview protocol was developed and validity and reliability were established using peer reviewers and a panel of experts. One-to-one semi structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants. Data was analyzed following a multi-level coding process. Results of the coding were reviewed by the primary investigator and Inter-rater reliability was established using a co-reviewer process. Finally, themes were presented in Chapter 4.

Results and Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study are intended to benefit K through 12 school leaders. The following section provides a review of the findings related to practices employed by school leaders to establish a culture of school safety. Following the discussion of practices, challenges faced by school leaders when creating safe school culture and recommendations for sustainability of practices are reviewed. Additionally, key findings are presented followed by implications of the study. Finally, recommendations for future research and final thoughts are offered.

Practices employed by school leaders to create a culture of school safety.

Findings related to practices employed by school leaders to create a culture of school safety support the current state of the research (Adelman & Taylor, 1997; Kadel et al., 1999; Osher et al., 2007; Reeves et al., 2010). Specifically, research on effective school leaders suggests that addressing both the physical and psychological safety needs of students promotes a culture of school safety. Experts in the field recommend that schools develop a comprehensive approach to school safety that combines intervention with prevention strategies. This is accomplished through school wide use of a research based SEL curriculum. It is suggested that schools use data to drive the creation of goals for safe school culture and design an evaluation to foster accountability. Schools should have a shared vision and define how that vision translates into practice for all stakeholders. The process creates systemic change over time and is tailored to the context of the individual school environment.

Practices described by school leaders in this study include a focus on creating both a physically secure and psychologically healthy environment for students. In fact,

one participant said that a safe school culture is as much about ensuring students are emotionally connected, have healthy relationships with others in school, have a space for their voices to be heard, and understand how conflict is resolved as it is about ensuring that the physical space is secure. Six overall themes emerged as important practices to establish a safe school culture: (a) professional development, (b) implementing a social – emotional learning program or curriculum, (c) having clear expectations, structures, routines and accountability systems that promotes buy-in, (d), having a process to create a shared vision, which includes community norms and agreed upon common goals, (e) include student voice initiatives such as lunches, round tables, student council and forums where students have structured opportunities to engage administrators in discussions and share their thoughts, ideas, and solutions for improving school culture and climate, and (f) engage parents and other stakeholders by providing opportunities for dialogue, input, and feedback on all aspects of the school culture.

School leaders also discussed the internal and external resources needed to facilitate the process of creating a safe school culture. The findings included: (a) colleagues and institutional partnerships, (b) instructional programming related to SEL needs (c) funding, (d) parent partnership, and (e) staff development. The findings correlate well with the framework for safe school culture developed by Pollack and Sundermann (2001) which suggests schools partner with the stakeholders in their community to create a comprehensive safe school framework. The principal investigator recommends including an SEL model and training staff to implement it with fidelity as well as partnering with outside agencies to bring in additional resources to the school

community related to developing a safe school culture. It is important that the whole school community define what a safe school culture means so the safe school framework meet the specific needs of the school.

How school leaders define a successful safe school culture. The literature suggests that school leaders broaden the definition of a safe school culture to include social-emotional well-being as well as ensuring the facilities are free from physical hazards (Zins et al., 2004). Evidence from the field supports a definition of a successful school culture as one that includes instruction in a wide range of social and emotional skills that are applicable to daily life. A safe school culture should address affective learning to build attachment to the school and a sense of belonging to the community. Affective learning encourages engagement and participation in the school community as well as nurtures a sense of safety, support and security (Osher et al., 2007; Pollack & Sundermann, 2001; The Urban Education Collaborative, 2010; Zins et al., 2004).

