A Successful Principal's Conversations: Perceived Impacts on Relationships and School Climate

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A SUCCESSFUL PRINCIPAL'S CONVERSATIONS:

PERCEIVED IMPACTS ON

RELATIONSHIPS AND SCHOOL CLIMATE

By

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A THESIS

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Requirements for the Degree of
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A SUCCESSFUL PRINCIPAL'S CONVERSATIONS: PERCEIVED IMPACTS ON
RELATIONSHIPS AND SCHOOL CLIMATE

By Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Dianne Hoff

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
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It is widely known that principals spend most of their day involved in
communication. However, there is less known about the characteristics of principal-staff
conversations and their possible impacts on principal-staff relationships and school
climate. Learning more about these conversations is important, because it is recognized
that anything that affects the professional relationships and climate for the adults in a
school can have ramifications for the learning climate for students and a school’s overall
effectiveness.

The purpose of this study is to explore principal-staff conversations and to
examine the perceived impacts these conversations may have on principal-staff
relationships and school climate through a case study of a successful principal. A
principal considered to be successful was chosen as the focus of this study because it
provided the opportunity to look at how one of the better educational leaders is
conducting her conversations with her staff members.
The study focuses on the principal of a rural, New England, K-8 elementary school, with 120 students and 22 staff members. Most of the professional staff members had an average of 20 years of teaching experience. The principal had been in her current position at the school for two years at the time of this study. This was her fourth principalship after 27 years as an elementary teacher.

Data obtained from interviews with staff members and the principal, a staff survey questionnaire, and researcher observations provided the basis for the description and analysis of the characteristics of principal-staff conversations and their perceived impacts on principal-staff relationships and school climate. The findings suggest that certain characteristics of a principal’s conversations, like listening well, providing consistent opportunities for conversations, and open sharing of information, can have positive impacts on principal-staff relationships and school climate.

The study has the potential to add important information to the literature regarding best practices for educational leaders by highlighting characteristics of a successful principal’s conversations that could have positive impacts on principal-staff relationships and school climate for teachers. Adopting such these practices may also have positive impacts on the learning environment for students.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

The Problem

Principals spend most of their day communicating. The research is replete with information about the quantity of principal/leader communication. A dominant 84.8 percent of secondary principals’ total activities are spent in verbal interaction (Martin & Willower, 1981), and interpersonal contacts account for 86 percent of an elementary principal’s day (Kmetz & Willower, 1982). Additional studies (Wolcott, 1973; Blumberg & Greenfield, 1980; Bredeson, 1987) corroborate the significant percentage of their workday that principals spend talking to and exchanging information with staff members. These are not optional or unimportant skills for a principal. As Bredeson (1987) says, “Regardless of how one defines the roles and responsibilities of the principal, the communication of messages, both verbal and nonverbal, is explicitly and implicitly the essence of leadership in schools” (p. 56). The quantity of principals’ daily communiqués is not in question; the quality is.

Although a great deal of communication goes on in schools, there are numerous realities that interfere with its quality, such as pressures on principals to fill multiple roles (Gantner, Newsom, & Dunlap, 2000) and the innate busyness of schools (Barth, 2001). Blase and Kirby (2000) cite physical and psychological factors that impede opportunities for principals and staff members to have meaningful conversations and the resulting negative consequences:
Many physical and psychological barriers make interaction and communication between administrators and teachers difficult. Teachers are physically and psychologically isolated from administrators; their desire for autonomy increases this isolation. Principals face overwhelming demands for their time, and their formal authority is limited. (p. xiii).

The consequences of this communication breakdown are potentially dire: “Teachers yearn for principals who communicate with them through respectful listening . . .” (Ganter, Newsom, & Dunlap, 2000, p. 12). Roland Barth (2001) speaks to this reality in schools when he says, “Conversations have the capacity to promote reflection, to create and exchange craft knowledge, and to help improve the organization. Schools, I’m afraid, deal more in meetings—in talking at and being talked at—than in conversations” (pp. 68-69). In an interview, Barth noted the following:

I don’t know too many principals and superintendents who are good listeners. They want others to listen to them, of course. Conversation is much more equitable and satisfying when people talk and listen in roughly equal amounts and there is little posturing regarding who is the superordinate and who is the subordinate. (Barth, as quoted in Sparks, 2002)

The ever-quickening pulse of both information and change in education also serves to hinder even the best intentions for real conversations in schools (Goodlad, 1984). Thus, various barriers to communication, which can exist between every principal and her/his staff members, can create compromised conversations that have negative impacts on what goes on in schools for both staff members and students. Lamenting the
deleterious effects of these compromised communications and interactions between principals and teachers, Blase and Kirby (2000) wrote: “When teachers’ and principals; purposes and strategies are incongruent, a climate is created that prevents them from reaping the benefits (such as elevated levels of teacher motivation and commitment) that effective leadership can have for them and, indirectly, for students” (p. xiii).

It seems clear, then, that part of understanding this problem – and possibly the solution – lies in exploring principal-staff conversations. Most people regularly utilize talk to convince others of the rightness of their own position and the wrongness of the other person’s point of view, rather than seeing these verbal exchanges as opportunities to understand the other person’s viewpoint (Flick, 1998). Such conversational disconnects have negative consequences for individuals and organizations. A 2001 study involving over 20,000 exit interviews discovered that the primary reason people leave jobs is “poor supervisory behavior,” and one of the most frequent factors cited in “poor supervisory behavior” was poor communication skills (Enbysk, 2002, p. 1). It is clear that a leader’s ability to manage the maelstrom of competing agendas from myriad special interest groups makes conversation skills all-important as determinants of interpersonal effectiveness in many settings. Goleman (2000) avers the ability of a leader to create an atmosphere that supports conversations that are true dialogues “is not a trivial gesture. The biggest single complaint of American workers is poor communication with management; two thirds say it prevents them from doing their best work” (p. 174).

What, then, defines conversation and distinguishes it from talk? Lambert (2002) offers a concept of conversation characterized by “shared intention of genuine ‘truth-seeking,’ remembrances and reflections of the past, a search for meaning in the present, a
mutual revelation of ideas and information, and respectful listening” (p. 65). She explains that “these rich processes are made possible by really listening to one another, listening for words, expression, emotion, and meaning” (p. 65). Some conversations may be too casual or abbreviated to contain all these elements, but “the elements are implied or understood, based on prior experiences with the relationships of the conversants” (p. 65).

Other scholars (Wheatley, 2001; Isaacs, 1999; Noddings, 1984, 1992; Flick, 1998) note the significant time, in addition to intention and skill, it takes to have a real conversation with someone; and time is a commodity much in demand by all the players on the school day stage. Educators make sincere attempts to provide time for their students to be heard and understood. For example, they provide circle time for kindergartners and seminar settings for college students. However, school leaders rarely offer equally open-ended forums for teachers’ voices to be similarly heard and understood (Lambert, et.al. 2000). Consequently, teachers often feel that they have little voice in the decisions that affect their professional lives.

In learning environments, the potential importance of conversations between school leaders and their staffs is compelling. Principals possess tremendous power to make a teacher’s life miserable or joyous (Blase & Blase, 2004), and conversations are the predominate way that principals and staff members interact. Cresswell and Fisher (1996) assert that, for most teachers, “a significant aspect of [their] work is the communication and relationship that they have with the principal” (p. 2).

There is evidence in the literature that conversations serve as indicators of school effectiveness (Rafferty 2003; Barth 1990; Cavallo, 1999). Furthermore, Barth (1990) believes that principal-staff interactions are symbolic of the quality of most other
interpersonal relationships in a school. This link between principal-staff conversations and relationships and school effectiveness has critical ramifications for students and the educators who strive to provide them with the best learning environment possible. The fact that the literature connects conversations with school effectiveness raises the stakes for this study because of the recognition in the literature that the learning lives of students are improved or imperiled by the respective health or toxicity of the prevailing interpersonal norms and emotional environment among the adults in a school. Barth avers that “the nature of the relationships among the adults who inhabit a school has more to do with the school’s quality and character, and with the accomplishment of its pupils, than any other factor” (quoted in Saphier & King, 1985, p. 69). Saphier and King (1985) highlight this connection between teachers and students when they write “If we are serious about school improvement and about attracting and retaining talented people to school careers, then our highest priority should be to maintain reward structures that nurture adult growth and sustain the school as an attractive workplace” (p. 74).

Scholars (including: Saphier & King, 1985; Lambert, 2002; Noddings, 1984; Edmonds, 1984) make the case that anything that can be done to improve the emotional, relational environment for teachers will have an impact on the learning environment for students. In an article discussing the implications of research on effective schools and classrooms that focused on recommendations for teacher training, Edmonds (1984) wrote:

In sum, the school effect is more powerful than the teacher effect. This does not mean that individual teacher behavior is not a critical determinant of the quality of
teaching and learning. It merely means that the school as a total environment has the capacity for effective or ineffective teaching. (p. 39)

The previous descriptions of conversation (which is sometimes used synonymously in the literature with dialogue) make it clear that these are emotion-laden activities. Beatty (2000) argues that the cognitive, practical activities of administration are too frequently studied, and the affective, emotional, relational dimensions of this dominant organizational activity are too little explored and less understood. She warns:

The consistent exclusion of the emotions in traditional educational administration is limiting, for it distorts our theoretical understanding of human experience. Educational administration researchers can no longer afford to treat the emotions as subordinate, insignificant or peripheral if we are to explore fully the way leaders are and the ways they can be. (p. 334)

Noddings (1984, 1992) and Beck (1994) also weigh in on the importance of the emotional side of educational leadership, specifically caring. Other scholars (Barth, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1992; Donaldson, 2001) write about the importance of the moral and relational dimensions of leadership. One way this relational dimension of leadership is manifested is through principal-staff conversations. But in order to examine the quality of these conversations, additional research is needed on the more qualitative dimensions of principal-staff conversations.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to add to the literature on principal’s conversations by exploring the characteristics of principal-staff conversations and how these characteristics
may have an impact on principal-staff relationships and school climate. The findings from the study may help us understand more fully how a principal’s conversations affect principal-staff relationships and school climate for the adults and, by extension, the students, as well. As supported in the literature, this knowledge has the potential to help both teachers and their students. For the purpose of this study, a *conversation* is defined as dyadic communication between the principal and staff members involving an exchange of ideas that involves eye contact, listening, mutual respect, shared inquiry, and a desire for mutual understanding (Noddings, 1992; Flick, 1998; Isaacs, 1999; Lambert, 2002; Buber, 1970). It is understood from the literature that even brief, casual exchanges reveal characteristics of a person’s conversations.

To examine principal-staff conversations, I intentionally chose a principal considered to be successful. She was an individual who had two previously successful principalships, and who was recognized as a successful educator by her staff members, her state university and her state’s Department of Education. Like Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) and Susan Moore Johnson (1990), who studied “good principals” and “good teachers,” respectively, I, too, believed that we needed to examine and illuminate the behaviors of such individuals so that we can better understand what it is that they do and how they do it. It is “they, rather than those who are merely satisfactory, whose numbers should be increased” (Johnson, p. xxii). Studying the principal-staff conversations of a *successful* educational leader provided the potential opportunity to shed light on “best practices” with regard to characteristics of a principal’s conversations, and their possible impact on relationships and school climate.
Guiding Questions

The following overarching question guided this study:

What are the characteristics of a successful principal’s conversations with her staff members and what is the perceived impact of these conversations on principal-staff relationships and school climate?

More specifically, the research questions addressed:

1. *What were the characteristics of conversations between a successful principal and her staff members?*

2. *What were the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships?*

3. *What were the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on school climate?*

The goal was to determine the characteristics of a successful principal’s conversations and what role they might play in principal-staff relationships and school climate.

Significance of the Study

Although *communication* is a major occupation in every principal’s practice, this research focuses on the relational characteristics of principal-staff *conversations* and how these conversations may have an impact on principal-staff relationships and/or school climate for staff members. Increasing principals’ awareness of conversations and the role these conversations could play in their relationships with staff members and school climate is important because the more specifics a principal knows about the
characteristics of conversations and their potential impacts, the more she or he can use that knowledge to create healthy professional relationships and a positive school climate.

Any revelations regarding the characteristics of principal-staff conversation that may influence principal-staff relationships and school climate for staff members has important implications for a principal’s practice because of the recognized potential of these factors to have an impact on the school climate for students, as well. The effective schools’ literature surfaces the connections between aspects of school climate and student learning outcomes.

Adding a study specifically focused on the principal-staff conversations of a successful educational leader can add to the available literature regarding “best practices” for current and future educational leaders. Among the characteristics of principal-staff conversations surfaced by this study are both simple and more complex behaviors that other educational leaders may choose to add to their repertoire.

The literature offers evidence that the leaning environment for students and the effectiveness of our schools are closely connected to principal-staff relationships and the work climate for the adults in a school. Because of the potential to positively or negatively affect both students and staff members in our schools, it is critical that we explore how principals’ conversations can have impacts on these principal-staff relationships and the school climate for staff members.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to add to the literature on principal’s conversations by exploring the characteristics of principal-staff conversations and their perceived impacts on principal-staff relationships and school climate. This research can contribute to our understanding of the characteristics of a principal’s conversations and how these conversations may influence principal-staff relationships and the climate for staff members. These are human factors of our schools that can have critical consequences for student learning and school effectiveness, as well.

**Emotional/Relational Aspects of Leadership**

This research study focused on these emotional/relational aspects of leadership by studying certain characteristics of principal-staff conversations and perceptions about their possible impact on principal-staff relationships and school climate. In subsequent sections of Chapter 2, the literature on conversation and its possible connections to relationships and school climate is examined. But before we look at the literature related to principal-staff conversations and their potential impacts on principal-staff relationships and school climate, we need an introduction to the literature regarding this relational, emotional side of leadership wherein the characteristics of conversation examined in this study reside.
Some researchers assert that emotional intelligence (EQ) is a better predictor of success in life and leadership than the more traditional measures of cognitive intelligence (IQ) (Goleman, 1997). Dr. Reuven Bar-On, a psychologist, invented the term “emotional quotient,” or “EQ” to describe an individual’s level of emotional competency. He studied “the basic differences between people who are more or less emotionally and socially effective in various parts of their lives – in their families with their partners, in the workplace – and those who aren’t” (Schwartz, 2000, ¶ 10).

Two academic psychologists, the University of New Hampshire’s John D. Mayer and Yale’s Peter Salovey, expanded on Bar-On’s research. Mayer and Salovey’s work formed the basis for Goleman’s work. They posited that “The correlations between performance and these emotional competencies have been well-established, but no overarching framework or theory could make sense of the foundation of these abilities” (Schwartz, 2000, ¶ 48). Psychologist Daniel Goleman (1995) promoted the idea that high emotional intelligence helps one form empathic relationships where you care what the other person thinks and feels. In examining research results from several hundred studies on a range of competencies as predictors of performance, Goleman (1995) reported that, “When I sorted out those results, EQ abilities were twice as important as anything else in distinguishing stars from average performers” (Schwartz, 2000, ¶ 49). Goleman proposed that the results of a study examining emotional intelligence and leadership showed “the highest performing managers have significantly more “emotional competence” than other managers. Studies reported by Goleman (1995) and Damasio (1994) posit the primary role emotions can play in our personal and professional lives and the potentially critical contribution that emotional intelligence may make to a leader’s success. Cavallo (1999)
concluded that “the emotional, social and relational competencies identified by Daniel Goleman and other emotional intelligence theorists, did in fact distinguish high performing leaders” (1999, pp. 1-2).

In describing the emotional impact of not just what a leader does, but how s/he does it, Goleman (2002) wrote the following:

Leaders give praise or withhold it, criticize well or destructively, offer support or turn a blind eye to people’s needs. They can frame the group’s mission in ways that give more meaning to each person’s contribution—or not. They can guide in ways that give people a sense of clarity and direction in their work and that encourage flexibility, setting people free to use their best sense of how to get the job done. All these acts help determine a leader’s primal emotional impact. (p. 9)

Providing additional support for the importance of emotional skills for leaders, Beatty (2000) observed that “While the applicability to educational leadership of the principles and benefits of collaboration and the emotional skills required to promote and maintain collaborative cultures may seem self-evident, human emotions per se have been consistently marginalized in educational leadership research” (p. 332).

To contribute to a remedy of this oversight, Beatty (2000) studied the emotional aspects of educational leadership by investigating the connections between an individual educational leader’s philosophy of leadership and his/her accounts of the emotional dimensions of leadership experiences. The five individuals (4 females, 1 male) who volunteered to be interviewed for the study were in the midst of their educational administration doctoral studies; all had had previous leadership experience (ranging from
8 to 20 years) at different levels throughout their professional careers. At the time of the interviews, all the participants were in leadership positions in education (4 individuals) and health care (1 individual). These leaders echoed the “unanimous acceptance of the assumption that emotions must be heavily masked in order to retain power and control, especially when [leaders] are threatened” (p. 354). The studied leaders, however, shared that when they had veered from this norm and revealed their emotions in professional situations with leader-staff interactions, they found the result to be “surprisingly rewarding” (p. 354). Beatty concludes, “It would seem that the pseudo-rationality used to mask real inner emotional realities, the stock-in-trade of the experienced traditional leader, is something that would have to be unlearned in order to begin to redefine leadership” (p. 354).

**Conversation**

This section starts with a brief review of the quantity of communication in a principal’s life, and then looks at research concerning more relational characteristics of conversations.

The research regarding the amount of time principals spend communicating is compelling:

Successful principals are communicating virtually 100 percent of the time they are on the job—listening, speaking, writing, and reading. The number one priority of a principal’s job description is to communicate in appropriate, productive, meaningful, helpful, and healing ways with teachers, students, parents, colleagues, as well as a vast array of others. . . .(McEwan, 2003, pp. 1-2)
Acknowledging the dominance of communication in the educational administrator’s practice, Greenfield (1986) avers that “talk is the work” of school leaders. Additional studies have focused attention on the quantifiable aspects of principals’ conversations (Martin & Willower, 1981; Kmetz & Willower, 1982; March, 1978), reporting that as much as 70% of a principal’s time is spent in conversation. In his famous ethnography of an elementary school principal, Wolcott (1973) reported that the studied principal spent 65 percent of his time in face to face encounters.

Examining multiple aspects of the interpersonal communications, Bredeson (1987) interviewed three secondary and two elementary school principals. He visited each of the principals five times: three of the visits to each principal were solely for the purpose of interviews; the other two visits were spent shadowing each principal. He reported that the principals in his study were engaged in dyadic interactions for 73.5 percent of the total number of their interpersonal communications.¹ These studies provide critical information regarding the sheer amount of time principals spend communicating.

Other researchers (Mintzberg, 1973; Willis, 1981; Martin & Willower, 1981) have also measured the sheer volume of principals’ verbal communication. However, Gronn (1983) critiqued such studies for ignoring two important points about principals’ verbal communication: (1) the quality vs. the quantity of the exchanges; and (2) the social, interactive nature of communication and how the “interactants’ talk accomplishes administration” (p. 2). He conducted a case study of the taped conversations of an elementary principal of a school located near Melbourne, Australia. Of the 300 pages of typed transcripts from two days of recording, a 30 minute-segment and 12 typed

¹ In a less quantitative finding, the principals in Bredeson’s (1987) study noted that good communication was dependent upon a “capacity and willingness to listen” (p. 67).
transcript pages was selected for detailed analysis. Findings from the study reinforced the earlier studies' findings that principals spend most of their time talking. In addition, this study showed that the way principals talk is used to inform others of a position or a need for a specified action and to influence others to take an action based upon what is said. Findings of this study suggest that the way a principal uses talk is representative of the principal's leadership style and how that same principal uses power and control.

Also noting the abundance of studies that have informed us about the quantifiable factors of principal-staff conversations, Bogotch (1997) laments that we are still ill-informed regarding "how such face-to-face talk furthers or deters educational purposes within schools" (p. 274). Concurring with Dewey, Bogotch believes "school leadership occurs as part of social interactions; thus, within all conversations, there is evidence of, as well as opportunities for, sharing ideas, examining role and institutional constraints, and re-creating new social, aesthetic, and moral ideas and meanings" (p. 275). His study took place in a suburban elementary school in the southeastern United States and focused on a private conversation between the school's principal and a fifth grade teacher. The researcher based his interpretations of the conversation on listening to the actual conversation in person, on the tape, and by reading the transcripts. The researcher concludes that principal-staff member relations (in this case reciprocal) were evident in, and affected by, the conversations. In the course of the conversation, the principal revealed her values and style by showing sensitivity about the presenting problem, listening, and using reflective practice, and, finally, encouraging and supporting the teacher in taking responsibility for doing her own problem-solving in the situation. The
results of the study support Bogotch’s intent to reveal more about the substance of principal-staff conversations.