Participants in this study agreed with the literature on the importance of including SEL needs and overall well-being in how they define and evaluate a safe school culture. The following themes emerged from the data describing how the participants determine if a school has a successful safe school culture and how they evaluate the culture: (a) positive relationships, (b) supportive community, (c) physically secure, and (d) a psychologically healthy learning environment that include solid relationships. The results of this study also showed that school leaders evaluate successful school environments by the following themes: (e) observing adult and child interactions, (f) reviewing data related to attendance, discipline, and academic achievement, and (g) engaging practices that foster a welcoming atmosphere. Culture and climate surveys were most

frequently used by schools to elicit annual community feedback. Community involvement, parent participation and observations of how children treat one another during less structured non-instructional times such as lunch, transitions, and recess were also mentioned as additional indicators used to evaluate school culture.

Challenges faced by school leaders when creating a safe school culture.

The literature indicated that three factors consistently contribute to safe school cultures that foster resilience and successful student achievement (a) parental and or community involvement and expectations; (b) individual attitudes about schooling and peer group affiliation, and (c) school practices including teacher pedagogy and SEL curriculum that fosters a growth mindset, resiliency and grit (Duckworth, 2006, Dweck, 2006; Goleman, 2006; Kadel et al., 1999; Ogbu, 2002). These factors can also present challenges to establishing school environments that cultivate psychological safety. For example, parental involvement is positive unless it becomes over involvement or over parenting, which has significant long term negative implications for the mental health and well being of children (Marano, 2014). If students don't find a healthy peer group affiliation or struggle with building and maintaining positive relationships with peers, they can adopt an attitude of indifference which has a significant influence on educational outcomes and student achievement (Kaufman & Chen, 2001). Teacher practices also have significant and long term implications for school culture and climate if they are ineffective, punitive, or resist instructional practices that promote safe learning environments. Interestingly, when participants were asked about challenges to establishing a safe school culture, over-parenting and individual attitudes about school did not emerge as themes. The themes that emerged focused on specific factors that

impact the day to day operations of the school organization such as: faculty and staff turnover, resources, and changing existing culture and assumptions. The challenge of changing existing culture and assumptions directly relates to teacher pedagogy and curriculum as well as parent and community involvement and expectations.

Participants' made statements related to teacher performance, attitudes, and adult mindset defined by Dweck (2006) as challenges to establishing safe school cultures. Participants reported that changing adult mindset was one of the biggest obstacles to overcome. Students need adults that believe in them and are willing to foster a positive relationship at school and at home. It was also suggested that adult mindset poses a challenge to establishing a safe school culture because some teachers are punitive and are not willing to change their perspective. Transitioning new hires was a theme that emerged from this research, but is not included in the literature. Participants believe it is important to pay attention to hiring practices and how new hires are brought on to maintain positive gains, ensure faculty buy in, sustainability of programs, and develop consistency and stability in the school culture and climate.

It is important to note how challenges faced changed the way participants originally envisioned implementing a safe school culture. The following themes emerged from the discourse: hiring practices, resources to drive change, data driven practice and taking time for the change process. Participants described the importance of being patient and process oriented. The respondents discussed learning to be strategic about how to move a community forward and remembering that it takes time to impact a school culture. It was reiterated in the data that it takes time, programming, training, ongoing dialogue and courage to make tough decisions. Several participants described

the value of having the entire faculty and staff trained in the SEL model and the positive impact on school culture and climate.

Recommendations for sustaining a safe school culture. Pollack and Sundermann (2001) suggested that schools create a safe school framework that is comprehensive and involves the entire school community. They believe a comprehensive approach to creating a safe school culture improves learning, behavior, and resource allocation. A deliberate focus on creating a framework to emphasize a safe school design should be coordinated, sustainable, and systemic with an evaluative component.

The research suggests that a safe school framework be individualized and meet the individual needs of the school environment to be sustainable (Osher, et al., 2007; Pollack & Sundermann, 2001; Zins et al., 2004). The themes that surfaced related to the process participants recommended to ensure sustainability of a safe school culture aligned with the literature: (a) be reflective, (b) be process driven, (c) have structures and systems in place, (d) have stringent hiring practices (e) make culture a priority, and (f) engage all stakeholders. Related to being reflective, the participants suggested that school leaders engage committees to assess and reflect on practice to uncover vulnerabilities and strengths, which leads to targeted improvements. The importance of being reflective and willing to change something that data indicates is not working was stressed by several participants. Being process driven and having structures and systems in place is a result of closely monitoring the systems and structures created to ensure a positive culture and climate. Ensuring there are clear expectations, effective processes, procedures and an accountability system allows for continuous

improvement. Making culture a priority requires committing resources to the process, hiring the right people, professional development and ongoing dialogue. Engaging these processes ensures sustainability.

It is worth restating the theme that emerged from asking participants to share anything else about their experience relevant to this study. The common characteristic was that children deserve and require our attention to their physical and psychological safety as we govern school environments. One participant stated that it is our job as educators to create spaces that honor childhood. In a society where children are criminalized and asked to grow up way too fast, schools must prioritize establishing a culture and climate where kids can be kids.

Key Findings

Neuroscience is the cornerstone of establishing safe school culture.

Neuroscience teaches that repeated experiences over time changes the brain (Goleman, 2004). Research in the neuroscience of social emotional learning confirms that behavior interventions change the brain's function and can produce changes to cognitive and emotional functioning. Brains of children from preschool age through adolescence are constantly being shaped by their experiences particularly by factors in affective environments such as home and school (Cozolino, 2011; Davidson, 2010). Schools can be intentional about promoting positive brain changes and cultivating healthy social and emotional habits. Davidson (2010) puts forward that all behavior interventions are biological in that they produce changes in brain functioning. Furthermore, "behavior interventions can produce more specific brain changes than medication because behavior interventions have the capacity to affect highly specific

brain circuitry in ways that modern medicine cannot” (p.14). This research suggests that social emotional learning is the cornerstone to establishing safe school cultures.

Establishing safe school cultures requires regularly teaching social emotional learning skills over time in a systematic way with the same frequency that core academic subjects are taught (Goleman, 2004; Zins et al., 2004; Polack & Sundermann, 2000). It is the responsibility of the school leader to value and prioritize a psychologically safe learning environment.

Therapeutic response versus punitive action. Child and adolescent antisocial behaviors in the school environment are habitually met with derision from adults. Parents and educators frequently demand schools address these behaviors with immediate punitive action and policies that exclude, criminalize or expel students from the learning community. Educators and school administrators are urged to be aware that modern threats within the school setting (e.g., harassment, micro-aggression, cyber-bullying, parental and academic demands), and other acts of psychological violence trigger the same neurological response as if they experienced a physical threat (Roberts, 2015). Thus, schools are advised to expect that many students will arrive in states of hypo-arousal. These students may be disruptive; they may also seem internally distracted or disengaged. These students are not able to learn in this state and the school’s response should be therapeutic rather than punitive. A therapeutic response requires the schools to engage in psychologically safe school practices that teach skills in self-regulation and mindfulness. Providing direct instruction in mindfulness and other SEL skills in addition to academic skills is not only an effective

proactive strategy to prevent hidden violence in schools, but also helps promote the children's physical and psychological well-being (Steinberg, 2015).

Social emotional learning programs are essential to a safe school framework. Steinberg (2015) believes schools should incorporate social and emotional learning into the curriculum to build emotional intelligence. SEL programs address academic and pro-social behaviors simultaneously and foster social skills that lead to improved scholastic performance and increase psychological safety in the school environment (Zins et al., 2004). There is a direct connection between evidenced-based SEL programs and school success. SEL interventions that are comprehensive, consistent, systemic, and designed with a developmentally appropriate scope and sequence are found to have the greatest impact on school culture and academic achievement (Steinberg, 2015).

Many of the SEL programs were initially designed to decrease behavior problems (e.g., impulsiveness and aggression) in troubled youth. However, they have been effective in improving self-regulation in children that do not struggle with such problems (Steinberg, 2015). Successful SEL programs are holistic integrated approaches that address academic and pro-social behaviors that foster social skills and attitudes that lead to improved scholastic performance and increase psychological safety in the school environment. (Zins et al., 2004). Strong academic outcomes are achieved by integrating high behavioral standards and high academic expectations with the same levels of support from faculty, staff and administration (Osher et al., 2007). Successful schools enhance social, emotional, and academic achievement through supports provided to children and adults to help them realize the expectations for the conditions

for learning. Effective schools have a culture that supports the conditions for learning through the values, norms, traditions, and beliefs that create the cumulative daily experience of the members of the school community (Osher et al., 2007). Establishing a safe school culture contributes to successful and effective learning environments.