Clearly, it is important to pay attention to what is and is not going on in these principal-staff conversations. Writing about school leaders who are “forced to transact their business “on the fly,” and “squeeze important decisions and information-sharing into [these] passing conversations in the hallway . . .” Donaldson (2001) warns:

As opportunities for leadership, these realities encourage “dumping” rather than dialogue. Their one-way character and their brevity offer both leaders and others the chance to have their say, make their complaint, raise their issue, [or] present their suggestion. [Such] school communications leave little opportunity for fact-finding, perspective-sharing, and joint problem-solving. (p. 17)

This is representative of our increasingly complex society where, as Kegan (1994) argues, we are “in over our heads.”

Roland Barth (2001) asks, “So how do we transform talk, meetings, agendas, and posturing into conversation?” (pp. 68-69). Joining the voices concerned about the quality of the communication going on in the typical educational administrator’s day, Lambert (2002) also reminds us that there is a dearth of dialogue present in these communiqués in schools:

“Dialogue . . . suggests a boundless, emerging conversation that is unattached

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2 In his book by the same name, Kegan considers the “fit, or lack of fit, between the demands our cultural curriculum makes on our consciousness on the one hand, and our mental capacities as ‘students’ in this ongoing school, on the other” (p. 7). He makes the case that in many instances we truly are “in over our heads.”

3 Dialogue is sometimes used interchangeably with conversation in the literature; at other times it is used to indicate a deeper and more nuanced conversation.

4 Lambert, et. al (2002) describes dialogue as “perhaps the most elegant form of conversation. In dialogue, we listen, seek to understand, and hold our assumptions in the air of critique. We do not seek decisions, actions, or justifications. The promise of dialogue is that we may invent visions of what could be in our schools and organizations” (p. 70). Conversation and dialogue are often used synonymously in the
to action and highly time-consuming. In the center of the cyclone of schools, we tend to find just the opposite: An issue or problem arises, vaguely defined, and faculty move toward solution. (p. 72)

Lambert (2002) views conversations as the antidote to the “cyclone of schools” (p. 72), where educators must contend with top-down policy initiatives, standardized testing, and an ever-changing core curriculum. Conversations, Lambert contends, are where we “find ourselves, our ideas, our priorities, and our capacities for relationships and understanding” (p. 64). She avers that conversations are “the primary work of leaders, for it is the medium through which we become more fully ourselves and invent new ways of being together” (p. 67). She considers conversations constructivist when the participants enter into a reciprocal relationship where each is able to construct new meanings around the subject of the conversation. She offers four overlapping classifications for conversation: personal, inquiring, sustaining, and partnering. All four types share Lambert’s common elements of conversation: (1) shared intention; (2) search for sense-making; (3) remembrance and reflection; (4) revelation of ideas, information; and (4) respectful listening (pp. 66-67).

Echoing Lambert’s (2002) characterization of conversation, Nel Noddings’s (1992) description of dialogue identifies it as “open-ended; [it provides] opportunities to question ‘why,’ and it helps both parties arrive at well-informed decisions . . . connects us to each other and helps to maintain caring relations,” (p. 23). Dialogue, she believes, “not only [serves] to inform the decision under consideration; it also contributes to a habit of mind—that of seeking adequate information on which to make decisions” (p. 23).

literature. Interestingly, Lambert’s own definitions of conversation and dialogue share many characteristics.
Senge (1990) sees dialogue as a prerequisite for a learning organization. He views a healthy culture as one that promotes “a community of inquiry and experimentation” (p. xv) and credits dialogue with helping people learn how to think together and create such a culture. By thinking together he does not mean merely shared problem solving or the co-creation of new ideas, but what he calls collective sensibility, “in which the thoughts, emotions, and resulting actions belong not to one individual, but to all of them together” (p. 75). He further believes that dialogue gives the members of an organization the opportunity to surface, share, and explore each person’s assumptions (1990).

Gerzon (2003) avers that dialogue, of all the forms of discourse, is “highly effective in boundary-crossing” (p. 94) and notes that it demands “discipline, practice, and commitment” (p. 94). Speaking to the way dialogue has the potential to level the playing field for participants, he quotes the U.N.’s Giandomenico Picco who said, “Dialogue brings with it equal footing . . . . We include, as much as we want to be included. We listen as much as we want to be listened to” (p. 94).

Other scholars (Wheatley, 2002; Greenleaf, 1998) highlight the importance of listening as a part of conversation. Margaret Wheatley writes, “The greatest barrier to good conversation is that as a culture we’re losing the capacity to listen. We’re too busy. We’re too certain of our own views. We just keep rushing past each other” (p. 3). She believes that listening is healing because “listening creates relationship” (p. 89). Also emphasizing the critical nature of listening, Larry Spears (in Greenleaf, 1998) highlights characteristics of the servant-leader gleaned from Greenleaf’s original writings. Spears writes that servant leaders practice
a deep commitment to listening intently to others. Listening also encompasses getting in touch with one’s own inner voice, and seeking to understand what one’s body, spirit, and mind are communicating. Listening, coupled with regular periods of reflection, is essential to the growth of the servant-leader. (p. 5)

In addition to its emphasis on listening skills, servant leadership also addresses other affective dimensions of leadership (Greenleaf, 1998). Although servant and leader had previously been thought of as opposites, Robert Greenleaf joined the terms to symbolize the quantum shift from the more traditional autocratic and hierarchical models of leadership to more caring models based on teamwork, community, and ethical behavior (p. 2).

Stressing that a dialogue is an opportunity to consider the ideas of others and think together, Isaacs (1999) blames peoples’ inability to conduct dialogues and the consequent disconnects between people on a lack of awareness of the “undercurrents beneath the surface of their conversations, undercurrents that can bring people together or tear them apart” (p. 2). He believes that the problem is not only personal; it is pervasive in “most political and corporate leaders, academics, community builders, and families . . .” (p.2). He avers

[H]ow we talk together definitively determines our effectiveness. Indeed, it could be said that all great failures in practical and professional life stem from parallel failures in this single domain of conversation. The problems that even the most practical organizations have—in improving their performance and obtaining the results they desire—can be traced directly to their inability to think and talk together. . . . (p. 3)
The critical nature of a leader’s conversations cannot be overemphasized. For example, the skillfulness of a leader’s interpersonal conversation determines whether the implementation of new initiatives will be successful (Schein, 1983), and organizational conversation will only be as good as interpersonal conversation (Torrington & Weightman, 1994). A leader’s conversation is the crucial juncture where leader behaviors can make a difference in the work lives of their staff members.

**Relationships and Conversation**

Educational leader and theorist, Roland Barth (2001), wrote tellingly about principal-staff relationships:

Among adult relationships in schools, that between teacher and principal is decisive. I have found no characteristic of a good school more pervasive than healthy teacher-principal relationships—and no characteristic of a troubled school more common than troubled, embattled, or antiseptic administrator-teacher relationships. The relationship between teacher and principal seems to have an extraordinary amplifying effect. For better or worse, it models what *all* relationships in the school will be. (pp. 105-106).

Emphasizing this crucial role of relationships in creating functional—or dysfunctional—organizations, Donaldson (2001) writes: “the leader’s professional and personal relationship with staff” is at the core in determining whether the relationship will be one of “trust, openness, and personal affirmation” or “marked by domination, required compliance, and fear” (p. 32). These viewpoints (Barth, 2001; Donaldson, 2001)
emphasize that an educational leader has a choice on how they will affect principal-staff relationships, and should choose wisely and reflectively.

Buber (1970), too, made significant contributions to the evolution of our thinking about interpersonal relationships and dialogue. He designated two different ways of relating to others: (1) an *I-thou*, or subject-subject relationship, where parties interact as human equals; and (2) an *I-It*, or subject-object relationship, where one person (the *I*) has agency and power over the subordinate other (the *It*). Buber insisted that, in order to be fully human, you had to act in an *I-thou* manner, by treating others as people, not objects. He emphasized dialogue in which both participants are fully engaged, thinking and conversing. Buber’s *I-thou* paradigm represented three important aspects of healthy relationships: presentness, co-constructed conversation, and mutuality. Buber believed that if action grows out of these conditions, it is moral action, based upon full humanity. He also believed that if you do not operate in an *I-thou* fashion, you are lessening your own humanity, as well as that of the other person. *I-thou* relationships are *Gemeinschaft*, which means conversation and community. Rules and procedures are examples of *Gisellschaft*, or *I-it* relationships. Adults, who do not master *Gemeinschaft*, the *I-thou* interaction with others, are not fully human, according to Buber. A true human being, he contests, thinks and operates in a way to be open to the construction of new ideas and open to participatory relationships (Buber, 1970).

Following Buber’s model, any kind of abuse disempowered and objectified the abused person and was an example of an *I-It* relationship. Conversely, in *I-thou* relationships, two people use dialogue to co-construct equal and reciprocal exchanges that privilege neither person. Buber encouraged us to examine school situations and
identify instances where individuals are either included and given agency (I-thou), or excluded and marginalized (I-it) (Friedman, 1960, pp. 57-61).

Noting a connection between listening and caring relationships, Noddings (2002) asks rhetorically, “What is our consciousness like when we really care?”; and then answers: “I’m attentive in a receptive sort of way; I really hear” (2002). Listening, then, provides validation of and to the “other.” For Noddings, caring is relational, and the cared for should be able to trust in the relationship: the community must assure people that no one will be without care. In a talk she gave at the University of Southern Maine in October 2001, Noddings stressed that we have to “cultivate moral sentience,” that is, we “have to feel something when someone is hurting.” She also emphasizes that interpersonal conversations and relationships are closely intertwined and that listening, caring, and trust are interrelated. To Noddings (1992), listening is a manifestation of caring, which she believes cannot be learned cognitively; it must be felt (pp. 15-18).

Lamenting that “the endless cycle of reforms, revolving-door principals, and unfulfilled promises have deeply wounded many who work in schools” (p. 65), Lambert (2002) proposes that “sustaining conversations” . . . [that is] “conversations that enable us to reconstruct meaning and purpose in our professional lives” (p. 65) as a remedy for this relationship malaise in schools. Lambert’s “sustaining conversations” are a subset of her recommended “constructivist conversations [where] each individual comes to understand the purpose of the talk, since the relationship is one of reciprocity. Each person is growing in understanding; each person is seeking some interpretation of truth as he or she perceives it” (p. 65).
Also noting the important role conversations play in professional relationships in schools, Palmer (1998) asks us to adopt new guidelines “that will help us respect each other’s vulnerability and avoid chilling the conversation before it can even begin” (p. 150). He points to the confusing combination of existing norms for talking with each other that include the conflicting norms of compassion and competition. He says this “creates an ethos in which it feels dangerous to speak or to listen” (p. 151). To counter this, Palmer (1998) proposes more spiritual guidelines for our dialogues that allow us to be present to another person’s problems in a quiet, receptive way that encourages the soul to come forth, a way that does not presume to know what is right for the other but allows the other’s soul to find its own answers at its own level and pace. (p. 151)

Stressing the importance of hearing that we matter and a leader’s vital role in communicating such messages, Kegan and Lahey (2001) talk about the “value of being valued” (p. 92). Their term for “the regular expression of genuinely experiencing the value of a coworker’s behavior” is ongoing regard, which, they say, has two aspects: appreciation and admiration (p. 94). Again, principal’s conversations are a key way these relational messages do or do not get communicated.

Based on a study by Blase and Blase (2004) it can be argued that compromised conversation can contribute to the creation of toxic relationships between administrators and their staffs. The focus of the study was principal mistreatment of teachers, illuminating this negative side of educational leadership which has received far less attention, they claim, then the positive side of school leadership. The authors argue that by ignoring this “dark side” of leadership, potential and practicing educational leaders are
ill-prepared to deal with “school principal’s misuse [and abuse] of power and, in particular, mistreatment of teachers” (p. 246). This was an interview-based study of 50 teachers, scattered throughout the United States, who had been mistreated by school principals for periods ranging from six months to nine years. The authors reported their findings about principal mistreatment behaviors in terms of three levels of aggression: Level 1 principal mistreatment behaviors were identified as “indirect and moderate aggression [including] discounting teachers’ thoughts, needs and feelings and isolating and abandoning them” (p. 252); Level 2 principal mistreatment behaviors were identified as “direct and escalating aggression” (p. 255) and included “spying, sabotaging, stealing, destroying teacher instructional aids, making unreasonable work demands, and both public and private criticism of teachers” (p. 255); and Level 3 principal mistreatment behaviors that were identified as “direct and severe aggression” (p. 255) and included “lying, being explosive and nasty, threats, unwarranted reprimands, unfair evaluations, mistreating students, forcing teachers out of their jobs, preventing teachers from leaving/advancing, sexual harassment, and racism” (p. 255). Teachers abused by principal mistreatment suffered “devastating” (p. 253) effects to their professional and personal lives. In addition to the individual harm done to the abused teachers, “principal mistreatment seriously damaged in-school relationships, damaged classrooms, and frequently impaired all-school decision-making” (p. 255).

The need to know as much as possible regarding the connections between principal-staff conversations and principal-staff relationships is compelling. Wheatley (2002) writes
We have the opportunity many times a day, everyday, to be the one who listens to others, curious rather than certain. But the greatest benefit of all is that listening moves us closer. When we listen with less judgment, we always develop better relationships with each other. It’s not differences that divide us. It’s our judgments about each other that do. Curiosity and good listening bring us back together (p. 36).

Also noting this connection between conversations and relationships, Thayer (1991) avers, “a theory of leadership will not stand without a theory of conversation that informs us of the nature of relationship between leaders and followers. For both leaders and followers, their relationships are created and maintained in conversation” (quoted in Gougeon, 1991, p. 6), further reinforcing the connection between conversations and relationships.

**Climate and Conversation**

It is evident from the literature that there are some blurry boundaries between the relational elements of climate and definitions of culture. The researcher acknowledges this interchangeability and fluidity of scholars’ various definitions and descriptions of *climate* and *culture*. This section of the literature review includes literature that may be labeled *climate* or *culture* but which pertains to the concept of *climate* as it was defined for the purposes of this study. McBrien & Brandt (1997) weigh-in with the following definition of school climate:

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5 For the purposes of this study, the word *climate* referred to the prevailing interpersonal norms and emotional environment among the adults at the school. It included the overall tone, quality, and character of the school as a workplace.
[It is] the sum of the values, cultures, safety practices, and organizational structures within a school that cause it to function and react in particular ways. Some schools are said to have a nurturing environment that recognizes children and treats them as individuals; others may have the feel of authoritarian structures where rules are strictly enforced and hierarchical control is strong. Teaching practices, diversity, and the relationships among administrators, teachers, parents, and students contribute to school climate. Although the two terms are somewhat interchangeable, school climate refers mostly to the school's effects on students, while school culture refers more to the way teachers and other staff members work together. (p. 89)

In his definition of climate, Rafferty (2003) includes "the milieu of personalities, the principal and teachers, interacting within the sociological and psychological framework present in all schools" (p. 52). Like Lieberman and Miller (1992), he believes that the principal sets the tone for a school's climate by determining 'the way things work around here.' Although directed toward school climate for students, Moos (1979) makes "the social atmosphere of a setting or learning environment" (p. 81) a part of his definition. The classic definition from Schein (1990) views culture as a set of norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions that affect the way the members experience their organization. Another scholar claims that culture is 'the way we do things around here' (Bower, 1966). In a discussion of the naming of this "special something" that defines a school, Deal and Peterson (1999) write:

Parents, teachers, principals, and students have always sensed something special, yet undefined about their schools: something extremely powerful, but difficult to
describe. This ephemeral, taken-for-granted aspect of schools is often overlooked.
... For decades the terms climate and ethos have been used to try to capture this
powerful, pervasive, and notoriously elusive force. (p. 2)

Joining scholars who prefer to use the word culture to characterize this aspect of schools,
Deal and Peterson (1999) allow that although all the people in a school contribute to the
creation of the culture, “... school leaders can nudge the process along through their
actions, conversations, decisions, and public pronouncements” (p. 85). Lieberman and
Miller (1992) call school culture “perhaps the most compelling theme, yet the one least
understood” (p. 83).

There were enough similarities between the language describing school
climate/culture and the educational communities in Beck’s research (1999) to include it
in this discussion. Beck notes Noddings’s assertion that one of the indicators of caring
of action in a community is the notion that activity inevitably involves conversation” (p.
24). She then quotes Dewey who said:

There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and
communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have
in common; and communication is the way they come to possess things in
common. (p. 5)

One of the “four imperatives” Beck (1998) found to be an influence on positive
school reform at a site-based managed school relates to school culture issues: the
educators in the school that was the site for Beck’s research viewed themselves “as
members of a community and felt an imperative to interact in supportive and respectful

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ways” (p. 358). Beck’s study focused on a site-based managed urban elementary school. The school was considered to be a success as measured by the following school-improvement literature criteria: (1) It showed evidence of pervasive and high quality student learning; (2) it showed evidence of widespread changes in pedagogical practices and curriculum; and (3) teachers, students, parents, and community members all indicated high levels of satisfaction with the school. A year-long case study was conducted at the site to determine the factors shaping reform initiatives at the school. Data were collected through on-site observations and tape-recorded interviews with four administrators, thirteen teachers, five non-faculty staff members, three students, and four parents. The “community imperative” that was among the findings of this research, was credited with “humaniz[ing] the pursuit of learning and help[ing] to create a culture of trust and support that fostered risk-taking, honest communication, and reflection” (pp. 375-376). Beck also reported that “responses to the community imperative also helped to create a culture where teachers would take risks, acknowledge weaknesses, and continue to improve practice” (p. 376). One interviewed teacher used the following words to describe the climate at the studied elementary school: “friendly, cohesive, productive, caring, trying [in the positive sense of this word, one assumes, as in “trying hard”], a helpful type attitude and a welcome attitude” (p. 376).

Psychologist Edgar Schein stated that “the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture” (quoted in Johnson, 1990, p. 245). Stressing the power of the principal in this regard, in a large-scale study, Lieberman (1969) found that a school principal’s behavior profoundly affects staff members’ daily work life and their feelings of self-worth. It is the emotional overlay, the care, or lack thereof, that
clearly registers with staff members. “... the relationship with one’s principal is of paramount importance in a teacher’s work life. “A principal sets a tone” (Lieberman & Miller, 1992).

The literature provides evidence that conversations are a paramount way that a principal sets a tone that contributes crucial aspects to the creation of the climate of a school. Barth (2001) writes of the “culture of caution” that exists in most schools, where principals summarily snuff out the spark of teacher initiatives by (1) exhibiting body language that indicates “disapproval, fear, and defensiveness;” (2) listing all the possible reasons teachers’ ideas will not work; and (3) postponing the decision, hoping teachers will abandon their proposals, and the ideas will just disappear (pp. 184-186). Addressing the conversational climate of an organization, Kegan and Lahey (2001) state, “The places where we work and live are, among other things, places where certain forms of speech are promoted or encouraged and places where other ways of talking are discouraged or made impossible” (p. 7).

In such schools, teachers quickly get tired or frustrated with their attempts to communicate if they feel devalued or unheard. Only seven of seventy-five public schoolteachers in Johnson’s (1990) study “believed that they exerted ongoing influence over important school-wide matters” (p. 189). Additionally, principals often send mixed messages to different members of the same school staff, as Johnson (1990) discovered in her study involving interviews with over one hundred highly-regarded teachers:

- My relationship with both the principal and other leaders in the system is a good one. There is respect for my opinion. I don’t get shot down a lot. Yet
I know there are some people who have terrible relationships with the principal. If they ask him anything, he’ll say no. . . . (p. 191)

- Our principal is very open on the one hand. He will listen. Yet he’s very stubborn in many ways. If he makes a decision, that’s the decision. Maybe that’s the way it should be. He is the administrator. But I think that when you’re dealing with kids, and you’re in the classroom all day, that you know what’s going to work and what’s not going to work. I think it needs to be discussed. Very often it isn’t. (p. 192)

- It just seems as though things are done by edict. Very often they are things that we are the experts on and they’re not. Not that I expect them to allow us to make the decisions without them, but consulting us would be really nice. (p. 193)

Teachers want to be involved in the process when potential decisions will have an impact on them or their practice.

Other scholars also address the importance of this feeling of inclusion and empowerment, and how principals do and don’t make it happen in schools. Blase and Blase (1999b) note that principals who believe in shared governance utilize five strategies in their practices: building trust, developing open conversation, sharing information, building consensus, and embracing inevitable conflict in productive ways (p. 484).

Enumerating the ways principals can use their conversations to establish an empowering climate that supports collaborative conversations, Rosenholtz (1989) writes of the critical nature of “Principal’s feedback mechanisms, the opportunities they create for faculty collaboration, and their ability to share authority by empowering faculties to make work-
enhancing decisions . . .” (p. 69). She emphasizes that these principal behaviors powerfully affect staff members: “Armed with a greater certainty, a shared sense of school purpose, and the trust and value accorded them by principals, teachers are more likely to share their expertise with others and to seek out their advice” (p. 70).