Establishing a safe school culture requires a planning framework.

Ultimately, the responsibility lies with school leaders to prioritize school safety and develop a framework that meets the identified needs of the school. Research shows that a comprehensive approach to establishing a safe school culture is critical to successful and sustainable interventions (Thomerson, 2000; Zins et al., 2004; Pollack & Sundermann, 2001). Safe school cultures attend to the physical and social-emotional needs of students, thus allowing them to reach their full human potential. Building learning environments to improve the quality of education for all children requires schools to implement interventions that place an equal value on building social-emotional skills with the same rigor as core content (Thompson, 2011; Reeves, Kanan, & Plog, 2010). Effective safe school frameworks include 8 core structures: (a) identify needs and review a research based SEL program, (b) develop school and community partnerships, (c) conduct a needs assessment to ascertain problems, identify existing efforts and make data driven decisions to drive change, (d) develop a plan based on the challenges that have been identified through the needs assessment, (e) prioritize problems ,create measureable goals and objectives, identify strategies and implement programs address the goals and objectives, (f) SEL program components should provide instruction in a wide range of social and emotional skills that are applicable to daily life, (g) the program should also address affective learning to build attachment to

the school community and (h) conduct an evaluation of the determined program components with the goal of informing the school about what is working and what is not working. (Urban Education Collaborative, 2010; Osher, et al., 2007; Pollack & Sundermann, 2001; Zins et al., 2004).

Implications of the Study

The purpose of this study was to have a conversation with experienced school leaders to determine (a) the practices employed to create a culture of school safety and the challenges faced, (b) how a successful safe school culture is defined by school leaders and (c) recommendations for future sustainability of strategies and best practice. Implications of this study for practice provide school leaders with a framework or building blocks for a safe school culture. The first practical contribution of the present research is schools should create practices and procedures that are developmentally appropriate and responsive to what we now know about the brain. Siegel (2012) presented the case for schools to embrace the wisdom of neuroscience and provide education practices that promote self-regulation through mindfulness and neural integration. We understand that the brain can be changed by repeated experiences over time and that behavior interventions produce changes in the brain's functioning (Davidson, 2010). Schools can be intentional about promoting positive behavior changes and cultivating healthy social and emotional habits by direct daily instruction in social emotional learning standards. Steinberg (2015) suggested incorporating brain development into the curriculum and parent education programs. He further noted that parents and children find the information fascinating, and with this knowledge, parents can be better parents and interact more intelligently with their children. Professional

development covering brain science, emotional intelligence, and SEL are cornerstones to any approach to establishing a psychologically safe environment.

As previously stated, social emotional learning is the cornerstone of a safe school culture framework. Steinberg (2015) believes schools should incorporate social and emotional learning into the curriculum to build emotional intelligence. Practices described by school leaders in this study include a focus on creating both a physically secure and psychologically healthy environment for students. The six overall themes that emerged from the research as important practices to establish a safe school culture correlate with the core components of building a framework for a safe school culture (a) professional development, (b) implementing a social – emotional learning program or curriculum, (c) having clear expectations, structures, routines and accountability systems that promotes buy in, (d) having a process to create a shared vision, which includes community norms and agreed upon common goals, (e) include student voice initiatives such as lunches, round tables, student council and forums where students have structured opportunities to engage administrators in discussions and share their thoughts, ideas, and solutions for improving school culture and climate, and (f) engage parents and other stakeholders by providing opportunities for dialogue, input, and feedback on all aspects of the school culture. Social emotional learning standards should be incorporated into the curriculum and taught and assessed with the same frequency and rigor as other core content. It is important that teachers are trained and provided ongoing professional development in the neuroscience of education and whatever research based SEL model the school elects. Parents need to be brought along and provided salient information about developmentally appropriate practices with

children and how SEL standards are taught reinforced and assessed. Parents must be partners with the school in this endeavor.

This research also has implications for schools when planning curriculum and looking at pedagogic practice. One of themes directly relates to teacher pedagogy and curriculum. Participants' made statements related to teacher performance, attitudes, and adult mindset specifically. School leaders reported that changing adult mindset is one of the biggest obstacles. Participants reiterated that it takes time, programming, training, ongoing dialogue and courage to make tough decisions. Several participants described the value of having the entire faculty and staff trained in the SEL model and the positive impact on teaching and learning as well as school culture and climate.

This study not only provides the structure for creating a framework for safe school culture, it also presents research on why a SEL curriculum is critical to establishing psychologically safe spaces for children. Research shows that a comprehensive approach to establishing a safe school culture is critical to successful and sustainable interventions (Thomerson, 2000; Zins et al., 2004; Pollack & Sundermann, 2001). SEL programs provide teachers and students tools for building emotional intelligence which also increases the capacity for academic achievement. A safe school framework is tailored to meet the individual needs of the school community, and is process and data driven to support sustainability and continual improvement. A safe school framework grows and changes along with the school. It should have goals attached that are reviewed annually to support schools as they respond to students needs and make critical decisions about curriculum design and pedagogic practice

Recommendations for Future Research

This research focused on exploring the practice of K through 12 school leaders in southern California to establish safe school culture. Culture and climate in schools are multi-faceted because they are unique due to human dynamics that exist within each school organization. The effectiveness of intervention and prevention strategies varies depending on the individual needs of the school community. The following recommendations for future research should be explored.

Safe School Culture Assessment and Evaluation

There are very few resources for school leader's related to evaluation and assessment of school culture and climate. When school leaders were asked about the metrics used to evaluate school culture, only a few tools specific to culture and climate were mentioned. Culture assessments are important to the effectiveness of organizations (Reynolds, 2015). School leaders would benefit from further study of school culture assessments that provides feedback to measure the effectiveness of the school's SEL programs, the overall school climate, and combined data sources used by school leaders.

Brain Based Teaching and Learning

School leaders can benefit from understanding the brain and the neuroscience of learning. Neuroscience teaches that repeated experiences over time changes the brain (Goleman, 2004). Schools have a lot of power and influence over children's brain development because children spend so much time in school. The influence of the school's teaching practice on children's brain development is undeniable (Bryson & Siegel, 2011). Research that explores practical application of brain based research in teaching methodology, school master schedule planning, and developmentally

appropriate practice aligned to content standards would serve to improve the quality of school culture and climate as well as academic outcomes.

Expand the Conversation

This research focused on 15 school leaders in southern California. This study could be replicated in other geographic areas so the collective weight of the evidence can be more compelling. A recommendation for future research is to engage school leaders in a national conversation about strategies and practices for establishing safe school culture. A larger geographic area will add to the collective knowledge and pool of strategies and resources for creating psychologically safe spaces for children. In fact, the USDE (2015) invited school leaders to join a national conversation on school culture and climate. There is need for additional research on providing safe school culture.

Final Thoughts

School leaders are responsible for creating an environment that reflects a commitment to physical and psychological safety as well as academic rigor. It is expected that schools are places that challenge, extend and enhance a child's capacity to learn. We now understand that it is equally important to ensure that schools foster a child's capacity to build healthy relationships, self-regulate, engage in positive decision making practices, and develop empathy toward others. Researchers in the fields of neuroscience, behavior, and psychology have warned us that we have created a generation of victims who lack the basic skills to cope with life's ever present challenges in healthy and rational ways. Our children are reduced to violence, somatic disorders, and psychotropic drug use as coping mechanisms instead of being resilient and gritty in the face of difficulties (LeVine, 2006; Lythcott, 2005; and Luthar, 2003). Neuroscience

research and cognitive psychology arm school leaders with the tools to transform schools into places that develop these skills from early childhood and throughout adolescence in the same way we develop cognitive skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics.