Blase and Blase (2001) state that “Building trust is critical to empowering teachers” (p. 35). In their study, they found that successful shared governance principals found ways to express their trust in their teachers’ professional abilities. Some of the ways these shared governance principals demonstrated their trust in teachers was through involving staff in conversations focused on decision-making and showing that they were honest and open in all their personal interactions (p. 36).

Findings by Martin (1990) in a study examining teachers’ perceptions of principals’ instructional leadership behaviors indicated the significant influence of principals’ interpersonal behaviors on teachers’ feelings of empowerment. Eighty-one elementary teachers from five rural Tennessee school districts completed a questionnaire that directly addressed the question of what principals do to increase teachers’ feelings of pedagogical efficacy. When principals were perceived to demonstrate supportive behaviors with teaching efforts, the teachers tended to see the principals as instructional leaders. Teachers also responded to principals’ sensitivity. A major conclusion of the study was that interpersonal communication was a requisite skill for school leaders to be effective with teachers. Additionally, teachers are more likely to develop collegial relationships with principals perceived to be instructional leaders, and these relationships are influenced by the principal’s trusting, supporting, and encouraging behaviors.
One of the markers of a successful school climate according to a study by Judith Warren Little (1982) was the opportunity for collegial discussions among staff members (p. 326). In her research, Little (1982) found two norms that characterized “successful schools”: (1) a “norm of collegiality” and (2) a “norm of continuous improvement” (p. 326). Little’s norm of collegiality speaks to potentially positive aspects of a school’s culture. She makes it clear that when principals foster frequent opportunities for practice-focused collegiality, staff members develop a “shared language adequate to the complexity of teaching” (p. 331). In “high success” schools, principals were active participants in this practice-focused discourse (p. 337). In a later study, Little (2002) stressed that such opportunities for collegial conversations depended upon the availability of time and space: the sufficient discretionary time in staff members’ work days and the adequate physical space of a teachers’ room (pp. 48-49).

Examining principals’ leadership styles and their potential relationship to school climate, a study by Mendel, Watson, and MacGregor (2002) compared teachers’ perceptions of the leadership behavior of their principals with the teachers’ perceptions of the school climate. Elementary school K-5 teachers from a southwest Missouri school district were chosen by random sampling to participate in this survey. A total of 169 usable questionnaires were returned. The study found that teachers who perceived their principals as having a collaborative leadership style also perceived their schools as having the most positive school climates. From their study, the authors infer that a collaborative leadership style contributes the most to a positive school climate. However, they question “whether collaborative leadership contributes to positive school climate or if collaborative leaders prefer schools with positive school climate” (p. 7).
In a study of a principal’s daily interactions, Gantner, Newsom, and Dunlap (2000) looked at a high school principal and almost 100 of his teachers and conducted ten interviews with a cross section of this group of teachers. The school had a reputation for academic excellence; the school district and the community regarded the principal as highly effective. Teachers indicated that mutual trust and respect between them and their principal was very important to them. In addition, teachers wanted to be able to depend on honest and consistent behavior from the principal and the opportunity to be included in decision-making. The researchers found that the teachers in this study wanted a principal who “[built] caring, ethical relationships, and who foster[ed] a climate that nurtures teaching and learning” (p. 17).

Evaluating principal interactions and school level environments, Cresswell and Fisher (1996) surveyed teachers regarding their perceptions of the connections between a school’s climate and a principal’s interpersonal behavior. Eight hundred and fifty teachers and 50 principals at 56 Australian secondary schools completed questionnaires evaluating principal interactions and school-level environments. This research indicated that one of the most significant influences on teachers’ perception of their environment has to do with the level of trust the principal conveys to them. In this study, teachers’ perceptions of principals’ trust increased when the teachers were “given the responsibility and independence to carry out their tasks” (p. 18). Dissatisfied interpersonal behavior by the principal had generally negative influences on teachers’ perceptions about the school climate.

In a study predicated on Barth’s claim (1990) that teacher-principal interactions are representative of most other relationships in a school, Rafferty (2003) explores the
relationship between school climate and communication with a study of principal-teacher interactions. Two survey instruments were combined and used in this study: the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire for Secondary Schools (OCDQ-RS) and the Communication Climate Inventory (CCI). Of the 821 survey instruments sent to 26 high schools, and 503 teachers, counselors, and library-media specialists, 62.3% completed and returned questionnaires. Participating schools were identified as open climate or closed climate schools based on their overall openness indices as measured by the survey results. “The greatest difference in open climate and closed climate response frequencies related to the extent to which teachers felt their opinions made a difference in the day-to-day decisions that affect their work” (p. 62). This study’s findings remind the reader that teachers place a high value on the presence of trust and open communication in their interactions with their principal, which can create opportunities for teachers to be involved in decisions about their practice. Rafferty (2003) concluded that “because school excellence is directly related to what teachers think and do, effective communication is at the heart of creating and maintaining the effective school (p. 66).”

Based on data in their study examining effective leadership, Blase and Blase (1999) recommend, “Programs [that] teach practicing and aspiring principals how to develop professional dialogue and collegiality among educators (p. 138). Hargie, Tourish, and Hargie (1994) acknowledge “the role of conversation as a significant variable in determining organizational success,” as well as the “growing emphasis on the importance of interpersonal conversation” (p. 27). Harris (1998) further support the idea that conversation is vital to a manager’s role as a leader, and Thody (1998) makes a connection between effective leadership and effective schools.
Barth stressed that "the nature of the relationships among the adults who inhabit a school has more to do with the school’s quality and character, and with the accomplishment of its pupils, than any other factor" (quoted in Saphier and King, 1985, p. 69). Lightfoot (1983), too, reinforces the close ties between teachers and students: "[Teacher] satisfaction is critical to the tone and smooth functioning of the school. Their nurturance is critical to the nurturance of students" (p. 341).

Saphier and King (1985) highlight this link between the climate for teachers and the climate for students in schools when they write "If we are serious about school improvement and about attracting and retaining talented people to school careers, then our highest priority should be to maintain reward structures that nurture adult growth and sustain the school as an attractive workplace" (p. 74). Blase and Blase (2004) also make the connection between principal-staff relationships and school improvement: "The importance of related leadership skills and corresponding attitudes and values to the development of strong, positive relationships between principals and teachers cannot be overemphasized; indeed, respectful, constructive relationships between principals and teachers are essential for school improvement" (p. 246).

There is evidence in the literature that anything that can be done to improve the emotional, relational environment for teachers will have an impact on the learning environment for students. Lieberman (1986) notes a connection between factors in a school’s climate that affect both staff and students:

Schools where . . . teachers have maximum autonomy to do their work but are collectively engaged in dialogue about the central problems of the school, are places that are more likely to be successful for the adults and the children. (p. 5)
In an article discussing the implications of research on effective schools and classrooms that focused on recommendations for teacher training, Edmonds (1984) writes:

In sum, the school effect is more powerful than the teacher effect. This does not mean that individual teacher behavior is not a critical determinant of the quality of teaching and learning. It merely means that the school as a total environment has the capacity for effective or ineffective teaching. (p. 39)

Summary

Research has informed educators about elements of conversations, relationships, and climate and their positive and negative impact on the effectiveness of schools. Scholars acknowledge a principal’s critical influence on school climate, requisite elements for healthy school climates/cultures, and the impact a principal can have on these factors. This is critical work for educational leaders. Barth (quoted in Evans, 1996) writes alarmingly about teachers’ state of mind:

Teachers are dejected. Many would not enter the profession if again given a choice. They commonly report a sense of discontent and malaise; they feel unappreciated, overworked, and demeaned as professionals. They feel little trust for or from either school and district administrators or the public. They feel trapped in their jobs, powerless to effect change, and frustrated at the never-ending non-teaching demands . . . (p. 95)

The literature points to a strong connection between the health of the relationships and climate for the adults in a school and the learning environment for students. Whatever principals can learn about ways to improve the emotional, relational aspects of
the school climate for staff members will lead to benefits for students, as well. This study
explored the characteristics of a principal’s conversations and their perceived impacts on
principal-staff relationships and the climate for the school’s staff members. It is clear
from the literature that the results of this study may benefit both teachers and students by
adding to the literature on conversation, relationships, school climate, and effective
schools.
Based upon the literature review, it is clear that principals’ communication, as a dimension of educational leadership, has oft been researched and even more frequently theorized about. However, although some of the quantifiable and managerial dimensions of a principal’s communications have been well-explored, there is less empirical research regarding the more emotional and relational aspects of these exchanges.

The goal of this research was to add to the literature on principal-staff conversations by surfacing characteristics of a successful principal’s conversations with her staff members and the perceived impacts of these conversations on principal-staff relationships and school climate.

Research Questions

The following overarching question guided this study: What were the characteristics of a successful principal’s conversations with her staff members and what are the perceived impacts of these conversations on principal-staff relationships and school climate? The literature supported what school staff members know well: everything a principal does has profound effects on all the people and events of a school. This study asked about staff members’ perceptions regarding principal-staff conversations and their perceived effects on principal-staff relationships and school climate. What is the nature of these conversations? What is known about the
characteristics of those conversations? Do they have any perceived impacts on principal-staff relationships and/or school climate?

More specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

Research Question #1: What were the characteristics of the conversations between a successful principal and her staff members? In examinations of principals’ communications, researchers often focused on quantifiable aspects of the time spent interacting with staff members. However, less is known about the emotional, relational characteristics of principal-staff conversations and less still about successful principals’ principal-staff conversations. My study looked at staff members’ perceptions of their conversations with a successful principal, surfacing characteristics of these principal-staff conversations. This is important information, because our awareness of emotional aspects of our behaviors profoundly affects our ability to be successful in our work (Goldman, 1995).

Research Question #2: What were the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships? Since principals have the most control over principal-staff relationships, and conversations are a primary way we do or don’t nurture our personal and professional relationships (Wheatley, 2002; Noddings, 1984), it was important to surface staff perceptions of how a successful principal’s conversations may impact staff-principal relationships. By eliciting data regarding how characteristics of a successful principal’s conversations may impact principal-staff relationships, I collected information that could be used to draw some conclusions and derive some implications regarding the emotional, relational dimensions of this issue.
Research Question #3: What were the perceived impacts principal-staff conversations on school climate? After surfacing the characteristics of this successful principal’s conversations, I sought to reveal the perceived impacts—if any—of these conversational characteristics on school climate. I collected data that could be used to posit some possible impacts of the characteristics of a principal’s conversations on school climate. As the literature attests, the potential impacts of principal-staff conversations on school climate are important for students, as well as staff members.

Key Definitions

Conversation

For the purposes of this study, a conversation was defined as dyadic communication between the principal and staff members involving an exchange of ideas, eye contact, listening, mutual respect, shared inquiry, and a desire for mutual understanding. It is understood from the literature that even brief, casual exchanges reveal characteristics of a person’s conversations.

Lambert (2002) includes mutual sharing of “ideas and information” as well as “respectful listening” in her definition (p. 65). Although some conversations may be too casual or abbreviated to contain all the elements, Lambert insists that any missing elements are “implied or understood, based on prior experiences with the relationships of the conversants” (p. 65). In the literature, scholars ascribe similar characteristics to conversation and dialogue. For example, Noddings (1992) defines dialogue as “open-ended, [providing] opportunities to question ‘why and helping both parties arrive at well-informed decisions; [it] connects us to each other and helps to maintain caring
relationships. Isaacs (1999) stresses that dialogue is an opportunity to consider the ideas of others and think together. Flick (1998) considers dialogue part of the “Understanding Process” which also includes “understanding others, listening deeply, suspending judgment, walking in another person’s shoes, and uncovering and examining assumptions” (p. 5). Buber (1970) emphasized the requisite egalitarian nature of what he termed dialogue, where both participants are fully engaged, thinking and conversing. In Chapter 2, I more fully explored these and other scholars’ descriptions of conversation and dialogue.

**Relationships**

For the purposes of this study, *relationships* were the professional, interpersonal connections between the principal and staff members. They included how the principal and staff members recognized and responded to one another’s opinions and feelings and how each regarded the other’s superordinate or subordinate position as factors in one’s ability to perform well. Operationally, for this study, relationships were understood to be the staff members’ and the principal’s perceptions of these connections.

Barth (2001) avers that these principal-staff relationships are representative of what all relationships in a school will be like (p. 106). Donaldson (2001) notes that the professional relationships between the adults in schools may be marked by “trust, openness and personal affirmation” or “domination, required compliance, and fear” (p. 32). In his characterization of interpersonal relationships, Buber (1970) designated two different ways of relating to others: an *I-thou*, or subject-subject relationship, where parties interact as human equals; and an *I-it*, where one person (the *I*) has agency and
power over the subordinate other (the It). In Chapter 2, I further examined these and other scholars’ descriptions of relationships and their intersections with conversation.

**Climate**

For the purposes of this study, *climate* was the prevailing interpersonal norms and emotional environment among the adults at a school. It included the overall tone, quality, and character of the school as a workplace. Operationally, for this study, climate was understood to be staff members’ and the principal’s perceptions of this organizational phenomenon.

Rafferty’s (2003) definition of climate encompasses “the milieu of personalities, the principal and teachers, interacting within the sociological and psychological framework present in all schools” (p. 52). Moos (1979) includes the “social atmosphere of a setting” in a definition of climate, and McBrien and Brandt (1997) state “teaching practices” and “relationships [between] administrators [and] teachers” are some of the factors that comprise a school’s climate. There is some interchangeability and fluidity between scholars’ various definitions and descriptions of climate and culture in this literature. Deal and Peterson (1999) note that “for decades, the terms climate and ethos have been used to try to capture this powerful, pervasive, and notoriously elusive force” (p. 2). Ultimately calling this “elusive force” culture, Deal and Peterson (1999) aver that although all the people in a school help create the culture, it is something school leaders shape through their “actions, conversations, decisions, and public pronouncements” (p. 85). I looked more deeply at these and other scholars’ descriptions of climate/culture and their potential connections with conversation in Chapter 2.
Research Design

The subject of my study and my understanding of the nature of conversation grew out of several different intellectual and theoretical traditions. The research questions were at the intersection of conversations, relationships, and school climate. My research methods focused on surfacing descriptions of the characteristics of a successful principal’s conversations with her staff members. It was in the resulting data that I searched for patterns to illuminate our understanding of principal-staff conversations and perceptions about their possible impacts on principal-staff relationships and school climate.

My general approach to this research study was to develop a greater understanding about a successful principal’s principal-staff conversations by conducting a case study to surface the characteristics of these conversations and the perceived impacts of a successful educational leader’s conversations on a learning organization. Based upon the elements of Yin’s (1989) definition of a case study, my research involved “(a) investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when (b) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which (c) multiple sources of evidence are used” (p. 23). I chose to do a single case study because I believed that it represented a case of some uniqueness: the opportunity to study the characteristics of a successful principal’s conversations and their possible impacts on principal-staff relationships and school climate. I believed that there might be resonant, universal themes embedded in this single case.

For my purposes, an exploratory case study using observations, interviews, and a survey instrument comprised of open-ended questions was important for revealing
emergent and substantive information about the studied principal’s conversations with staff members and the perceived effects of these conversations on principal-staff relationships and school climate. The human interactions between the principal and staff members in this study were significantly influenced by the setting in which they occurred, and this behavior needed to be studied in a natural setting. The social and physical setting—schedules, interruptions, unpredictable outcomes, ever-changing interpersonal dynamics—influenced the occasion for, and nature of, some of the observations. In addition, an exploratory case study seemed an appropriate choice for this research because I was asking a “how” question about contemporary, or current, events, over which I had no control.

**Description of the Case**

**Site and Population Selection**

The research site for my study was Lawrence Elementary School (a pseudonym), a rural, New England, K-8 school, with 120 students and 22 staff members (includes secretary, custodian, cook, assistant cook, 3 ed. techs, and the school nurse). The teachers were, for the most part, mid-career teachers who had an average of 20 years of teaching experience. The majority had been teaching at this school for at least 15 years. The educational leader who was the subject of this study, Lara C. (a pseudonym), had been in her current position at Lawrence Elementary School for two years at the time of this study. She was the fifth principal that the school had had in the past ten years. This was her fourth principalship. Prior to her principalships, Lara had been an elementary teacher for 27 years.
I wanted to study the conversations of a principal who was considered *successful* and chose Lara because of her reputation with peers and the state university. As an educator with over twenty years of experience in the same state, I was aware of her reputation for creating positive relationships and climates in the schools she led and wished to explore how her conversations with her staff members might or might not play a role in these dynamics. Although there were other principals I could have chosen for this study, it was the widespread high regard among educator peers for Lara’s reported interpersonal leadership abilities that made her attractive to me as a “successful” principal.

There were additional, somewhat more objective, criteria to support her selection as a “successful” principal: (a) she was selected for her state’s Academy of School Leaders; (b) she was the requested speaker at her states’ Principal’s Association Conference; (c) she was nominated as a National Distinguished Principal; (d) she was chosen to be her state’s representative to report to the National Congressional Task Force on Impact of No Child Left Behind on Rural Schools; and (e) at the request of the state university’s Educational Leadership Program, she has taught *The Principalship*, a graduate level course, to future educators for the past five years.

Although the following information was not known at the time of the selection of this principal, it is of note and does provide some additional, *ex post facto*, support for her designation as a *successful* principal. The spring prior to this principal’s arrival, Lawrence Elementary School was designated a priority school, according to Title I evaluations. By the second year of her principalship (the year of data collection for this

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6 The state department of education uses a formula to determine a school’s designation as a priority school, which involves collecting aggregate information based upon the school’s Title I population, special education population, and scores on the state assessment examinations.
study), student scores on state assessment tests had increased sufficiently for the school to be removed from the list of priority schools.

I chose to study a principal who was considered to be successful because I believed that we can learn the most about best practices from successful practitioners. If we can find out what it is that successful educators do in their practices, then we can “spread the word.” It is leaders with reputations and results like the principal who was the subject of this study whom we want influencing the teachers and students in our public schools.

**Data Collection Methods**

In order to generate the kind of data that would best inform my research questions, I employed a qualitative methodology, using an exploratory case study approach with multiple methods for gathering data. (To view a chart showing the alignment of research questions and data collection methods, see Appendix H.) Three qualitative methods—interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and observations—were employed to gather data.

Before my first visit to Lawrence Elementary School, I met with the principal, and we discussed ways to create an emotionally and psychologically safe relationship between me and the staff members so that as many as possible would feel at ease about participating in the study. On my first visit to the school, I was introduced to staff members at a staff meeting. I spent a few minutes giving them a brief biography of my professional work. Then I provided them with an overview of the study and the research protocol. I stressed the confidentiality of staff members’ participation and that their principal was the focus of the study.
The data collection protocol was as follows:

(1) A questionnaire first used in my fall 2002 pilot study (Appendix I) served as the basis for the instrument used in this study for the staff survey (Appendix B). In the pilot study, staff responses on these questionnaires had proved to be a rich source of data (See Appendix I). Modifications to this original fall 2002 instrument were made based upon the following: (a) feedback from the fall 2002 pilot study’s participants; (b) input from doctoral cohort members; (c) input from doctoral committee members.

To collect data related to the categories that had emerged from the pilot study and the literature, open-ended questions were used on the survey instrument for this study. The staff questionnaire was made available to all Lawrence Elementary School’s professional and non-professional staff members. Based upon a review of my pilot study protocol, I took steps to provide greater anonymity for participants. In the pilot study, staff members had picked up questionnaires from a pile on a table at a staff meeting, and returned them to an envelope on the school secretary’s desk. In retrospect, I realized that both of these venues were too public and, consequently, presented potential barriers to staff members’ participation because of the problems with preserving participant anonymity.

For the study I conducted at Lawrence Elementary School, I mailed questionnaires and self-addressed return envelopes to all twenty-two Lawrence Elementary School staff members. The questionnaires provided staff members with an anonymous alternative to the staff interviews for registering their viewpoints and experiences. This more private option provided a potentially easier option for staff members to express any negative data, which they might have been more hesitant to
express in an interview situation. A two-month period of time was allowed for the completion and return of questionnaires. I solicited staff input on their choice for the starting and ending dates of this two-month period. Seven staff members completed and returned questionnaires, a response rate of 32%.

(2) I interviewed staff members, which provided the opportunity to probe beyond the limits of the staff survey instrument. I waited to initiate this method until I had been at Lawrence Elementary School for two months and had had a chance to become a “known quantity” with staff members. All Lawrence Elementary School staff members were invited to participate in individual interviews. Ten of the 22 staff members elected to be interviewed, a response rate of 45.5%. The group of staff interviewees was comprised of 7 teachers and 3 other staff members. I conducted the interviews at the school during May and June 2004.

The interviews generally fit easily into a staff member’s free period; when an interview took longer or was unavoidably interrupted, arrangements were made to complete it at the staff member’s convenience. Each staff interview took forty-five minutes to one hour and was done in a setting to preserve confidentiality, e.g., an empty classroom or office. A list of Staff Interview Questions (Appendix E) guided the interviews. (They closely paralleled the Principal Interview Questions (Appendix G).) Each interview was recorded on an audiotape, and I created a typed transcript of each interview. These tape-recorded, transcribed interviews yielded thirty-seven single-spaced pages of data.