School leaders are better able to accomplish their education mission when they integrate social and emotional learning along with academic competencies. Social and emotional learning influences have a critical role in bettering academic performance and improving attitudes about learning. The attributes of effective schools have been widely researched. The number one attribute is safety (Lezotte & Snyder 2010). All the participants in this study cared deeply about their schools and work toward creating environments where children thrive and reach their full potential. Creating learning environments that allow children to reach their full potential requires that schools implement interventions that focus on social-emotional skills as well as core content (Thompson, 2011).

Social and emotional learning is more than an elementary curriculum or approach to fostering strength and understanding in how to cope with life. Social and emotional learning is a mental health and wellness movement that is spreading beyond the doors of K through 12 schools. The skills taught through social and emotional learning can be found in colleges, universities and even in the corporate world. Researchers are engaged in robust discussions about improving competence in adult emotional intelligence in the workplace and exploring the politics of emotional intelligence within organizations (Fineman, 2009). Learning and practicing to express empathy and how to respectfully disagree with one another is a skill set that can benefit

children and adults alike. The brain is a social organ that seeks connections to learn and school leaders must capitalize on that fact. Learning is a social process involving the brain that takes place in collaboration with others and schools have the capacity to fundamentally change the way the brain functions (Cozolino, 2014; Hippel, 2014; Seigal, 2012; Zins et. al., 2004). Social and emotional dynamics can hamper or facilitate learning and dictate positive or negative outcomes for students. Growing conventional wisdom presents the case for schools to embrace the wisdom of neuroscience and provide education practices that promote self-regulation through mindfulness and social emotional learning. Mindfulness skills that are taught in conjunction with most social and emotional learning programs supports children's ability to reflect, name, understand, and manage their feelings. When an individual understands, and can manage their own feelings, they are better able to understand the feelings of others. Empathetic individuals have healthier relationships which is the basis of emotional and social intelligence (Seigal, 2012).

Research suggests that the number one factor of well-being and mental health is positive relationships and healthy connections to other people. High test scores and stellar grades are no longer the sole indicators of future success. We now know that emotional intelligence and the ability to bounce back in the face of difficulty is a far better predictor of achievement (Lythcott, 2015). The ability to self-regulate, empathize with others, and build positive relationships are skills that can be taught and developed. People thrive in every aspect of their life when they have healthy relationships, as well as kindness and compassion for oneself and others. Because of the benefits of mindfulness and social and emotional learning programs, schools are advised to begin

teaching children how to be reflective, and how to build empathy and resilience beginning in kindergarten and throughout their high school education (LeVine, 2006). School leaders have a responsibility to embrace the full power and purpose for education. Establishing safe school cultures is far too great of a responsibility to ignore the social and emotional learning dynamic. Our job as K through 12 school leaders is to cultivate school environments that allow young people to develop into fully competent and completely equipped adults who have the capacity and skills to cope in a world that is rapidly changing. The school's role in building a child's capacity to cope with failure and disappointment is critical. School leaders have an opportunity to make lasting and meaningful change in student behavior through social and emotional learning. Mandela (1993) stated that "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." If school leaders get it right, they can in fact change the world.

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APPENDIX A

CITI Participation Certificate

COLLABORATIVE INSTITUTIONAL TRAINING INITIATIVE (CITI PROGRAM)
COURSEWORK REQUIREMENTS REPORT*

* NOTE: Scores on this Requirements Report reflect quiz completions at the time all requirements for the course were met. See list below for details. See separate Transcript Report for more recent quiz scores, including those on optional (supplemental) course elements.

- Name:
- Email:
- Institution Affiliation:
- Institution Unit:
- Phone:

- Curriculum Group: GSEP Education Division
- Course Learner Group: GSEP Education Division - Social-Behavioral-Educational (SBE)
- Stage: Stage 1 - Basic Course

- Report ID: 18594895
- Completion Date: 02/02/2016
- Expiration Date: 01/31/2021
- Minimum Passing: 80
- Reported Score*: 97

REQUIRED AND ELECTIVE MODULES ONLY	DATE COMPLETED	SCORE
Belmont Report and CITI Course Introduction (ID: 1127)	02/02/16	2/3 (67%)
History and Ethical Principles - SBE (ID: 490)	02/02/16	5/5 (100%)
Defining Research with Human Subjects - SBE (ID: 491)	02/02/16	5/5 (100%)
The Federal Regulations - SBE (ID: 502)	02/02/16	5/5 (100%)
Assessing Risk - SBE (ID: 503)	02/02/16	5/5 (100%)
Informed Consent - SBE (ID: 504)	02/02/16	5/5 (100%)
Privacy and Confidentiality - SBE (ID: 505)	02/02/16	5/5 (100%)

For this Report to be valid, the learner identified above must have had a valid affiliation with the CITI Program subscribing institution identified above or have been a paid Independent Learner.

CITI Program
 Email: citisupport@miami.edu
 Phone: 305-243-7970
 Web: <https://www.citiprogram.org>

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY**INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES****Establishing a Safe School Culture: An Examination of Current Practices in K through 12 Leadership**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Zanita V. Kelly Gwin, B.S. Ed., M.Ed., under the guidance of Faculty Committee Farzin Madjidi, Ph.D., Lani Fraizer, Ed.D. and Gabriella Miramontes, Ed. D. at Pepperdine University, because you are a K through 12 school administrators with a minimum of three years experience in leadership. Your participation is voluntary. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything that you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. Please take as much time as you need to read the consent form. You may also decide to discuss participation with your family or friends. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form. You will also be given a copy of this form for you records.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to determine the practices used by school leaders to create a culture of school safety and challenges faced by such. The study also identifies how successful safe school culture is defined by school leaders and provides recommendations for future sustainability of strategies and practices.

STUDY PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to...

- 1. Participate in an hour long conversation to learn about the practices you engage to create a safe school environment.**
- 2. Agree to a voice recording of our conversation**
- 3. Review the written transcript of our conversation**
- 4. Provide critical feedback or approval of the transcript**

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There is no anticipated risks associate with your participation

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

While there are no direct benefits to the study participants, there are several anticipated benefits to society which include:

There are no anticipated benefits to the participant. However, the anticipated societal benefits associated with the findings of this study are the compilation of best practices employed by school leaders in southern California to create a culture of school safety; how to overcome challenges to the process; and recommendations for future sustainability of strategies and practices. This research is significant in that it provides K through 12 school leaders in southern California with best practice strategies in establishing a safe school culture that addresses the physical and social-emotional needs of their students. Furthermore, it contributes to the burgeoning research in the field of wellness and psychological safety for children.

CONFIDENTIALITY

I will keep your records for this study anonymous as far as permitted by law. However, if I am required to do so by law, I may be required to disclose information collected about you. Examples of the types of issues that would require me to break confidentiality are if you tell me about instances of child abuse and elder abuse. Pepperdine's University's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) may also access the data collected. The HSPP occasionally reviews and monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects. I will refer to you only by a pseudonym for from a generic school organization. Your identity and the name of your organization will be kept anonymous at all times and in all circumstances. There will be no identifiable information obtained in connection with this study. Your name, address or other identifiable information will not be collected.

The interview will be recorded for the purpose of creating a transcription of our conversation. Your responses will be coded with a pseudonym and transcript data will be maintained separately. The audio-tapes will be destroyed once they have been transcribed.

The data will be stored on a password protected computer in the researcher's office for three years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

ALTERNATIVES TO FULL PARTICIPATION

The alternative to participation in the study is not participating or completing only the items which you feel comfortable.

Your alternative is to not participate. Your relationship with your employer will not be affected whether you participate or not in this study.