(3) I also interviewed Lara C., the principal of Lawrence Elementary School. A list of Principal Interview Questions guided the interviews (Appendix G). Many of these
questions were piloted on a questionnaire with the principal who was part of my spring 2003 pilot study; the questions had proved to generate data around the issues of conversations, relationships, inclusion\(^7\), and school climate. An advantage of the interview protocol was the opportunity for the interviewer to listen and gently probe for deeper responses to questions. The interview with Lara took approximately 45 minutes. It was tape-recorded and transcribed and yielded 5 single-spaced pages of data.

(4) I observed the principal by shadowing her during her typical activities. I made 31 visits to the research site; each visit lasted approximately 3.5 hours, for a total of approximately 108 hours from March 1, to July 1, 2004. During my time on site, I shadowed Lara and took field notes regarding her conversational behaviors in a variety of venues: her office, the combination gymnasium/cafeteria, the hallways, classrooms, the teachers' room, the kitchen, the bathroom, the library, Lara's car, and the local store. I made most of my observations in the morning; I usually arrived at 7:30 a.m. and met Lara in her office. By 7:45 a.m. we were in the gymnasium with all the students, where she covered the before school duty. I generally left the site between 11:30 to 11:45 when Lara was back in the gymnasium/cafeteria covering lunch duty for the K-5 teachers; there were six occasions when I also made observations of the principal in the afternoon and during after school meetings. Although the primary data for this research report comes from the perceptions of the staff members, observation data provided some corroboration

\(^7\) Because of the large amount of data related to inclusion, it seemed to warrant its own category in data analysis: inclusivity/exclusivity. Rather than forcing the data around climate and inclusion into one category, it seemed to be an appropriate response to the data to break it out as one of the four categories: conversation behaviors, relational descriptors, inclusivity/exclusivity, and climate. During data analysis, it became clear that inclusion was seen as an aspect of relationships and climate. The term that emerged as a descriptor of inclusion as an aspect of relationships was openness. Inclusion was the descriptor for that aspect of school climate.
of the interview and questionnaire-based data. I believed these research methods would most clearly reveal the perspectives and voices of a school’s staff members.

**Data Analysis Methods**

**General Procedures**

Data collected from (a) seven completed staff survey questionnaires, (b) ten interviews with staff members, (c) two interviews with the principal, and (d) researcher observations provided answers to the three research questions. Data from interviews and questionnaires were typed into transcripts, coded according to original sources and saved in computer files. Frequency counts were calculated on the data from staff and principal interviews and the data from the staff survey questionnaire. All data were coded by source: for example: SS-1 meant Staff Survey respondent #1; SI-4 meant Staff Interview participant #4. The careful coding and the creation of this electronic data bank made access rapid and reliable whenever I wished to recheck a reference regarding the original source, the context, or the frequency of data.

**Specific Analysis Procedures by Research Question**

**Research Question 1: What were the characteristics of conversations between a successful principal and her staff members?**

Data and analysis regarding Research Question #1 are reported in Chapter 4 in two sections. In Part #1 of Chapter 4, data from researcher observations and the principal’s responses to an interview specifically about her typical day were analyzed to create a description of the principal and her activities as principal of Lawrence Elementary School; these findings included characteristics of principal-staff conversations from researcher observations. Some data from staff members’ responses to
interview questions and survey questionnaires added to the description of the principal in this first part of the chapter. In Part #2 of Chapter 4, data from staff members’ responses to interview questions and survey questionnaires and the principal’s responses to interview questions were analyzed to surface characteristics of principal-staff conversations. At the end of Chapter 4, the findings regarding characteristics of principal-staff conversations from Part #1 and Part #2 of Chapter 4 are reported and compared.

Research Question #1 looked at the characteristics of the conversations between a successful principal and her staff members. Initially, all the data from the interviews and questionnaires were sorted according to research question (Appendix H). Data for Research Question #1 were analyzed through multiple readings, manual color-coding and data reduction. For the next step in analysis, the coded data were sorted into the established categories that limited the study and that had been chosen based upon previous knowledge, the literature, and a pilot study: conversational behaviors, relational descriptors, inclusivity/exclusivity, and climate (Appendix J).

To continue the content analysis of the data for Research Question #1, further coding and data reduction were done to the data in the conversational behaviors category. I also did cross category analysis to discover any connection or contradictions between themes. I repeatedly read through the data to find, understand, and surface the unique ideas, themes, patterns, and stories there regarding principal-staff conversations. To analyze the data for the frequency and context of words describing characteristics of principal-staff conversations, I read through the data in its entirety, searching for and noting repeated words, phrases, events, and patterns of behavior. Frequency counts
assisted in evaluating the concepts. Italics are used throughout the text in Chapter 4 to highlight these emergent concepts.

This inductive analysis of the data surfaced emergent words, phrases and/or themes that served as more descriptive and refined coding categories. These emergent themes were tested for their fit with the data regarding principal-staff conversations during my repeated readings of the data. Categories were altered, added, or deleted based upon continued analysis of the data, further refinement of my thinking, and comparisons of the themes with the focus of Research Question #1. In the findings, I made careful note of both confirming and disconfirming data.

**Research Question # 2: What were the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships?**

Data and analysis regarding Research Question #2 were reported in the first half of Chapter 5 in two stages. First, findings and analysis of data from staff members’ responses to interview questions and survey questionnaires and the principal’s responses to interview questions were reported regarding the characteristics of principal-staff relationships at Lawrence Elementary School. Second, a matrix (Appendix K) was created to analyze the data for the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships.

Research Question #2 looked at the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships. For the purposes of this study, relationships were the professional, interpersonal connections between the principal and staff members. They included how the principal and staff members recognized and responded to one another’s opinions and feelings and how each regarded the other’s superordinate
or subordinate position as factors in one’s ability to perform well. Operationally, for this study, relationships were understood to be the staff members’ and principal’s perceptions of these connections. Initially, all the data from the interviews and questionnaires were sorted according to research question (Appendix H). Data for Research Question #2 were analyzed through multiple readings, manual color-coding and data reduction. For the next step in analysis, the coded data were sorted into the established categories that limited the study and that had been chosen based upon previous knowledge, the literature, and a pilot study: conversational behaviors, relational descriptors, inclusivity/exclusivity, and climate (Appendix J).

To continue the content analysis of the data for Research Question #2, further coding and data reduction was done to the data in the relational descriptors and inclusivity/exclusivity categories. I also did cross category analysis to discover any connections or contradictions between themes. I repeatedly read through the data to find, understand, and surface the unique ideas, themes, patterns, and stories there regarding principal-staff conversations. To analyze the data for the frequency and context of words describing characteristics of principal-staff conversations, I read through the data in its entirety, searching for and noting repeated words, phrases, events, and patterns of behavior. Frequency counts assisted in evaluating the concepts. Italics are used throughout the text in the first half of Chapter 5 to highlight these emergent concepts.

This inductive analysis of the data surfaced emergent words, phrases and/or themes that served as more descriptive and refined coding categories: (a) support, (b) respect and trust, (c) openness, and (d) freedom to challenge or disagree. These emergent themes were tested for their fit with the data regarding principal-staff relationships during
my repeated readings of the data. I also did cross category analysis to discover any connections or contradictions between themes. Categories were altered, added, or deleted based upon continued analysis of the data, further refinement of my thinking, and comparisons of the themes with the focus of Research Question #2. In the findings, I made careful note of both confirming and disconfirming data.

To analyze the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships, a matrix was created (Appendix K). The characteristics of principal-staff conversations from the findings reported in Chapter 4 were arrayed along the left, vertical edge of the matrix: (a) started conversations with a greeting; (b) provided accessibility for conversations; (c) listened well; (d) shared information re: students, curriculum, and personal issues; (e) used humor; (f) asked empowering questions; (g) took notes that assisted with follow through and follow-up; and (h) gave supportive responses. The findings regarding the characteristics of principal-staff relationships (from the first part of the analysis and findings for Research Question #2) were arrayed along the top, horizontal edge of the matrix: (a) support; (b) respect and trust; (c) openness; and (d) freedom to challenge or disagree.

Each characteristic of Lara’s conversations identified in Chapter 4 was considered in an effort to understand how it contributed to—or possibly undercut—the development of principal-staff relationships at Lawrence Elementary School. It is important to acknowledge that it was impossible to prove the impact of a characteristic of the principal’s conversations on principal-staff relationships. However, I noted possible intersections of data on the matrix that were defensible based upon collected data, and my own judgment as informed by relevant literature. Spaces in the matrix were left blank if
there did not seem to be sufficient support from the collected data, my own judgment, and the relevant literature to indicate a possible connection. It is important to note that there were not a lot of minority views in the data. On the basis of co-occurrence, the conversational characteristics of this principal seem to have had something to do with creating the reported characteristics of principal-staff relationships. These intersections were noted as characteristics of principal-staff conversations that may have had an impact on principal-staff relationships. Intersections that included data regarding characteristics of principal-staff conversations that were not common to both the data from researcher observations and staff members were noted as characteristics of principal-staff conversations that also might have had an impact on principal-staff relationships, as well, but were clearly identified as data that had only been significantly noted by researcher observations.

Research Question #3: What were the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on school climate?

Data and analysis regarding Research Question #3 were reported in the second half of Chapter 5 in two stages. First, findings and analysis of data from staff members’ responses to interview questions and survey questionnaires and the principal’s responses to interview questions were reported regarding the characteristics of the at Lawrence Elementary School. Second, a matrix (Appendix L) was created to analyze the data for the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on school climate.

Research Question #3 looked at the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on school climate.

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8 Because of the interview and survey protocol, the data staff members reported about the school climate were linked with data about Lara. Therefore, the reported data and analysis are more about Lara’s influence on the climate at Lawrence Elementary School, than about isolated data regarding characteristics of the school’s climate.
conversations on school climate. As previously established, there is a blurring of the
distinctions about the specific parameters regarding the concepts culture and climate in
the literature. For the purposes of this study, the word climate referred to the prevailing
interpersonal norms and emotional environment among the adults at a school. It included
the overall tone, quality, and character of the school as a workplace. Operationally, for
this study, climate was understood to be staff members’ and the principal’s perceptions of
this organizational phenomenon.

Initially, all the data from the interviews and questionnaires were sorted according
to research question (Appendix H). Data for Research Question #3 were analyzed
through multiple readings, manual color-coding and data reduction. For the next step in
analysis, the coded data were sorted into the established categories that limited the study
and that had been chosen based upon previous knowledge, the literature, and a pilot
study: conversational behaviors, relational descriptors, inclusivity/exclusivity, and
climate (Appendix J).

To continue the content analysis of the data for Research Question #3, further
coding and data reduction was done to the data in the climate and inclusivity/exclusivity
categories. I also did cross category analysis to discover any connections or
contradictions between themes. I repeatedly read through the data to find, understand,
and surface the unique ideas, themes, patterns, and stories there regarding principal-staff
conversations. To analyze the data for the frequency and context of words describing
characteristics of principal-staff conversations, I read through the data in its entirety,
searching for and noting repeated words, phrases, events, and patterns of behavior.
Frequency counts assisted in evaluating the concepts. Italics are used throughout the text in the second half of Chapter 5 to highlight these emergent concepts.

This inductive analysis of the data surfaced emergent words, phrases and/or themes that served as more descriptive and refined coding categories: (a) *inclusion*, (b) *positive support*, (c) *collegial opportunities*, and (d) *respect and appreciation*. These emergent themes were tested for their fit with the data regarding school climate during my repeated readings of the data. Categories were altered, added, or deleted based upon continued analysis of the data, further refinement of my thinking, and comparisons of the themes with the focus of Research Question #3. In the findings, I made careful note of both confirming and disconfirming data.

To analyze the perceived *impacts* of principal-staff conversations on school climate, a matrix was created (Appendix L). The characteristics of principal-staff conversations from the findings reported in Chapter 4 were arrayed along the left, vertical edge of the matrix: (a) *started conversations with a greeting*; (b) *provided accessibility for conversations*; (c) *listened well*; (d) *shared information re: students, curriculum, and personal issues*; (e) *used humor*; (f) *asked empowering questions*; (g) *took notes that assisted with follow through and follow-up*; and (h) *gave supportive responses*. The findings regarding the *characteristics* of school climate (from the first part of the analysis for Research Question #3) were arrayed along the top, horizontal edge of the matrix: (a) *inclusion*; (b) *positive support*; (c) *collegial opportunities*; and (d) *respect and appreciation*.

Each characteristic of Lara’s conversations identified in Chapter 4 was considered in an effort to understand how it contributed to—or possibly undercut—the climate at
Lawrence Elementary School. It is important to acknowledge that it was impossible to prove the impact of a characteristic of the principal’s conversations on school climate. However, I noted possible intersections of data on the matrix that were defensible based upon collected data, and my own judgment as informed by the relevant literature. Spaces in the matrix were left blank if there did not seem to be sufficient support from the collected data, my own judgment, and the relevant literature to indicate a possible connection. It is important to note that there were not a lot of minority views in the data. On the basis of co-occurrence, the conversational characteristics of this principal seemed to have had something to do with creating the reported characteristics of school climate in the data. These intersections were noted as characteristics of principal-staff conversations that may have had an impact on school climate. Intersections that included data regarding characteristics of principal-staff conversations that were not common to both the data from researcher observations and staff members were noted as characteristics of principal-staff conversations that might have had an impact on school climate, as well, but were clearly identified as data that had only been significantly noted by researcher observations.

**Trustworthiness**

Since this was a case study of one educational leader, there were limitations to the conclusions I could draw. However, a case study approach allowed me to explore the phenomenon, principal-staff conversations, in some depth in its natural setting. Data were primarily emergent, rather than tightly prefigured, and the methods employed in the case study provided the opportunity for collecting descriptive data. This case study with a qualitative methodology is not generalizable in the statistical sense. However, its findings
may be transferable to other principals and their schools, and other leaders and their organizations.

Although there was not triangulation, there were multiple methods of data collection. Surveys were completed by staff members, I conducted an interview with the principal, I conducted interviews with staff members, and I made multiple observations at the research site. In these ways, the principal, the staff members, and the researcher were used as information sources, insuring multiple viewpoints. There was strong consistency between all the collected data.

The weakness of interviews is that they are especially dependent upon the openness and honesty of participants and the level of trust between the researcher and the interviewee. To counter this weakness, I spent two months at the research site before starting the interview process, so that a rapport and level of trust could be established between me and the interviewees.

I was able to make repeated observations of the principal during the 108 hours she spent at Lawrence Elementary School. This data from these observations added depth to the study and were useful for corroborating the data from the staff questionnaires and the staff and principal interviews.

There were some weaknesses in the methods used for researcher observations. My observations were not tape-recorded. Therefore, what was noted was dependent upon my note-taking ability and objectivity regarding which observations of the principal’s conversations were representative. To counter this potential weakness, I was highly vigilant during the observations, listening especially carefully for, and ready to note, any “negative data” that emerged regarding the principal. Because of privacy and
confidentiality issues, I was not able to listen to all of the principal-staff conversations that occurred during my time on site at Lawrence Elementary School.

Data for all three research questions were collected from staff members on seven survey questionnaires and in ten interviews, which yielded a total of 17 data sources from staff members. However, because the survey protocol insured complete anonymity for staff members, there was no way to determine whether there was any overlap between staff members who participated in the staff interviews and staff members who completed and returned questionnaires used in the staff survey.

I did not have a lot of strong data to report that pertained specifically to the Lawrence Elementary School climate. Because of the interview and survey protocol, the data staff members reported about the school climate were linked with data about Lara. Therefore, the reported data and analysis are more about Lara’s influence on the climate at Lawrence Elementary School, than about isolated data regarding the school’s climate. Having acknowledged the limitations of this data, it was still possible to extrapolate some information regarding aspects of the Lawrence Elementary school climate from the data.

The foci of the study—the characteristics of conversation and their potential impacts on relationships and school climate—are generally difficult topics to describe and collect data on. This reality made it challenging to collect data that specifically addressed these phenomena. Further, analyzing the perceived impacts of these conversations on relationships and school climate is very difficult. I had to rely a lot on subjective measures and interpretation.

I have over twenty years of experience as an educator, working for seven different principals, and holding positions both as a classroom teacher and as a program
administrator. I was aware of how my values and experiences regarding conversations, relationships, and climate in schools contributed to my interest in this research and could have influenced my observations and conclusions. I was very invested in the search for a better understanding of how principal-staff conversations might have impacts on principal-staff relationships and school climate. My attraction to and appreciation of these relational dimensions of leadership may have led me to data that supported my own hypothesis.

Throughout data collection and analysis, I tried to be self-aware of any bias that might cause me to unconsciously foreground minor data that resonated with my personal beliefs and experiences and background more major, emergent themes that presented disconfirming data as it related to my personal beliefs and experiences. I attempted to remain continuously aware of my subjectivity by writing and reflecting about possible researcher bias before and after my observations and interviews.

I intentionally searched for any negative cases. For example, when I heard that the principal had had to inform one staff member that her position had been cut from the next year’s budget, I made a point securing an interview with that staff member. I also extended the original deadline for the return of staff survey questionnaires well into the summer with the intention of providing ample opportunity for negative data to surface regarding the studied principal. I made persistent observations of the principal to help counter the reactivity phenomenon of people behaving differently when they are being watched. During data analyst, I returned to the data repeatedly to see if the categories, themes, explanations, and interpretations made sense and if they accurately reflected the
characteristics of the studied principal’s conversations and the staff’s perceptions of their impacts on principal-staff relationships and school climate.

Implications

The findings of this study of the characteristics of a successful principal’s conversations with her staff members and the perceived impact of these conversations on principal-staff relationships and school climate will add to the professional literature concerning leadership, conversation, relationships, and school climate. Educational leaders who are aware of how their conversations may have impacts on their relationships and school climate can make informed choices about how they conduct their conversations.

The literature on effective schools underscores the link between the health or toxicity of principal-staff relationships and the potential positive or negative impacts on a school’s learning climate for students. Therefore, increasing principals’ awareness of how their conversations might have impacts on principal-staff relationships and the work climate for the adults in a school and, ultimately, affect the climate for students is critical for the success of schools.

Findings of the entire study specifically informed the studied principal’s practice. This principal had indicated that she wished to participate in this study for the purposes of improving her practice. This was a powerful model to her staff members about self study, openness to change, listening, and personal growth.
Chapter 4

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PRINCIPAL’S CONVERSATIONS

This chapter provides findings and analysis in response to Research Question #1: *What were the characteristics of conversations between a successful principal and her staff members?* Data collected from (a) seven completed staff survey questionnaires, (b) ten interviews with staff members, (c) an interview with the principal, and (d) researcher observations provided answers for Research Question #1.

Data and analysis regarding Research Question #1 are reported in Chapter 4 in two sections. In Part #1 of Chapter 4, data from researcher observations and the principal’s responses to an interview specifically about her typical day were analyzed to create a description of the principal and her activities as principal of Lawrence Elementary School; these findings included characteristics of principal-staff conversations from researcher observations. Some data from staff members’ responses to interview questions and survey questionnaires added to the description of the principal in this first part of the chapter. In Part #2 of Chapter 4, data from staff members’ responses to interview questions and survey questionnaires and the principal’s responses to interview questions were analyzed to surface characteristics of principal-staff conversations. At the end of Chapter 4, the findings regarding characteristics of principal-staff conversations from Part #1 and Part #2 are reported and compared.

Data from interviews and questionnaires were transformed into typed transcripts, assigned a code number, and saved in computer files. All data were encoded by source: for example: SS-1 meant Staff Survey respondent #1; SI-4 meant Staff Interview
participant #4. The careful coding and the creation of this electronic data bank made access rapid and reliable, whenever I wished to check or recheck a reference regarding the original source, the context, or the frequency of data.

Research Question #1 looked at the characteristics of the conversations between a successful principal and her staff members. For the purpose of this study, a conversation was defined as dyadic communication between the principal and staff members involving an exchange of ideas that involves eye contact, listening, mutual respect, shared inquiry, and a desire for mutual understanding (Noddings, 1992; Flick, 1998; Isaacs, 1999; Lambert, 2002). It is understood from the literature that even brief, casual exchanges reveal characteristics of a person’s conversations.

Initially, all the data from the interviews and questionnaires were sorted according to research question (Appendix H). Data for Research Question #1 were analyzed through multiple readings, manual color-coding, and data reduction. For the next step in analysis, the coded data were sorted into the established categories that limited the study and that had been chosen based upon previous knowledge, the literature, and a pilot study: conversational behaviors, relational descriptors, inclusivity/exclusivity, and climate (Appendix J).

To continue the content analysis of the data for Research Question #1, further coding and data reduction was done to the data in the conversational behaviors category. I also did cross category analysis to discover any connection or contradictions between themes. I repeatedly read through the data to find, understand, and surface the unique ideas, themes, patterns, and stories regarding principal-staff conversations. To analyze the data for the frequency and context of words describing characteristics of principal-staff
conversations, I read through the data in its entirety, searching for and noting repeated
words, phrases, events, and patterns of behavior. Frequency counts assisted in evaluating
the concepts. Italics are used throughout the text in Chapter 4 to highlight these emergent
concepts.

This inductive analysis of the data surfaced emergent words, phrases and/or
themes that served as more descriptive and refined coding categories: (a) *started
conversations with a greeting*; (b) *provided accessibility for conversations*; (c) *listened
well*; and (d) *shared information re: students, curriculum, and personal issues*; (e) *used
humor*; (f) *asked empowering questions*; (g) *took notes that assisted follow-up and follow
through*; and (h) *gave supportive responses*. Characteristics a, b, c, d, and e were noted
by researcher observation and in data from staff members; characteristics f, g, and h were
noted only in researcher observations. These emergent themes were tested for their fit
with the data regarding principal-staff conversations during my repeated readings of the
data. Categories were altered, added, or deleted based upon continued analysis of the
data, further refinement of my thinking, and comparisons of the themes with the focus of
Research Question #1. In the findings, I made careful note of both confirming and
disconfirming data.

**Part #1: Characteristics of Principal-staff Conversations from Researcher**

**Observations**

Researcher observations and an interview with Lara provided information
regarding her activities as principal of Lawrence Elementary School, including a
description of Lawrence Elementary School and the details of Lara’s typical day. Quotes
attributed to Lara come from the interview in which she described her typical day.
The events of the "typical day" were representative of the 108 hours I was present at Lawrence Elementary School observing Lara: these were repeated behavior patterns that emerged from the data in my field notes and in the interview with the principal about her typical day. These conversation-related behavior patterns are highlighted in italics throughout the text in Chapter 4.

Included conversations in the "typical day" were transcribed from my notes; they were not tape-recorded. Although each of these conversations did occur, they did not all occur on one day. These conversations were chosen for their typicality. Based upon the opportunities I had to hear examples of the principal’s conversations during my time at Lawrence Elementary School, I have confidence that these conversations were representative.

**Description of the Research Site**

Lawrence Elementary School is a long, white, one-story building that runs parallel to the road; two portable classrooms provide needed space for the upper grades’ student enrollment. It is a K-8 school with 120 students and 22 staff members (includes secretary, custodian, cook, assistant cook, 3 ed. techs and the school nurse). The teachers were, for the most part, mid-career teachers who had an average of 20 years of experience. The majority had been teaching at this school for at least 15 years.

The main door of the school, located nearest the inner curve of the driveway, leads into the short leg of the school’s L-shaped hallway. Immediately to the right after you enter through the main double-doors of the school is the door to the school office. The administrative assistant’s desk and chair, the school intercom, and one of the school’s two copy machines are squeezed into the outer office.
The wall between the principal’s office and the administrative assistant was glass from about three feet above the floor to a foot from the ceiling; horizontal blinds on Lara’s side of this “window wall” could be closed as needed to provide privacy. A door on the interior wall of this outer office opens into Lara’s office. Straight ahead as you enter her office is a small table, covered with a table cloth, set for serving tea from a nearby teapot and china tea cups, but more likely in use for organizing the latest book sale or packaging up the completed state educational assessment tests. Sharing the shelf with the teacups is a framed picture of Lara’s granddaughter. To the left is her desk, supporting a computer and flanked by a four-drawer file cabinet. Hanging on the wall to the right was a calendar with school events noted in each day’s block.

**Description of the Principal of Lawrence Elementary School**

Lara, the principal of Lawrence Elementary School, is about 5 feet 7 inches tall, of average weight, with short, curly, light brown hair, steady green eyes, and a quick smile. She often wears bright-colored (blue, green, red, warm brown) dresses, skirts, (at the knee or ankle length) and blouses or sweaters, usually accessorized with dangly, pierced earrings and interesting necklaces or pins. Frequently, she wears mid-heeled dress shoes that click smartly on the tiled floors of Lawrence Elementary School as she moves rapidly through the hallways. When she’s in conversation with staff members, Lara turns to face the other person and makes eye contact; she does not interrupt.

All staff members had positive comments—and no negative comments—about Lara’s affect toward them. They described Lara’s affect as “friendly” (SI-8), “happy” (SI-9), “smiling and cheerful” (SI-6). “Her tone is always very upbeat. [She] always has a smile, and you can hear a smile—even if we’re talking on the phone—you can hear her
They saw her as “mellow, very easy going” (SI-10), “light-hearted” (SI-8) and had “never seen her ‘blow’” (SI-10). They appreciate that she is “easy to talk to” (SS-2), and her affect was “never combative [or] threatening” (SI-1). Staff members noted many positive characteristics in Lara. Staff members saw this principal as friendly, positive, high-energy, smiling, helpful, mellow, and easy to talk to.

**Description of the Principal’s “Typical Day”**

Lara usually arrives at Lawrence Elementary school around 7 o’clock each morning. She knows that on the rare occasion she arrives after 7 o’clock, she “throws everyone’s schedule off.” She parks her car along the arc of the school driveway and heads into the building. Lara unlocks the main door to the school office, turns on the photo copier, unlocks her office door, and unlocks her file cabinet (where student records are stored). She reads and sorts the mail the custodian always leaves for her on top of her desk and turns on the computer to read her emails.

By 7:15, Lara can hear other people coming through the main door. Her usual greeting to each staff member who stops by is “Good morning! How are you?” A teacher sticks her head in Lara’s office and says she needs “five minutes of your time,” says she will be right back, and leaves to deposit her coat and book bag in her classroom. When that first teacher returns, another teacher is already in Lara’s office, showing her some of her students’ work; she alerts Lara to something a student needs, and then leaves. Another teacher enters the office and asks Lara, “Do you have a minute?”

Lara is regularly in her office at this point, “because,” as Lara put it, “staff members are counting on me to be available” at this time of the day. Lara says she knows from experience that “there is nothing anyone has to say that takes a minute, but I never
say ‘no’ unless I’m dealing with something else that absolutely can’t wait.” Lara notes that “in the morning, staff members have questions for her; they want clarification or need help understanding something: they want to ask me stuff.” In the afternoon, they want to tell me stuff, how something went.”

The following conversations were typical of many others. They often cover issues with students, curriculum, and, less often, personal issues. Lara’s enthusiasm and support for teachers’ ideas was often evident (to me).

Conversation #1 – Lara (L) and Teacher (T) in Lara’s office

Context: Teacher (T) had visited another school to do an observation of a literacy program, liked what she saw, and needs materials to make changes in her curriculum:

T: Thank you. It was great. I learned so much.

L: Put in for everything you feel you need.

T: OK, everything except the easel.

L: Go for it!

This is an example of how Lara offers support and permission to staff members. The “go for it” response was a common response to staff members’ ideas, requests, and proposals.

Conversation #2: Lara (L) and Teacher (T) in Lara’s office.

Context: Lara had suggested this teacher join the music teacher for a summer music and drama workshop in another state; Lara has gotten funding for two to attend.

T: I’m going to do that summer thing with (another teacher).

L: Holy Moley! Do you have the application on a school computer? If you don’t, I’ll retype it for you. Oh my golly! It’s just perfect for you and (the other teacher).
T: I’m glad I can go!
L: Hooray! That’s going to be fantastic!

This is an example of how Lara offers support and resources to staff members. This is that “go for it” feeling that seemed to pervade the climate.

At 7:30, Lara walks from the office to the end of the short, ramped hallway, where the gymnasium/cafeteria doors open to the left. Opposite this entrance is the long segment of the school’s L-shaped hallway; classrooms, bathrooms, storage closets, and the teachers room all open off this hallway. At the far end, the doors open onto the raised wooden walkway connecting the main building to the portable classrooms. Lara takes up her position around the half court line of the gymnasium’s basketball court.

The students, clustered talking in small groups, or participating in impromptu basketball games, operate quite independently. Lara intercepts the occasional errant pass, greets and chats with students, and has brief exchanges with teachers who visit her in the gym. She explains that these are almost always “quick, targeted questions,” because it means taking time out of their prep time”. Lara says if she is delayed getting to the gym for this duty she has elected to do, the students come looking for her. She says they seem to “want visual contact with [her]; “they want me there.”

By 7:45, the students are off to their classrooms, and Lara is back in her office, if she is not intercepted by someone in the 25 feet between the gym door and her office door.

Conversation #3: Lara and 6th grade teacher (T), in hallway between gymnasium and school office:

L: Good morning, how are you?
Fine. How are you? (Lara had been fighting a cold).

Much better, thank you! Keep your ear to the ground. (Student names) left the dance early. They helped set-up, but then they left.

OK, I will.

I need to write thank you notes to the ten mothers who helped me out at the dance Friday night. Something interesting happened with some girls and I’m dying to find out what.

The preceding is an example of how Lara *starts conversations with staff members with a greeting and shares information*. These greetings were invariably upbeat in tone.

When Lara makes it back to the school office, she stops to spend a few minutes talking with her administrative assistant. Any conversation between the two is limited, because it is a very busy time for both Lara and the administrative assistant, with lunch counts to tally and phone calls to field.

Lara heads into her office, where she finishes reading her regular mail and responding to and deleting emails, noting “the emails take up a lot of time—it’s continuous communication.” She lists the things she needs to get done that day on a colored index card. She *meets with each teacher every week; she locks in a time*, “so I am sure; I don’t want to leave anyone out or leave anything hanging.”

Parents who have just dropped their children off may stop by to talk with Lara around this time. These kinds of visits are usually over by 9:00.

At 9:00, Lara walks down the long hallway, checking to see which students are absent and enjoying seeing all the academic work underway. She may take a bathroom break at this point, because she “never goes to the bathroom during recess or lunch,
because that’s the only time the teachers have to use it.” Lara’s travels through the hallways are punctuated by her “Good morning! How are you?” greetings to each staff member she encounters. At this point in her day, Lara may return to her office to make or receive more phone calls (often from other administrators in her school district), and check and return emails. By 9:30, she may have a scheduled meeting with a teacher. If she does not have a scheduled meeting, Lara may stop by the kitchen or a classroom to see a staff member about something.

At 10 o’clock, she likes to be back in her office and available for the K-5 students going to or from recess, who like to “know I’m there,” so they can stop and “tell me what I need to know.” They notice if she is out of her office or the building during their recess time, and ask Lara, “Where were you yesterday?” when they see her.

When this recess is over at 10:20, Lara likes to use the 40 minutes she has before lunch duty to focus on “new stuff”; this is her “prime time” for thinking about and planning any new projects. She also may still have calls to make or return. Staff members may stop by to see her.

Conversation # 4 - Lara (L) and teacher (T) – Lara’s office

L: What are the prices for a trumpet?

T: (Gives prices.)

L: Why don’t you go ahead and I’ll give you a check. I really want that kid to have that trumpet. Lots of things are chaotic in his life. If this helps his self esteem about his math ability . . .

T: I think I’m going to start working math into conversations with him.
L: Great! Will the trumpet come in a nice case? ‘Cause that’s as important to the
student as the trumpet itself.

T: I’m going to tell him this is a school trumpet. If he’s still playing in eighth grade,
it’s his!!!

L: I love it. I don’t think those kinds of breaks happen for this kid.

This is yet another example of the supportive responses Lara gave staff members. Near
the end of this exchange, Lara makes a note in her communication notebook regarding
getting the funds for the trumpet. Teachers often seek Lara out for advice, permission,
and resources. She typically writes things in her communication notebook that help her
remember to do the follow-up.

Conversation # 5: Lara (L) and Teacher (T) in Lara’s office – scheduled weekly meeting

Context: Lara and Teacher are discussing federal education legislation.

L: What could we do, given national agendas over which we have no control, to
make people feel valued and not devalued? What can we do here?

T: You were down there doing the positive publicity. You do a good job of that.
I think we need a systematic way of keeping positive p.r. out there

L: I see the devaluing everywhere. But (Lara reminds the staff member) they can
only do that to [us] if [we] allow them to. It’s very frustrating for me, us, in
administration . . . I don’t know. I apologize that I can’t block some of this
for you so you can feel good about the incredible work you do. I see the heart
and passion of what you are doing. I’m concerned that despite all that, that you
are not feeling valued. Who can believe [that] if you publicly humiliate people,
they will do better? I hate it that it affects your passion.
T: It’s a wearing down – it’s an erosion.

L: It always comes down to the kids. As professional teachers, when you see a child light up, when she starts to read, that’s the reward.

T: You do a lot for us in a lot of ways. You’re very valued.

The preceding exchange is an example of the conversations Lara has with her staff members about the broad picture of public education and how it impacts Lawrence Elementary School and its staff members. These conversations typically include Lara’s eliciting and sharing personal feelings and professional views.

Each day from 11 to 11:45, Lara takes lunch duty for the K-5 teachers, who would not have much of a break without her intervention. “It’s fun, and I love it,” she says. “And most teachers appreciate that I do appreciate lunch duty!”

She squirts on the ketchup for the younger students and keeps the slightly older ones from crying when their milk spills. She also cleans all the tables after each of the two lunch shifts, and often simultaneously, offers a listening ear to a student. “If I have a student who has just had a rough time at lunch, I’ll ask them to stay and talk to me while I wash down the tables. It’s a plan that seems to work: if you’re doing something while you’re talking to them, you tend to talk less. Otherwise, I might do too much talking.

Lara brings her lunch tray back to the office at noon so she can answer the school phone while the administrative assistant is in the kitchen checking off the students who have purchased lunches. Lara also likes to be in the office and available for any of the older students who might want to stop by and talk before, during, or after their recess.

Once a week, Lara drives to a take-out restaurant in the town, buys her lunch, and talks to the two people who do the cooking there as she eats her lunch. She uses the time
to “straighten out any gossip [about the school], and pick up any new stuff!” Lara has found that talking regularly to parents is another good way to “pick up on the local gossip and the public perception of the school.”

At 12:40, her administrative assistant leaves for an hour. By 1:00, Lara may be visiting with a teacher during a scheduled meeting time.

The following conversation is an example of how Lara shares her perceptions about students with staff members. This provides them with another “take” on the student(s) in question.

Conversation #6: Lara (L) and Teacher (T) in Lara’s office – scheduled meeting

Context: This staff member provides some counseling services for the school.

T: I’m going to try to do a training session in each class two times a month. I just did a triage. I thought it was a priority to see kids who might need to see more of me.

L: Well, try it and see. If it doesn’t do what you expect, you can change it again.

T: It gives me a bit more flexibility. So I don’t have to say no to kids or put them off too long.

L: Did you see (student)?

T: Yes. But it’s not like I came in with magic beads. He gets things off his chest and his feelings dissipate. As long as you’re consistent with him, he holds his own. But I’ve given up on the idea of a whole hour.

L: And that’s the student who comes down just for hugs. One thing I’m thinking is that (student) is really fragile right now. I’m not positive of that. She’s such a sweetie – and bright!
T: An Ann of Green Gables who grew up in a ghetto.

L: She’s playing a poor hand well. Long-term, unconditional caring from a supportive person helps. We talked about ways we can make friends and ways we can be a friend.

T: I don’t know why you need a guidance counselor!

In this segment of another conversation with the same staff member, there are examples of how Lara asks empowering questions when she is talking with staff members:

L: What do you think is the matter with him?

T: (Describes situation with student who wants counseling services.)

L: Let me play it back. What do you see as your role?

Other examples of Lara’s use of questions in conversations are found in the following exchanges. The first conversation was with a teacher regarding a planned classroom visitation by Lara:

L: What do you want me to be looking at?

T: The number sense activity—my focus and their understanding of the basic operations.

L: Great!

T: I want to see how the transitions go.

Another staff member approaches Lara to share a personal challenge:

T: I have to write an essay, and I’m not very good at it.

L: Do you want some help?

A staff member offers information about a student’s behavior problem.
L: It sounds like he’s just playing both ends against the middle and doing a pretty good job of it. So, what are you going to do with him?

T: (Shares strategy for dealing with the student’s behavioral problem.)

L: Anything I can write up anything good [about the student] you know I want to do that. If there is anything else I can do to help, let me know.

At 1:30, Lara makes sure she is available in the office to allow students to use the phone to call home. Lara officially has to monitor these calls and finds that parents want to take advantage of having her at the other end of the phone to share a concern. At 1:30, the cooks are done cleaning up the kitchen after lunch, and they like to stop by and chat. After that, her time is usually taken up by more phone calls and salespeople calling or appearing.

By 2:30, parents start coming to pick up their children and may want to catch Lara “for just a minute.” Lara likes to use this time to chat with the bus drivers when they arrive and are waiting for school to be dismissed. She said she can find out what is happening on the bus, and offer to help. Her administrative assistant returns in time to call the students by class to board the busses. Lara stands at main doors of the school to say goodbye to the students, and “see every kid out the door.” She believes it is crucial to make eye contact with each student; it gives her a quick reading on what kind of a day each student had and can be a heads-up for the following day. Lara stands by the rail outside the school’s main doors and waves good-bye as the busses swing out of the school driveway “even in bad weather,” she says, “which seems to impress them.”

At 3:05 when Lara comes back through the door, there are at least two to three staff members waiting to talk, wanting to know, “Do you have a minute?” Lara says
“this is the time of the day teachers want to tell you what happened. By telling you, they sort it out for themselves. They hardly ever ask questions; they are too tired to ask questions.”

Somewhere between 3:00 and 3:30, Lara likes to have a conversation with her administrative assistant, because “we’re both so busy, days can go by without our having a chance to talk.” Lara also might join a conversation that a teacher team is having about students or curriculum. At 3:30, Lara also likes to save time at this point in the day for a conversation with the school custodian.

In the afternoon, sports teams are either practicing or may have a game scheduled; Lara is a big fan. She likes to wear the school colors on game days, and also attends games. Lara was not certain, but her husband reports she is usually home by 5:45 p.m. “Unless I have a night meeting or event to go to,” she added.

Summary of Characteristics of Principal-Staff Conversations from Researcher

Observations

This profile of Lara’s typical day has highlighted the repeated behaviors I found in Lara’s conversations with her staff members. These observations revealed eight, dominant, conversation-related behaviors:

1. Provided accessibility for conversations.

Lara was often available to teachers for conversations in the following ways: (a) she was physically accessible in her office at the start of the day and the end of the day; (b) she schedules a meeting with each teacher once each week and also makes a point of seeing other staff members regularly; and (c) she was available in her office, the hallway, the school office, the kitchen, or a classroom.
2. Started with a greeting.

Lara repeatedly started conversations with staff members with a greeting. “Hey lady, how are you?” “How’s it going?” “Good morning!” “How are you?” are examples of how Lara greets staff members. These greetings are delivered in an energetic, “upbeat” manner to staff members who enter her office or whom she encounters in the hall.

3. Openly shared information regarding students, curriculum, or personal issues.

Conversations between Lara and staff members often addressed students, curriculum, or personal issues. The conversations about students addressed positives or negatives occurring in the classroom or their personal lives. With regard to curriculum issues, staff members frequently come to her for advice, permission, and sometimes for resources. The references to personal issues I observed pertained to inquiries about staff members or their families, reports of vacation destinations, and the arrival of new children or grandchildren. There were also personal exchanges that included inquiries about the staff member or a staff member’s family member—“I’m glad you’re feeling well enough to be back to work. You take it easy.” or “How is (staff member’s husband) doing? I’m sorry to hear that.”

4. Asked empowering questions.

Lara asked questions during conversations that offered help to staff members but didn’t offer to solve situations for the staff member. Whether it was about offering to write a grant with a staff member, a conversation about a more complex issue with a student, or scheduling a teacher observation, the following questions are examples of the kinds of questions she asked: “How can I help?” “What would you like me to do?” and “What do you think?”
5. *Gave supportive responses.*

Lara expressed support and enthusiastic responses to staff members’ reports about students or requests. Typical expressions included: “That’s wonderful; Glad to hear she’s doin’ well;” “Put in for everything you feel you need;” “Go for it!” She told two different staff members that she would help them find funds (for a conference and for a trumpet for a student) and worked with a third to help write a grant.


Lara’s body language shows that she is listening to staff members during conversations with them. When Lara has a conversation with a staff member, her usual behavior was to rotate her chair so that she was facing the other person; she and the other conversant were face-to-face, with no intervening desk. She looked directly at the other person throughout the conversation, stopping occasionally to write a note in her communication notebook. If she talked with someone in the hallway, she stopped, faced the person, and looked them in the eye. She did not interrupt and allowed time for staff members to complete what they were saying. She did not appear anxious to “jump in” during any slower parts of a conversation.