EMERGENCY CARE AND COMPENSATION FOR INJURY

If you are injured as a direct result of research procedures you will receive medical treatment; however, you or your insurance will be responsible for the cost. Pepperdine University does not provide any monetary compensation for injury

INVESTIGATOR'S CONTACT INFORMATION

I understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described. I understand that I may contact Zanita V. Kelly – Gwin at [REDACTED] or Lani Frazier at [REDACTED] if I have any other questions or concerns about this research.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant or research in general please contact Dr. Judy Ho, Chairperson of the Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board at Pepperdine University 6100 Center Drive Suite 500 Los Angeles, CA 90045, 310-568-5753 or gpsirb@pepperdine.edu.

APPENDIX C

Research Questions and Interview Protocol

Table C1

Research Questions and Interview Protocol

Research Questions	Possible interview questions
RQ1: What are the strategies and practices employed by school leaders in K through 12 schools in southern California to create a culture of school safety?	<p>How do you define a safe school culture?</p> <p>What are the practices you employ to create a safe school culture?</p> <p>What external or internal resources did you need to facilitate the process of creating a safe school culture?</p> <p>What strategies or process did you use to engage parents in the process of establishing a safe school culture?</p> <p>What strategies or process did you use to engage faculty and staff in the process of establishing a safe school culture?</p> <p>What strategies or process did you use to engage students in the process of establishing a safe school culture?</p>
RQ2: How do you define a successful safe school culture?	<p>How do you determine/know that a school has a successful safe school culture?</p> <p>How do you evaluate your school culture and with what frequency?</p>
RQ3: What challenges are faced by school leaders in K through 12 schools in southern California in implementing safe	<p>What have been the challenges to establishing a safe school culture?</p> <p>Did challenges change the way you originally envisioned implementing a safe school culture?</p>

(continued)

Research Questions	Possible interview questions
school strategies and practices?	
RQ4: What recommendations would you make for future sustainability of strategies and practices to create a safe school culture?	What recommendations would you make to a new school leader related to creating a safe school culture?
	What process do you engage to ensure sustainability of a safe school culture?
	Is there anything else you can share about your experience relevant to this study?

APPENDIX D

IRB Approval



Pepperdine University
24255 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, CA 90263
TEL: 310-506-4000

NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

Date: February 16, 2016

Protocol Investigator Name: Zanita Gwin

Protocol #: 16-02-195

Project Title: Establishing a Safe School Culture: An Examination of Current Practices in K through 12 Leadership

School: Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Dear Zanita Gwin:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at community.pepperdine.edu/irb.

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chairperson

cc: Dr. Lee Kats, Vice Provost for Research and Strategic Initiatives

APPENDIX E

List of Course Work

EDOL Course	Course Name	Professor
724	Ethics & Personal Leadership	Dr. Farzin Madjidi
714	Organizational Behavior, Theory, and Design	Dr. June Schmieder-Ramirez
755	E-Learning Theory & Practice	Dr. Kathleen Plinske
700	Leadership Theory & Practice	Dr. Farzin Madjidi
763	Learning Design & Evaluation	Dr. Kay Davis
767	Qualitative Research & Analysis	Dr. Leo Mellette
754A	Economic & Policy Systems	Dr. Farzin Madjidi
754B	International Policy Experience	Dr. June Schmieder-Ramirez
758A	Consultancy Project	Dr. Ronald Stephens
766	Research Design & Analysis	Dr. James Della Neve
764	Consultancy Project	Dr. Ronald Stephens
734	Advanced Data Analysis & Interpretation	Dr. Farzin Madjidi
765	Strategic Leadership & Management of Global Change	Dr. Laura Hyatt
759	Law & Dispute Resolution	Hon. John Tobin
785	Contemporary Topics	Dr. Ronald Stephens
753	Leadership, Advocacy, & Policy Development	Dr. Jack McManus
757	Entrepreneurship	Dr. Vance Caesar
787	Comprehensive Exam Seminar	Omitted according to protocol
791	Dissertation Excellence Project	Dr. Farzin Madjidi