7. *Took notes that assisted follow-through and follow-up.*

Noting things in her communication notebook during and/or after conversations with staff members was Lara’s usual procedure. When Lara had a conversation with a staff member, she had her spiral-bound communication notebook open on her desk beside her and a pen ready to take notes. She stopped occasionally to write notes during the conversations, sometimes saying aloud what she was noting. She kept the notebook with her at all times to make notes during conversations, and note requests from staff members
and other 'things to do'. “That way I keep it straight and remember it,” she said. She wrote notes during or immediately after a conversation with a staff member. In addition to sometimes vocalizing the notes as she wrote them, she sometimes read them back to the other person when she finished writing to check her understanding. She told me it was the only way she could reliably keep track of what transpired in the conversations and what the follow-up was going to be.

8. Used humor.

There was a lightheartedness or humor in some of the principal’s shorter exchanges with staff members. This was more of a gentle humor, rather than raucous frivolity.

**Part 2: Characteristics of Lara’s principal-staff conversations from staff members’ and the principal’s perspectives**

The data are reported in three different sections: (a) Conversation-related behaviors; (b) Types of conversations; and (c) Topics of conversation. Data were collected from questionnaires sent to staff members, interviews conducted with individual staff members, and an interview with the principal.

The quotations from individual staff members on staff survey questionnaires (SS) and in staff interviews (SI) are identified by their assigned code number. For example: SS-3 signifies staff survey respondent #3, and SI-4 signifies staff interview participant #4. Responses from the principal are identified as PI (principal interview). Italics are used throughout the text in this section to highlight these emergent concepts.
**Conversation-Related Behaviors**

The following conversation-related behaviors were mentioned most often by staff members:

*Listened well*

Lara’s listening ability was the trait mentioned most by staff members who participated in the study. Positive comments regarding Lara’s ability to listen were mentioned a total of 31 times among staff members’ responses on 13 of 17 interview/questionnaire documents. Given the opportunity to describe and characterize their conversations with their principal, staff members indicated the principal’s *ability to listen* was her most dominant conversational asset. Staff members reported that Lara “always seems willing to hear [and] sometimes she *uses the technique of reflective listening*” (SI-3); “Lara’s body language and results convey the posture. When one is truly engaged in active listening, it is obvious” (SS-5); and that “she is leaning in and listening” (SI-10) and “quite often, she will jot notes” (SI-4) during a conversation. Additional data paint a vivid picture of Lara’s listening skills:

She makes a point of turning around and *giving you her full attention*. She looks you in the eye; she listens to every single thing you have to say. She *doesn’t interrupt*; she lets you get all the way to the end, no matter how long it might take you. She’s very direct, gets right to the point, and really listens to what you have to say (SI-5). Another staff member noted “how Lara *always looks you right in the eyes*, and she gets close. And she just so sincerely will ask you—she doesn’t cross her arms, she doesn’t
have that negative body language at all” (SI-7). Another staff member described Lara’s listening skills and how it made her feel:

I think listening is one of Lara’s major strengths. She take time to listen, one-on-one and is generally very supportive. I think Lara’s particularly skilled at this—whether it be communicating with kids, teachers, parents, school committee members or department of ed. people. She is able to make people feel valued and respected and that and that what they have to say is important (SS-7).

Although this staff member did not describe it in detail, she did seem to note the presence of Lara’s “communication notebook”:

She lets you talk, sometimes takes notes, [and] promises to follow through on matters that she is able to deal with that will help a teacher handle parent issues or student issues (SS-6).

Staff members mentioned how Lara’s listening ability allowed for their points of view to be included in the conversation: (a) “[S]he’ll ask why I think that—and listen” (SI-9); “We just have conversation. It’s not an argument—it’s just a conversation. It’s just like we were talking about anything else, but we can both put our views in, and then we can talk about a compromise” (SI-6); (c) “She listens and considers your point of view” (SS-1); (d) “Lara will listen, discuss, look for a compromise or common ground” (SS-3).

*Used humor*

Lara’s conversations with staff members were viewed as upbeat, positive, lively, and often sprinkled with humor. The majority of staff members reported only positives
about this light-hearted style. There was also evidence that she handled serious issues well, adapting her affect to the situation.

Staff members (8 of 17) commented specifically on how Lara uses “humor,” is “full of life” and/or “jokes” (SS-1, SS-7, SI-2, SI-4, SI-10); and how she laughs, “kids around,” and is “upbeat” in her conversations (SI-3, SI-5, SI-6). Lara herself acknowledged that “we have a lot of humor around here; that just makes the day go fast” (PI). All but two staff members (15 of 17) who participated in interviews or completed questionnaires indicated positive feelings about the principal’s light-hearted style.

Despite the reportedly pervasive light-heartedness of the principal’s interactions with staff members, there were a number of references to how she deftly balanced the personal and the professional and tailored her affect to the situation. Lara showed a sensitivity to various situations and seemed to usually strike the right chord. For example:

Lara is full of life. But it depends on the seriousness of what we’re talking about what her demeanor is, how she’s going to respond. Conversations are usually—and if you knew Lara, you’d understand this—lively on both our parts. But that doesn’t mean to say that it’s negative or positive. It’s just that we both share and can laugh and joke and see humor, yet we both can sit back and do the serious thing where you need to deal with serious aspects of whatever’s going on (SI-4). Another staff member shared the following: “[She] communicates in a professional, very attentive manner and responds openly and honestly to all queries and issues; otherwise she is a professional at defusing minor or easily satisfied problems with great humor” (SS-1).
The specific occasion for the conversation and each staff member’s personal style seemed to determine whether an individual staff member viewed these particular attributes of the principal’s style as positive or negative. Two staff members (2 out of 17) reported generally positive feelings, with a couple of reservations. One acknowledged feeling “good” about the principal’s conversational style and tone now, however, “[Initially], her style put me off, because I tend to be quiet, and it was a little overwhelming sometimes. I don’t feel that way this year” (SI-3).

The other staff member’s reservations had to do with Lara’s use of humor: “Most of the time, she uses [humor] really effectively. Sometime, I think it kind of waters things down” (SI-2). However, this same respondent also said the following:

But, if you have a serious thing that you want to talk to her about, humor might come up, but she takes it very seriously: you can do that conversation in a serious manner—I don’t feel that it’s taken lightly (SI-2).

**Types of Conversations**

Two different types of conversation were described by staff members. The shorter, more informal conversations were initiated by either Lara or staff members. They took place in the school’s hallway, a classroom, or Lara’s office and could occur at any time of the day. Longer, usually scheduled, conversations took place once a week for each staff member, or as needed, before or after school, or during a teacher’s prep period. These more complex conversations often took place in Lara’s office.

*Shorter, more informal*

Staff members have learned to adapt the length or intent of their conversations to the principal’s availability. The staff indicated an awareness of what topics fit in the time
span of the informal, i.e., casual, “short little conversations” (SI-7) on-the-run, in the hall during the school day. They had learned to count on the expectation that “If Lara knows it’s something lengthy, she will set aside a time” (SI-8).

Lara typified the unscheduled conversations that took place between seven-thirty in the morning and three o’clock in the afternoon as needs-based exchanges, with both content and length circumscribed by the immediate needs of the students and schedule. “. . . throughout the day, it’s mostly not conversations; it’s mostly fragments of sentences and immediate needs: “Lara, have you got a minute?” . . . I’m walking down the hall, and they grab me” (PI).

Longer, usually scheduled

Staff members showed general understanding of, and sensitivity to, when they could expect to have various kinds of conversations with Lara. Two staff members wrote about the quality of listening they saw in these longer conversations with Lara:

[The principal] is busy enough and engaged in so many things, that . . . to hold a quality conversation, most times I need to make an appointment. However, whenever that has occurred, I feel her quality of listening is exceptional. I don’t feel like she is thinking about the twenty million other things she needs to do. I feel like she’s attending to me, my stories, questions, issues, problems, etc, with full attention. She follows up on things I ask about or need attention on (SS-7). She really listens, never interrupts, lets you finish. She give me her complete attention, looks me directly in the eye with respect and openness. When I have finished, she carefully and thoughtfully addresses everything I have said. This is her closed door, I-have-an-appointment behavior (SS-1).
Lara's behavior indicated that she was well-aware of the importance of providing the
time and space for the more substantive principal-staff conversations to occur.

After school, I make a point of staying in the office and that’s when people come
when they want to have a longer conversation. And they know that. It’s
something that’s evolved; it’s almost an unwritten code. If you have something
that’s going to take more than two minutes to talk to Lara about, you can come at
seven in the morning or earlier. And if you don’t catch up with her then, you can
catch her after school. And that works out pretty well. The after school thing’s
turned into 5:30 or 6:30 because we’re having a conversation that was complex
enough for us to take more time (PI).

**Topics of Conversations**

There were four topics that were specifically mentioned by staff members as the
foci of principal-staff conversations: students, general information, professional topics,
and personal issues. The data are reported in decreasing frequency of occurrence.

*Students*

Fourteen out of the 17 staff member interviews and staff member questionnaires
mentioned students as a primary focus of conversations between Lara and staff members.
In a school where a staff member said: “We all put the *students at the head of any list*”
(SS-3), it is not surprising that students and student-related issues were the most
frequently cited foci of all conversations. When asked what the principal’s usual goal was
in initiating a conversation, staff members cited the following student-related
conversation foci: “*students or groups of students*” (SI-1; “check on a *student*” (SI-10);
“ask about a particular *student*” (SI-10); “I think it’s always, in the long run, something
that will benefit the students” (SI-9); and “our conversations center on students” (SS-3).

When the principal was asked about her conversational goals, she had the following response:

We’re all trying to be on the same page; in terms of what we have to do for the kids . . . everybody has the big picture. I’m fairly clear about that at this point and very confident about that. So, the conversations tend to be about: “How can I help you with a kid?” (PI).

General information

Data from 12 of the 17 interviews and questionnaires indicated that sharing information was a primary focus of principal-staff conversations was information. Staff members cited this flow of general information—to or from their principal—as the second most common reason for conversations. In the conversations initiated by their principal, most staff members characterized her goal as one of communicating and providing and/or soliciting information. There were multiple references in staff questionnaires and interviews to conversations as informational exchanges. The following responses are representative: (a) “a dissemination of information,” (SI-2); (b) “to make sure I know something really important,” (SI-5); and (c) “[it is usually] to inform me” (SI-3). This matched with the principal’s expressed intent to keep everyone informed. She reported that she regularly spends time following up on memos she sends: “The written communication is followed up by verbal communications, because they get so much paper, and I don’t trust that.” She adheres to this practice because she has found that the personal contact provides the opportunity for clarification: “. . . if there are
any questions, or anything comes up that was not clear or if there’s a misunderstanding . . .

. . . if you follow up, then you can pretty much clear up some of those things” (PI).

Professional and curriculum topics

There are multiple references to professional topics or pedagogical and/or curriculum-related conversational foci (9 of 17). For example, one respondent describes conversations on a typical day as “most of the time, [they are] about professional-type things” (SI-4). Another says such conversations “generally [have] to do with instruction and best practices” (SI-1). Topics such as “a project we might want to do” (SI-6), “professional development” (SS-3), and “academics” (SI-8) are also mentioned.

Personal

References to the more personal side of their conversations with the principal were mentioned by (7 of 17) of the staff members who responded to items on the interview or questionnaire instrument. Staff members noted that the work-related exchanges were preceded by more personal “regular conversation” (SI-2). They described exchanging greetings: “We greet each other—smiles on both sides” (SI-4), and quote a couple of the principal’s usual ones: “Hey, how are you doing?” (SI-6); and “How’s your day?” (SI-7). Staff members spoke of feeling comfortable discussing “our families” (SI-9) or a “personal family problem” (SI-10) with the principal. Three staff members made specific note of how the principal might ask “how people are doing” or remember to ask something about “your personal life” (SI-8).

The principal’s intentions for principal-staff conversation topics resonated with staff impressions. When asked to describe the kinds of conversations she had with staff members, she described the exchanges as “focused on the work that we have for the day”
and “something about curriculum or upcoming programming.” She responded to staff members’ professional/curriculum-related conversations with offers of support: “How can I help you with resources?”; “Just let me know, if there’s something I could do that would help you improve your instruction.” The principal’s openness to the personal side of staff members was not accidental. She said she believed that “a lot of the communication is personal. The personal is the groundwork for the professional, without which I don’t think the professional can exist” (PI).

**Summary of Characteristics of Principal-Staff Conversations from Staff Members’ and Principal’s Perspectives**

In conversation-related behaviors, the data recognizing listening as a characteristic of Lara’s principal-staff member conversations was strong; humor was the second most noted characteristic. In types of conversations, staff members noted differences between short, on-the-run conversations that typically took place in the hallway and had a limited amount of time, and longer conversations that typically took place in the principal’s office and had a more generous time span. In topics of conversation, staff members report the majority of these principal-staff conversations focused on students, general information, professional or curriculum topics, and, finally, personal issues.

**Findings: Characteristics of the principal’s conversations.**

The following is a synthesis of the data from researcher observations and principal and staff members’ perspectives regarding the characteristics of Lara’s conversations. It is organized in two sections: (a) findings where the researcher observer
and most staff members are in agreement; and (b) findings where there are discrepancies between the data from the researcher observer and staff members.

(a) Findings where the researcher observer and most staff members who participated in the study are in agreement.

1. Started conversations with a greeting.

Lara greeted staff members she saw in the hall or in her office with a “How are you?” “Hey, how’s it goin’?” “Good morning!” that might be just a quick exchange or launch a conversation.

2. Provided accessibility for conversations.

Lara set aside the time and space to be accessible to staff members for various types and topics of conversations. In addition to being available for informal conversations, Lara scheduled conversations with each teacher, and also makes a point of seeing each staff member, each week. Lara’s conversations fell along a continuum, from the briefest, “How are you today?”; to honoring a request from a staff member for a longer exchange on a matter of some urgency: “Could I have five minutes?”; to the scheduled weekly meetings with each teacher during their prep period and with other staff members during their free time; to the ‘infinite’ after school conversations, where Lara stayed “as long as it takes” for a staff member who needed to talk with her about something.

3. Listened well.

Lara listened carefully to what staff members were saying during principal-staff conversations, Lara’s actions and responses clearly indicated that. Both I and staff
members chronicled her attentive body language, how she kept eye contact, and her patience.

4. **Openly shared information regarding students, curriculum, or personal issues.**

Principal-staff conversations focused on sharing information about students, curriculum/pedagogical topics, and, sometimes, personal issues. Staff members sought Lara out for advice, permission, and sometimes for resources. In principal-staff conversations, Lara offered information, support, advice, permission, and/or resources pertaining to students, curriculum, or other work-related issues. Personal exchanges were also an important part of principal-staff member conversations.

5. **Used humor.**

Lara had a sense of humor that came across in principal-staff conversations. The overwhelming opinion of staff members was that it did not subtract from the serious side of the work at Lawrence Elementary School.

(b) **Findings where there were discrepancies between the data from the researcher observer and staff members who participated in the study.**

1. **Asked empowering questions**

Lara’s repeated use of questions in her conversations with staff members was noted by me. Lara claimed that “it is all about the questions”—the questions her staff asked her and the questions she asked her staff. Three questions of Lara’s that surfaced in the data are (a) “How can I help?” (b) “What can I do to help?” and “What do you think?” The message of support these questions conveyed was important; equally so was the message a staff member that she/he owns the decision about how the problem will be
solved. However, only four staff members made note of such questions. The discrepant data regarding questions in principal-staff conversations could have been the result of what staff members understood “characteristics of conversations” to mean (I did not specify a definition on the staff questionnaire or in the staff interview.) Staff members made more mention of Lara’s questions in their descriptions of the perceived impact of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships and school climate.

2. Took notes that assisted follow through and follow-up.

The omnipresence of Lara’s “communication notebook” during principal-staff conversations was noted by the researcher; however, only three staff members noted its presence when they were having principal-staff conversations. That could be a positive sign that Lara’s use of it was not seen as an intrusion or interruption of their conversations with her but, rather, a benefit to them, because Lara’s utilization of the notebook gave staff members more certainty about follow through and follow-up by the principal or it could be a part of the “scene” that staff members view as neither positive or negative.


The frequent expressions of enthusiasm and support that emanated from Lara in response to staff members’ requests or sharing of ideas were noted by the researcher. However, only a few staff members mentioned these positive responses in this section of the data regarding characteristics of conversation. Staff members did mention these kinds of behaviors in their descriptions of principal-staff relationships and school climate. So, they may not have perceived these as characteristics of principal-staff conversations.
Chapter 5

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS: RESEARCH QUESTIONS #2 AND #3

This chapter reports findings and analysis of the data related to Research Question #2: *What were the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships?* and Research Question #3: *What were the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on school climate?* Data collected from (a) seven completed staff survey questionnaires, (b) ten interviews with staff members, and (c) an interview with the principal, provided answers to Research Question #2 and Research Question #3. Data and analysis of Research Question #2 and Research Question #3 are reported in separate sections of Chapter 5.

Data and analysis regarding Research Question #2 are reported in two stages. First, findings and analysis of data from staff members’ responses to interview questions and survey questionnaires and the principal’s responses to interview questions were reported regarding the *characteristics* of principal-staff relationships at Lawrence Elementary School. Second, a matrix (Appendix K) was created to analyze the data for the *perceived impacts* of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships.

Data and analysis regarding Research Question #3 are also reported in two stages. First, findings and analysis of data from staff members’ responses to interview questions and survey questionnaires and the principal’s responses to interview questions were reported regarding the *characteristics* of the climate at Lawrence Elementary School. Second, a matrix (Appendix L) was created to analyze the data for the *perceived impacts* of principal-staff conversations on school climate.
To begin the process of data analysis, data from interviews and questionnaires were transformed into typed transcripts, coded according to original sources, and saved in computer files. All data were encoded by source; for example, SS-1 meant Staff Survey respondent #1; SI-4 meant Staff Interview participant #4. The careful coding and the creation of this electronic data bank made access rapid and reliable, whenever the researcher wished to check or recheck a reference regarding the original source, the context, or the frequency of data.

Research Question #2 looked at the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships. For the purposes of this study, relationships were the professional, interpersonal connections between the principal and staff members. They included how the principal and staff members recognized and responded to one another’s opinions and feelings and how each regarded the other’s superordinate or subordinate position as factors in one’s ability to perform well. Operationally, for this study, relationships were understood to be the staff members’ and the principal’s perceptions of these connections. Initially, all the data from the interviews and questionnaires were sorted according to research question (Appendix H). Data for Research Question #2 were analyzed through multiple readings, manual color-coding and data reduction. For the next step in analysis, the coded data were sorted into the established categories that limited the study and that had been chosen based upon previous knowledge, the literature, and a pilot study: conversational behaviors, relational descriptors, inclusivity/exclusivity, and climate (Appendix J).

To continue the content analysis of the data for Research Question #2, further coding and data reduction was done to the data in the relational descriptors and
inclusivity/exclusivity categories. The researcher also did cross category analysis to
discuss any connections or contradictions between themes. The researcher repeatedly
read through the data to find, understand, and surface the unique ideas, themes, patterns,
and stories there regarding principal-staff conversations. To analyze the data for the
frequency and context of words describing characteristics of principal-staff
conversations, the researcher read through the data in its entirety, searching for and
noting repeated words, phrases, events, and patterns of behavior. Frequency counts
assisted in evaluating the concepts. Italics are used throughout the text in the first half of
Chapter 5 to highlight these emergent concepts.

This inductive analysis of the data surfaced emergent words, phrases and/or
themes that served as more descriptive and refined coding categories: (a) support, (b)
respect and trust, (c) openness, and (d) freedom to challenge or disagree. These emergent
themes were tested for their fit with the data regarding principal-staff relationships during
the researcher's repeated readings of the data. The researcher also did cross category
analysis to discover any connections or contradictions between themes. Categories were
altered, added, or deleted based upon continued analysis of the data, further refinement of
the researcher's thinking, and comparisons of the themes with the focus of Research
Question #2. In the findings, the researcher made careful note of both confirming and
disconfirming data.

To analyze the perceived impact of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff
relationships, a matrix was created (Appendix K). The characteristics of principal-staff
conversations from the findings reported in Chapter 4 were arrayed along the left, vertical
edge of the matrix: (a) started conversations with a greeting; (b) provided accessibility
for conversations; (c) listened well; (d) shared information re: students, curriculum, and personal issues; (e) used humor; (f) asked empowering questions; (g) took notes that assisted with follow through and follow-up; and (h) gave supportive responses. The findings regarding the characteristics of principal-staff relationships (from the first part of the analysis and findings for Research Question #2) were arrayed along the top, horizontal edge of the matrix: (a) support; (b) respect and trust; (c) openness; and (d) freedom to challenge or disagree.

Each characteristic of Lara’s conversations identified in Chapter 4 was considered in an effort to understand how it contributed to—or possibly undercut—the development of principal-staff relationships at Lawrence Elementary School. It is important to acknowledge that it was impossible to prove the impact of a characteristic of the principal’s conversations on principal-staff relationships. However, I noted possible intersections of data on the matrix that were defensible based upon collected data, and my own judgment as informed by the relevant literature. Spaces in the matrix were left blank if there did not seem to be sufficient support from the collected data, the relevant literature, and my own judgment to indicate a possible connection. It is important to note that there were not a lot of minority views in the data. On the basis of co-occurrence, the conversational characteristics of this principal seem to have had something to do with creating the reported characteristics of principal-staff relationships. These intersections were noted as characteristics of principal-staff conversations that may have had an impact on principal-staff relationships. Intersections that included data regarding characteristics of principal-staff conversations that were not common to both the data from researcher observations and staff members were noted as characteristics of principal-staff
conversations that also might have had an impact on principal-staff relationships, as well, but were clearly identified as data that had only been significantly noted by researcher observations.

Research Question #3 looked at the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on school climate. As previously established, there is a blurring of the distinctions about the specific parameters regarding the concepts culture and climate in the literature. For the purposes of this study, climate was the prevailing interpersonal norms and emotional environment among the adults at a school. It included the overall tone, quality, and character of the school as a workplace. Operationally, for this study, climate was understood to be staff members' and the principal's perceptions of this organizational phenomenon.

Initially, all the data from the interviews and questionnaires were sorted according to research question (Appendix H). Data for Research Question #3 were analyzed through multiple readings, manual color-coding and data reduction. For the next step in analysis, the coded data were sorted into the established categories that limited the study and that had been chosen based upon previous knowledge, the literature, and a pilot study: conversational behaviors, relational descriptors, inclusivity/exclusivity, and climate (Appendix J).

To continue the content analysis of the data for Research Question #3, further coding and data reduction was done to the data in the climate and inclusivity/exclusivity categories. The researcher also did cross category analysis to discover any connections or contradictions between themes. The researcher repeatedly read through the data to find, understand, and surface the unique ideas, themes, patterns, and stories there regarding
principal-staff conversations. To analyze the data for the frequency and context of words describing characteristics of principal-staff conversations, the researcher read through the data in its entirety, searching for and noting repeated words, phrases, events, and patterns of behavior. Frequency counts assisted in evaluating the concepts. Italics are used throughout the text in the second half of Chapter 5 to highlight these emergent concepts.

This inductive analysis of the data surfaced emergent words, phrases and/or themes related to climate that served as more descriptive and refined coding categories: (a) inclusion, (b) positive support, (c) collegial opportunities, and (d) respect and appreciation. These emergent themes were tested for their fit with the data regarding school climate during the researcher's repeated readings of the data. Categories were altered, added, or deleted based upon continued analysis of the data, further refinement of the researcher's thinking, and comparisons of the themes with the focus of Research Question #3. In the findings, the researcher made careful note of both confirming and disconfirming data.

To analyze the perceived impact of principal-staff conversations on school climate, a matrix was created (Appendix L). The characteristics of principal-staff conversations from the findings reported in Chapter 4 were arrayed along the left, vertical edge of the matrix: (a) started conversations with a greeting; (b) provided accessibility for conversations; (c) listened well; (d) shared information re: students, curriculum, and personal issues; (e) used humor; (f) asked empowering questions; (g) took notes that assisted with follow through and follow-up; and (h) gave supportive responses. The findings regarding the characteristics of school climate (from the first part of the analysis for Research Question #3) were arrayed along the top, horizontal edge of the matrix: (a)
inclusion; (b) positive support; (c) collegial opportunities; and (d) respect and appreciation.

Each characteristic of Lara’s conversations identified in Chapter 4 was considered in an effort to understand how it contributed to—or possibly undercut—the climate at Lawrence Elementary School. It is important to acknowledge that it was impossible to prove the impact of a characteristic of the principal’s conversations on school climate. However, I noted possible intersections of data on the matrix that were defensible based upon collected data, and my own judgment as informed by the relevant literature. Spaces in the matrix were left blank if there did not seem to be sufficient support from the collected data, the relevant literature, and my own judgment to indicate a possible connection. It is important to note that there were not a lot of minority views in the data. On the basis of co-occurrence, the conversational characteristics of this principal seem to have had something to do with creating the reported characteristics of school climate in the data. These intersections were noted as characteristics of principal-staff conversations that may have had an impact on school climate. Intersections that included data regarding characteristics of principal-staff conversations that were not common to both the data from researcher observations and staff members were noted as characteristics of principal-staff conversations that might have had an impact on school climate, as well, but were clearly identified as data that had only been significantly noted by researcher observations.

N.B.: The quotations from individual staff questionnaire respondents (SS) and staff interview participants (SI) are identified by their assigned code number. For example: SS-3 signifies staff survey respondent #3, and SI-4 signifies staff interview
Findings and Analysis: Research Question #2

In this part of Chapter 5, data and analysis for Research Question #2 are reported in the following order: first, the findings regarding how staff members described the characteristics of their relationships with Lara are reported; second, the findings regarding the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships are reported.

Characteristics of Principal-Staff Relationships from Staff Members’ and Principal’s Perspectives

Relationships: Support

The words “support” or “supportive” were used the most frequently, a total of 22 times by staff members on 12 of the 17 interview/questionnaire documents.

One staff member [who works in other area schools, in addition to Lawrence Elementary School] recalled an entire, illustrative conversation:

There was a workshop that I wanted to go to. I went to one principal [in another school], and she said, “That’s great. Find a grant.” I went to Lara, and she said,
"Oh, that’s fabulous! I’ll find some money—I’ll write a grant. We have money for that—let’s go! Oh, who can we get to go with you?” (SI-6).

The following quotations from the questionnaire and interview data were representative: “Lara is able to develop and maintain a professional and supportive relationship with the diverse group of staff at the school” (SS-1); “My job could not be done well without the support this principal gives to follow-through on multiple tasks. She does this every day of the week, willingly and successfully” (SS-4) and “[When this teacher faced an especially upsetting situation] she was so wonderful and so supportive” (SI-4). Staff members also used words implying support, like “understanding” (SI-9); “helpful” (SI-6); and “encouraging” (SS-1, SS-3, SI-5).

The data showed that support was a strong element in the relationships between the principal and staff members. There were no data from staff members that indicated any lack of support from Lara for their ideas or situations.

Relationships: Respect and Trust

In their responses to questions in the interview and on the questionnaire, 11 of 17 staff members specifically used the words “respect” or “respectful” to describe principal-staff conversations and principal-staff relationships. The rest of the staff members (6 of 17) used similar terms in describing their relationship with Lara.

The following quotations were representative of those staff members who used “respect” or “respectful” in their descriptions of their relationship with Lara: “I would describe my relationship as being supportive, respectful, and building in trust. She is caring and understanding of the human being behind the employee/teacher” (SS-7); “I would characterize my relationship with [the principal] as one of mutual respect. I
believe we value each other’s areas of expertise and do our best to be kind and considerate of each other’s time and feelings” (SS-3); “[She is] friendly, very respectful. . . , and I think she’s caring” (SI-8). “She [makes] each of us feel valued and respected” (SS-1); “I’ve felt more equal since she’s been here than [with] previous administrators” (SI-7); and “She shows amazing respect for the staff and their ideas. I get the same opportunities to express publicly in staff meetings as I do privately in her office” (SS-1).

Two other staff members wrote:

My relationship is one of mutual respect. I believe that my principal respects me as a professional. An example would be that she expresses verbal appreciation for what I consider my “duties” as an educator; such as planning and carrying out instruction or interacting with my students in a positive manner. These are only two examples of many (SS-6).

I feel she respects me as a professional. I think she strengthens the relationship [with us] by asking how people are doing, and mentions things about particular students, or your curriculum, or your personal life. She’s able to talk to you as an individual; you’re not just one of the teachers. And I know she does that for everyone (SI-8).

The remaining 6 out of 17 staff members who answered interview or survey questions regarding their relationship with Lara also used positive terms, including the following: “congenial, safe, open” (SS-5); “not condescending or intimidating” (SI-1); “upbeat, fabulous” (S-6); and “helpful, positive” (SI-7).

In the researcher observations of Lara’s numerous exchanges with staff members, there was a consistent attitude of respect in each exchange: Lara greeted each staff
member, gave them her attention, listened, made notes regarding follow-up, and offered her support. There were no observed occasions where Lara “lost her cool” or treated a staff member with disrespect, disdain, or disinterest. There was no difference in the way she greeted or treated professional staff versus other staff members.

This dominant perspective of Lara’s respect and trustworthiness was exemplified in the numerous references to the literacy initiative and potential grant available to the school, an opportunity the staff evaluated and, ultimately, rejected. This experience proved to be a defining moment for this principal and her staff. Its enormous impact became clear by how frequently the principal and staff members referenced it in their responses. Lara said, “I would say that this year we had an opportunity for [the staff] to have an example [of my trustworthiness]” (PI). A staff member offered the following description of the decision-making process that had occurred:

We all had a chance to say our opinions, and why we felt that way, and what our big concerns were. She kept saying it would be our decision, our decision. And, ultimately, it was our decision to make—to not do this grant. And she went with that. And we felt like we were holding our breath, and we worried that it would, in fact, not be in our court to decide. But she proved herself in that place, because she kept saying that [we did have the power to decide for or against the grant] all along, and we held out because we didn’t have the past experience to know that we could have total faith and trust in her. [We have learned] that when she says, “It’s up to you,” in fact, she’s said what she’s meant, and she’s done what she said, and followed through on that; and that is huge. She does what she says: she means it (SI-2).
The principal acknowledged the significance of the staff members’ participation in evaluating and ultimately rejecting the proposed literacy initiative/grant: “I think [that experience] built a lot of trust in terms of how I was going to behave as an administrator” (PI). But she was realistic about the time required to build the trust and relationships that could successfully counter the negative effects of many years of toxic leadership at the school:

The experience of the last year will have been very positive. But the first time that we come to disagreement and there is no compromise area, I think they’ll still be scared. I think it takes years to build the kind of trust that’s been lost here. Years. And they’ll continue to wait to see if the other shoe is going to drop. And that’s just human nature, and I don’t blame them. I don’t blame them. But knowing that helps; because I can sometimes anticipate—not always—sometimes anticipate where that, “(gasp) she’s going to do it now” comes from (PI).

The principal said the constant she tried to convey in every conversation with a staff member was respect. Lara recalled two occasions in her two years at this school “where I did something that afterwards I realized was so disrespectful—I was short-tempered and disrespectful” (PI). She still remembered—and clearly regretted—her tone and style in those instances. Lara said:

So, I think that’s some of how you value and respect people, by treating them the way you’d like to be treated and the way you think they ought to be treated. And if they all do it to each other, that’s the biggy. It’s not just about how does the principal react to people; it’s all about how the [school staff] reacts to one
another. Until you get that in a really good place for everybody, it's not where you want it to be” (PI).

In summary, the teacher autonomy that Lara promised then delivered regarding the decision about the literacy program/grant served as a powerful example of Lara’s trustworthiness to staff members. There was also widespread acclaim among staff members for the ways Lara showed her respect for them.

**Relationships: Openness**

Eleven of thirteen staff members who gave responses to the questions in the interview or on the questionnaire asking specifically about feelings of inclusion as characterizing their relationships with the principal gave positive responses. Two of the thirteen staff members who responded to questions regarding inclusion in the interview or on the questionnaire indicated a lack of feeling included in specific instances.

The following responses are representative of the majority of staff members who gave examples of the openness of the exchanges between themselves and Lara: (a) “She never makes me feel excluded, because she doesn’t lecture to me” (SI-5); (b) “In things that deal with our children, I feel that she values my opinion. And when she asks for an opinion, she’s not just saying the words—she’s truly asking for an opinion” (SI-4); and

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10 During data collection, the word inclusion was specifically used as a prompt, but not specifically tied to either principal-staff relationships or school climate. As a result, some of the data generated by this prompt described individual principal-staff relationships and some of it described more generalized aspects of the school climate. Data pertaining to reported “inclusive” behaviors affecting individual principal-staff relationships are reported in this first section of Chapter 5. It seemed more appropriate to refer to this data about “interpersonal inclusion,” which described characteristics of individual principal-staff relationships, as openness. This term seemed to more accurately describe the feeling of inclusion when noted as an aspect of principal-staff relationships, as well as to distinguish it from references to inclusion that seemed to be describing the school’s entire climate, rather than an aspect of a single principal-staff relationships. In the second half of Chapter 5, data that described more public, generally pervasive, “inclusiveness” that appeared to represent more widespread characteristics of the school climate are reported in a section called inclusion.
“Anytime you come to her with an issue, she’ll always say, ‘What do you think?’” (SI-10). The two of the thirteen staff members who indicated a lack of openness cited insufficient examination of all points of view at staff meetings and a desire for more written communication, like newsletters.

Additional data from staff responses showed other ways Lara’s conversations with staff members were open exchanges that led to a feeling of inclusion: (a) “I feel like—this is kind of a huge piece—that she doesn’t have an agenda, or she doesn’t seem to have a place where she’s trying to lead you to” (SI-2); (b) “I think she tries to look at a lot of different sides of whatever the situation is, ‘have you thought about’-type things, so that we can get a clear picture from each other” (SI-4); (c) “Her position and attitude seems to be: ‘I am here to help you, not boss you’” (SS-6); (d) “I don’t feel like she’s trying to convince me of her position, more, perhaps, her reasoning behind the decision” (SS-7); (e) “I’ve never felt that I was cut off, or anything like that because she had a different agenda” (SI-1); (f) “She doesn’t have agenda; she doesn’t seem to have a place where she’s trying to lead you to” (SI-2); (g) “[With the literacy program/grant initiative], she never had an agenda” (SI-4).

The principal indicated that she understood what it takes to build the trust that supports principal-staff relationships:

It takes time to build the relationships, it takes time for [the staff] to understand what the core values are that will never change, even if the decisions are different from time to time. And those personal relationships, where they see you in lots of different scenarios and they decide they can trust you and hopefully that’s an evolving level of trust (PI).
To sum up the staff members' feelings about the principal's openness, the majority of the staff gave responses indicating they felt well-informed and that this contributed to their feelings of inclusion. The staff's responses made it clear that involving and including staff members in shared decision-making is one of the most important aspects of their relationships with the principal. The data showed that involving and including staff members in shared decision-making was also one of the principal's most important goals. There was evidence in the data that showed she provided opportunities for all voices to be heard and was open and transparent about issues that affect staff members.

**Relationships: Freedom to challenge or disagree**

Survey and interview questions delved into staff comfort levels with regard to challenging or disagreeing with the principal. The intention of such inquiry was to surface an important aspect of a professional relationship: the freedom to challenge or disagree with a leader without fear of overt or covert negative repercussions.

The majority (12 of 17) of Lawrence Elementary School staff members who either participated in interviews or returned completed questionnaires reported feeling comfortable—ranging from "pretty comfortable" (SI-10) to "very comfortable" (SI-5)—challenging or disagreeing with the principal. Two staff members (2 of 17) indicated it was not their nature to challenge, and three staff members (3 of 17) indicated they were not comfortable challenging Lara.

The following quotations were representative responses of the majority of staff members: (a) "I feel very comfortable. She really listens to everything you have to say. She’s very open and has said on more than one occasion: ‘Oh, I didn’t know that—thanks’ (SI-5); (b) "She’s a really open person, so I feel like I can go in there and ask her..."
anything” (SI-6); and (c) “[She] listens, discusses, looks for compromise or common ground; [she may] agree or disagree, but never without adequate dialogue and a chance to voice perspective and opinion” (SS-5).

There were some subtle differences amongst these responses. Lara’s ability to listen was noted again, and an openness to new information, ideas, and the other person’s opinion. The last respondent in this grouping credited Lara with a tendency toward dialogue, not debate. These behaviors on Lara’s part suggest that she conveys mutuality and respect to staff members and that the resulting principal-staff relationships are egalitarian.

One respondent attributed the principal’s success at conflict resolution to her ability to look at situations as both a teacher and a parent:

There’s never been a disagreement [between the principal and me] to the point of it being hostile. Again, she has a pretty good perspective, as far as where the children are coming from, where the parents are coming from. But, also, and I must say I’m pleased to say, that she also understands the teacher’s perspective. I think she would not be as successful if she weren’t able to have the perspective of all the parties (SI-1).

In contrast to this majority, two staff members (2 of 17) who said they were “not comfortable” disagreeing with or challenging the principal seemed to have been talking more about their general comfort level regarding challenging or disagreeing with anyone, rather than a specific problem with this particular principal:

I don’t like to challenge her. I’ve learned to when I have to challenge, or question something, not so much challenge her, but I have to question some
decision she has made, I’ll usually think about it for a while and think about how can I talk about it so that I’m not coming across as negative. [I will think about] what can I do to make it seem like it was her idea (laughs) or explain to her how I feel this might not work (SI-8).

The other admitted, “Well, I’m not really good at that anyway. And I’d probably be uncomfortable, because it’s a matter of authority. I haven’t really had to do that” (SI-7).

Three staff members’ interview or survey responses (3 of 17) raised some negatives or questions about disagreeing or challenging Lara specifically. One said that she “[did not] disagree with [the principal] very often. I can only think of one time . . .” [a situation that involved desiring more forewarning from the principal regarding some extra duties]: “It was a little uncomfortable, because I just would have liked to know beforehand” (SI-3).

Another said that although “we haven’t had a lot of disagreements—hardly any” (SI-4), she did disagree with the principal’s “non-negotiable” opposition to in-school celebrations of two holidays. This same staff member explained, “I didn’t like it; but with all the good things that are going on in this school, it wasn’t something that I was going to make a huge issue [out of]” (SI-4). The third staff member addressed the effect of using humor during discussions where there were disagreements or challenges: “Lara uses humor and/or sarcasm. Sometimes this effectively lightens the situation; sometimes it only serves to push the conflict away, unresolved, or cast aside” (SI-2).

Despite their different comfort levels with disagreeing with or challenging Lara, none of the staff members interviewed felt that they were treated any differently than anyone else during or after disagreeing or challenging the principal. Four representative
quotations follow: (a) “I don’t think she holds a grudge. I don’t think I’m on the losing side if I have to disagree with her. I don’t recall ever having a disagreement that was unpleasant” (SI-1); (b) “She respects and honors everyone—she really does” (SI-5); (c) “I have disagreed with her a couple of times, but she honored where I was coming from on it” (SI-4); and

(d) None of us seem to have a problem telling her we don’t agree with her. I don’t think anyone ever feels bad about it. I don’t think she ever puts anybody down, like “it’s my way or no way.” She’s not like that (SI-9).

The principal’s self-description resonated with the staff responses to questions regarding the principal’s usual reaction to disagreements or challenges:

For me, it’s all about the questions—the ones I ask, the ones they ask, and then the ones we have to ask each other and somebody else, maybe, at the same time. But I think that’s the very important part. And so you don’t tend to have disagreements, because you’re still exploring the whole thing. So, I guess, that’s how I’d answer your question—we just keep talking. We just keep talking. [And] I ask a lot of questions. I just keep asking the questions, because there may be something I haven’t thought about. And so you don’t tend to have disagreements, because you’re still exploring the whole thing (PI).

The principal believed the staff was generally becoming increasingly comfortable with disagreeing or challenging her, but that it had been a complex learning process to get to the point where “they know it’s fair game” (PI). Previous administrators discouraged such participation, and this “past history” (PI), made the staff “tentative” (PI), so that
"they were hesitant to say anything, [but] quick to write a note that said they were confused as opposed to [they] disagreed—all very tactful, but not very honest" (PI).

According to staff responses to interview questions and the survey questionnaire, when it came to disagreeing with or challenging Lara, there were three different “comfort levels” among the staff members. The majority of interview or questionnaire respondents (12 of 17) reported feeling comfortable. They spoke of Lara’s efforts to search for compromise, the ample opportunities for discussion, her ability to listen, openness to new information, ideas, and the other person’s opinion. They described how Lara encouraged these honest exchanges: (1) she reported she was pleased to see the staff members overcoming their reluctance to challenge her; (2) two staff members (2 of 17) indicated it was not their nature to challenge; and (3) staff members (3 of 17) indicated they were not comfortable challenging Lara. One of these three disagreed with Lara’s non-negotiable opposition to in-school celebrations of two holidays, but chose not to say anything because of “all the good things going on at the school” (SI-4). A second of the three noted that Lara’s use of humor during discussions where there were disagreements or challenges were sometimes effectively lightened the discussion, but sometimes served to interfere with the resolution of the disagreement. None of the staff members interviewed felt that they were treated any differently than anyone else during or after disagreeing or challenging Lara.

In summary, the Lawrence Elementary School staff members created a profile of their relationships with Lara that included support, respect, trust, openness, and the freedom to challenge and disagree with the principal. Each of these characteristics of principal-staff relationships were noted by majorities of the staff members who
responded to interview and survey questions. In contrast to their experiences with previous principals at Lawrence Elementary School, staff members indicated that they were learning to count on the cited attributes in their interactions with Lara.

**Perceived Impacts of Principal-Staff Conversations on Principal-Staff Relationships**

To address Research Question #2, I next examined whether any of the characteristics of principal-staff conversations highlighted in Chapter 4 were perceived as having an impact on the characteristics of principal-staff relationships noted by the majority of staff members. To do so I arrayed the characteristics of principal-staff conversations along the edge of a matrix and the characteristics of principal-staff relationships across the top of the matrix and looked for intersections of the data.

As previously noted, in addition to the information from this study’s collected data, relevant literature was utilized to inform analysis regarding the possible impacts of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships. The review of literature in Chapter 2 generally informed my understanding and analysis of the data regarding the possible impacts of conversations on relationships. In addition to those sources, literature cited in this section offered also informed my analysis of the data and my decisions regarding the indicated findings displayed on the descriptive matrix (Appendix K) that provided responses to Research Question #2: *What were the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships?*

Lara’s reported *ability to listen well* was an important way she could have conveyed support and respect to staff members, providing a strong foundation for all the characteristics of the principal-staff relationships. Lara’s *ability to listen* also would have
allowed for staff input, which would likely contribute to feelings of openness in principal-staff relationships. In addition, the fact that Lara listened during conversations would have presented the opportunity for staff members to challenge or disagree with her. These potential impacts of a leader’s ability to listen on aspects of principal-staff relationships are supported in the literature by Wheatley (2002), Palmer (1998), Lambert (2002), Noddings (1992), Isaacs (1999), and Flick (1998), among others. Isaacs (1999) notes that listening can open us up to other points of view that may challenge or disagree with our own, making us more aware of the validity of our own conclusions (p. 97). He stresses how this act of listening conveys respect because it conveys that we realize the other person has things to teach us (p. 114).

Another characteristic of Lara’s conversational practice that seemed important to these professional relationships was the way she provided accessibility for conversations. These multiple opportunities for conversations made it possible for her to be informed and keep others informed. Indications were that this accessibility offered the chance for staff members to be proactive about seeking support from Lara. Also, it would have provided the opportunity for Lara to consult with staff members and get and share perspectives. Without her valuing both the “on-the-run” conversations and her setting aside the time for everyone to have the regular opportunity for longer conversations, there would be reduced chances for Lara to listen and build principal-staff relationships based on respect, trust, and openness. Again, the literacy grant experience provided examples for how staff members were able to take advantage of Lara’s accessibility for different kinds of conversations to register their opposition to the initiative. This accessibility also offered opportunities for staff members to challenge or disagree with Lara. These
potential impacts of a leader’s providing accessibility for conversations are supported in the literature by Buber (1970), Senge (1990), Barth (2001), and Donaldson (2001), among others. Lambert (2002) avers the critical nature of accessibility for conversations, which insure multiple opportunities for openly talking about what matters. She notes that the mutual and open sharing of information and ideas are a critical part of truth-seeking in conversation (p. 65). A study by Martin (1990) also concluded that interpersonal communication was a vital skill for principals to be effective with teachers. A finding of that study was that accessibility also contributed to the collegial relationships between principals and teachers. These relationships are also influenced by principals’ trusting and supporting behaviors.

Lara’s openness and transparency in sharing information with staff members regarding students and professional and curriculum-related topics would have had the potential to communicate trust and respect to the staff. This could contribute to feelings of openness between Lara and staff members, as demonstrated by the literacy grant episode. That experience inspired staff comments like “when Lara says, “It’s up to you,” in fact, she’s said what she’s meant, and she’s done what she said”(SI-2). This approach of Lara’s would have indicated support for staff members with various professional or personal issues and would have allowed for dissenting viewpoints to surface. These potential impacts of a leader’s open sharing of information are supported in the literature.

Blase and Blase (2001) found that honesty or transparent sharing of information and accessibility (they called it availability) were closely linked to effective discussion, debate, and decision-making between successful, shared-governance principals and their teachers. The researchers found that teachers’ responses to principals who sought their
input, which required the principals providing *accessibility for conversations* and *shared information*, included a feeling of *trust* and value (*respect*) for their opinions (p. 135).

Based on their study, Blase and Blase concluded that a principal shows *trust, respect*, and confidence in teachers by *listening* to their concerns and ideas (p. 138). In another study, Blase and Blase (1999) found that *listening* and giving teachers choice were characteristics of effective principals' dialogues with teachers (p. 133), which generated feelings of *support* in teachers.

Noddings (1992), too, avers that *providing accessibility for conversations* and *sharing information* leads to feelings of *openness*, opportunities to “question why” (p. 23), and an opportunity to *challenge or disagree*. She acknowledges that the end result of dialogic conversation may not be a ready resolution but rather a “sort of tension that will lead to fresh and more vigorous exploration” (p. 120). Noddings also saw such conversations where *information was shared* as opportunities to offer *support* (p. 53).

Judith V. Jordan (interviewed by Edwards, 2000) refers to her model of *mutuality* (akin to *inclusion*) and how “It recognizes that both parties bring certain expertise and skill to the meeting [or conversation]; this model specifically notes that not all expertise resides in the structurally more powerful person in any given exchange” (p. 14). She compares her mutuality model to Senge’s learning organization. Senge (2000) writes of what happens in conversations characterized by *open sharing of information*, when people have “no agendas other than the establishment of deeper connection with those who are important to them” (p. 76). He found that such dialogues made for *open*, inclusive decision-making process, resulting in greater support for resulting decisions (p. 77).
Lara’s practice of *asking empowering questions* was prevalent and it is likely that it played a role in *transmitting her trust in and respect for* staff members’ ability to take charge of their own problems and decide whether or not they wanted or needed her support. This questioning style had the potential to communicate *support*, without taking away ownership. A result of this *questioning approach* would have been to *include staff members* in problem-solving. One of Lara’s key questions—“What do you think?”—would have offered the opportunity *for staff members to challenge or disagree* with Lara’s opinion. The *enthusiastic, supportive responses* that were an observed characteristic of Lara’s conversations with staff members could have *conveyed support for staff members’ ideas*. The fact that Lara *took notes* that helped with follow-up and follow-through would have had the potential to *convey respect* for staff members and their ideas, and make it likely that they would *trust her to follow up* on issues. Although these characteristics of conversation were not noted in the data from staff members, the principal’s practice of *asking empowering questions* was noted by the researcher. Flick (1998) and Isaacs (1999) are two scholars who highlight inquiry as a critical part of conversations. In summary, it is likely that some of the recognized characteristics of the principal-staff conversations may have had impacts on some aspects of principal-staff relationships. The reported patterns of Lara’s conversational behavior and style appeared generally consistent with the creation of respectful, inclusive relationships.
Findings and Analysis: Research Question #3

For the reasons stated in Chapter 3, the researcher does not have a lot of strong data to report that pertains specifically to the Lawrence Elementary School climate. Because of the interview and survey protocol, the data staff members reported about the school climate were linked with data about Lara. Therefore, the reported data and analysis are more about Lara’s influence on the climate at Lawrence Elementary School, than about isolated data regarding the school’s climate. Having acknowledged the limitations of this data, it was still possible to extrapolate some information regarding aspects of the Lawrence Elementary school climate from the data.

In this section of Chapter 5, data and analysis for Research Question #3 are reported in the following order: first, the findings regarding how staff members described the characteristics of the school climate are reported; second, the findings regarding the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on the school climate are reported.

Characteristics of School Climate from Staff Members’ and Principal’s Perspectives

In a reference to the climate at Lawrence Elementary School, a staff member wrote:

We realize our vision and purpose of the school through the attitude the principal displays every day. We don’t [just] sit around discussing it, but we see a leader who makes it clear what she expects to see in our school climate through her words and actions (SS-6).
Climate: Inclusion

It is important to recall that eleven of thirteen staff members who gave responses to the questions in the interview or on the questionnaire asking specifically about feelings of inclusion gave positive responses. Two of the thirteen staff members who responded to the questions regarding inclusion in the interview or on the questionnaire indicated a lack of inclusion in specific instances.

Speaking for this majority, who indicated they felt that Lara made them feel included, staff members stated: “Our principal tries to keep us informed about any issues or decisions that would affect our teaching. She conveys a feeling of trust” (SS-6); and “She provides opportunities for all stakeholders to voice their opinions and respects that opinion” (SS-7). A representative response from a staff member spoke to how completely Lara involved staff members in the decision-making process:

... and that [the opportunity to make the promised decision regarding the literacy grant] was a huge thing for us. There’s (sic) been other instances where she says, “It’s up to you,” and, in fact, she’s said what she’s meant, and she’s done what she said, and followed through on that; and that is huge. That’s big. And she’ll give us as much information about things as we need to make decisions about. So, to build that faith and trust, which has grown voluminously, and it keeps building. It’s at a pretty high level. I can say, from past experience with other principals, it’s kind of a major thing. Because, if you don’t have that faith and trust, and you get lied to, or it isn’t what they said, or there are other pieces—

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11 As mentioned in the introduction to Chapter 5, data regarding inclusion are reported in both the relationship and climate sections of Chapter 5. In this section of the chapter, data pertaining to inclusion as a more general element of the school climate is reported.
theyˈve been withholding pieces of information, so you didnˈt have all the pieces
to put together to make a decision—that has happened more than I would like.
And to have all the parts to make a true decision and be valued for that is the best.
So, I appreciate Lara for that. She does what she says; she means it (SI-2).
Tellingly, yet another staff member mentioned the literacy initiative-grant experience, this time, as an example of how the principal included staff members:

I feel included, definitely included when it comes to changing curriculum, she lays things out. In one particular instance, she gave us tons and tons of information which meant she needed to do some research and pull some things together. She said right from the start, “If this doesnˈt work for you, (and this was a K, 1, 2, 3 thing)—itˈs OK.” We went through all of the work which sheˈd handed out—it was quite time-consuming—and we decided that it was not a good decision for our K-3. And she said, “OK. Youˈve looked at all the pieces, and itˈs OK” (SI-4).

This response from a staff member offered examples of how Laraˈs behavior supported a climate of inclusion that contributed to what some staff members referred to as a “team feeling”:

Totally included, totally included. She has let this faculty know things that come out of the superintendentˈs office, come out of the district, things that have been in the paper, things about testing. She has made everyone feel totally and completely included. I have never felt more included, and Iˈve taught quite a few years, and Iˈve taught in a number of different states, and Iˈve taught at different
grade levels, so I’ve had numerous principals, and she is very inclusive. *Team, team, team*—very team player (SI-8).

Two staff members noted that Lara made sure to include members of the staff that might otherwise be excluded: “She clearly values the slower thinkers or the more internal processors, despite her difference in processing [style]” (SS-7). This shows Lara’s awareness of staff members’ stylistic differences, as well as her sensitivity to them.

I think that she knows that the quieter people—she has to go after them and seek them out. And she does that. I think for the most part, I feel included in lots of different ways that she tries to include with that thinking or that planning or that decision that we have to make. Yes, I feel included (SI-2).

Staff members mentioned the principal’s dependable dissemination of information and the different methods of communication she utilized to achieve it, most commonly: conversation, staff meetings, and notes in staff in-school mailboxes. The staff corroborated their feelings of inclusion with myriad examples of the principal’s actions, among them: (a) “Our principal has unfailingly kept the staff apprised of any and all issues that directly affect us. We always hear it from her first!” (SS-1); (b) “She gives the staff the opportunity to write down anything that we’re concerned about or have questions about on an agenda list [for the staff meeting]” (SI-5); (c) “Our principal tries to keep us informed about any issues or decisions that would affect our teaching. She conveys a feeling of trust” (SS-6).

In additional examples of the principal’s efforts to include them, staff members described how the principal regularly *provided the venue and time for discussion and/or questions.* For example:
(a) "[There are] open discussions at all staff meetings" (SS-1).

(b) "She encourages discussion by making frequent opportunities for staff discussion of salient issues available" (SS-5).

(c) "[She provides] an open forum at teacher's meetings for discussions. [The principal] also calls on people who have not expressed an opinion or point of view to insure they have an opportunity to be heard" (SS-7).

Other responses described the principal's actions that contributed to these feelings of inclusion, for example: (a) "She usually asks us what we thought, rather than making the decision on her own" (SS-2).

Two of the thirteen staff members who responded to a question regarding inclusion in the interview or on the questionnaire gave examples of a lack of inclusion in specific instances. One staff member said: "I don't believe we examine all points of view on issues in large meetings; but staff has been encouraged to bring their point of view to her on an individual basis" (SS-6). The second staff member expressed a desire for more communication: "I don't feel there is enough communication. I think there should be more newsletters and things like that that went out with information" (SS-2).

Not surprisingly, there were two staff members who cited the literacy program initiative grant experience again, this time as an example of how the principal included staff members in issues that affected their practice: "She made arrangements and went with us to listen to speakers, acquired different testing materials required to be used with the grant, and ultimately respected and honored the [teachers'] decision to not continue the grant process" (SS-3) and
We attended [an informational meeting] as a team. When we still had questions and concerns, again, we made a site visit, as a team, to speak with people who could answer our questions. She seriously invited our input, opinions, and conclusions, and insisted all along that it [was] our decision (SS-7).

Lara’s self-reflections regarding inclusion matched well with the reports from the majority staff members. She declared: “I don’t make [my staff members] feel included; they are included” (PI). It is clear that she believes the latter is real and the former is merely an illusion of inclusion. “There are people who can make other people feel as though they’re included, but it’s not valid, and it’s not real” (PI). She further stated:

If you ask teachers for information or opinion, then, for goodness sakes, make sure you utilize that and value it in someway. Nothing frustrates me more than to have a principal or administrator from somewhere else say, “Well, we can ask the teachers, but it’s pretty much going to end up like this.” And usually, they’re more subtle in their language than that, but if the decision’s already made, don’t waste anybody’s time (PI).

The principal said she solicited staff opinions on various issues “all the time, unless it’s something that they don’t want to deal with, or I have to deal with.” The principal believed that the staff members must have input in the issues that affected their work, like schedules and curriculum decisions:

When I was in the classroom, there was no way I wanted [other] people to schedule [or decide] my most important resources—which [were] my time or my energy or my passion. The people who are going to do the work get to define the schedule (PI).
She then described what can happen when one cannot or does not follow that rule:

We had a scheduling issue, because of a study hall we wanted to put in at the upper grades. I messed up cluster meetings for primary [grade teachers]. And so, to fix that, which I couldn’t do actually in the schedule, it will be fixed for next year, but I actually couldn’t undo what I had done, but what I could do is another option, so I took first, second, and third grade, all of them, for library for an hour and twenty minutes so the teachers could meet because I had messed up their schedule. So, if I do something that impinges on their territory or on what they’re trying to do—and I really do value that—I try to fix it (PI).

When asked how well-informed she believed she kept her staff regarding issues that affected them or their practice, Lara responded, “Hundred percent,” and laughed. In a more serious vein, she continued to address the issue, saying, “Anything, anything I know that affects their work, I want them to know” (PI). Lara allowed that there were some details of reports that she handled herself and then shared with the staff for their feedback. There were also budgetary issues that she chose to work on and try to resolve herself, rather than raise unnecessary concerns among staff members.

For example, once the school faced a significant budget cut that would have meant losing four staff members. Although instructed to alert affected staff members according to the school seniority list, Lara chose not to share that information with her staff members at that point, because “I never saw [losing staff members] as a possibility, and I would have done whatever it took to keep them there” (PI).

The principal was able to work it out with the school board so that the budget was increased and no grade level teachers were affected; although, ultimately, one ed. tech
was affected. Lara admitted "there were two whole weeks where I didn’t sleep, knowing I hadn’t said anything to them.” But she felt, “They didn’t need to worry, until I knew for sure there was no other way out.” She admitted that in her approach to this situation, she may have been “more protective, perhaps, than I needed to be. But it was the end of the school year—we didn’t need any more stress, and I intended to work it out” (PI).

Although Lara seldom delayed sharing any information with her staff (and this was the first time she had ever faced such a situation at this school), she made the same choice as principal at other schools when faced with similar situations: “I don’t say anything that’s going to upset [staff members] until I know there’s no other way” (PI).

The principal used the education and evaluation process that she facilitated for the teachers to evaluate the literacy program initiative and grant proposal as an example of true inclusion. Staff members’ description of this event attested to their total involvement in the process. The principal reminded all once again: “Nobody can make you feel included: you are either included or you’re not” (PI).

In summary, there were indicators of inclusion in the Lawrence Elementary School climate. Many staff members attributed the school’s inclusive climate to Lara’s efforts to create an open environment where information was routinely shared in conversations between the principal and staff members and involved staff members in decision-making; according to the literature, these are important aspects of climate. The data made it clear that Lara was very intentional about keeping everyone in the loop about things that affected them or their practice and that Lara valued the slower processors, and invited staff input, opinions, and conclusions.
Climate: Positive Support

Data regarding support were reported in both sections of Chapter 5. In analyzing the data, it was obvious that some of the data pertaining to support was of a more interpersonal nature and some of the data described support as a more universal aspect of the climate at Lawrence Elementary School.

Staff members’ responses affirmed that the principal provided positive support for freedom of expression, risk-taking, and exploration. All of the respondents to interview and survey questions regarding aspects of climate mentioned Lara’s positive support that is a part of the climate of Lawrence Elementary School. Specifically addressing freedom of expression, one respondent wrote that “besides frequent forums of discussion, her basic demeanor elicits openness and a willingness to listen” (SS-5). Another mentioned the principal “always has an open door policy” (SS-2). A different staff member focused on risk-taking, saying, “If it isn’t illegal, [the principal] will support me in anything I might come up with that meets learning standards and provides educational opportunities for my students” (SS-1). The freedom to make personally meaningful explorations was described by another staff member:

She encourages and clearly supports professional development, and is more than willing to help facilitate that in any way she can. She is respectful of where we are as learners professionally and supportive of what we think our next steps are (SS-7).

Two staff members shared the following examples of the principal’s responses to their suggestions or ideas: “That’s great” (SI-3) and “Wish I had thought of that” (SI-5). Another respondent said, “She’s always there with that upbeat, positive feedback that I
think everybody needs and that no one here was getting for a very long time. So, it’s made a huge difference” (SI-10).

This “go for it” feeling was evident in the optimism that was “in the air” at Lawrence Elementary School. It seemed clear from staff members’ responses and researcher observations that Lara wanted the staff members to feel positive about themselves and do well, and that she was doing everything she could to support them in achieving that goal.

There was a nonjudgmental feel to the staff members’ accounts of their interactions with Lara that was further confirmed by researcher observations. In conclusion, one respondent wrote: “Our school climate is the best it has ever been since I have worked at [this school]. [The principal] is a key component of our community” (SS-3). A second said, “Lara is a talented and extremely fair-minded leader. She has many skills in the area of finding the best that all have to offer and then creating the climate to nurture that activity” (SS-1).

To recapitulate the data regarding support as an aspect of the climate at Lawrence Elementary School, staff indicated that Lara looked for opportunities to support and encourage staff members in their learning and growth, both professionally and personally: “It’s in the things that you ask them to do, and the trust that you put in them about the decision-making” (PI). Data from staff members made it clear that they had come to expect that a positive, supportive approach was something they could expect from Lara.
Climate: Collegial Opportunities

Another way Lara showed value for her staff members was by providing time and space for collegial conversations, which she indicated was one of her priorities. Staff members (11 of 17) specifically mentioned the opportunities Lara had created for collegial conversations. Two staff members (2 of 17) expressed concerns about an inadequate amount of time for collegial conversations.

Among the ways staff members noted Lara had made it possible for collegial conversations was the principal’s willingness to cover duties in order to provide the chance for staff members to have conversations at lunch or lunch recess time for the K-2 and 3-5 grade cluster teachers. Lara said, “I like doing lunch duty by myself—which frees everybody up to do something else.”

In addition, the principal provided an opportunity for upper grade teachers to meet for fifteen minutes every morning while she covered the before school recess in the gymnasium. She noted that other grade cluster meetings happened in the hallways before school: “They do those hallway meetings so well.”

It was after the principal realized that the change she had made in the overall duty schedule meant that teachers were unable to have their team meetings that she assumed some of the duties to restore those opportunities for teachers to meet. Staff members specifically made note of these remedial actions by the principal:

She provides [time] for the lower grades [teachers] by taking the library time with the kids, so that the lower grade teachers can get together and meet. There’s not a lot of opportunity for teachers to have a lot of breaks, because our staff has been
cut. So, she takes it upon herself—she [also] took over some of our lunch duties (SI-5).

She decided to take on lunch duty, so that we had—it’s about 15 minutes, because our lunch is really short—time to at least come together to say, “Here’s something we want to share,” even though we’re eating at the same time. That speaks very highly of her, too, because that takes a chunk out of her time. And she’s done lunch duty for all the lower grades now, which [is] pretty major, because educators need a chance to talk to each other. With the duty schedule increasing [because of] the change in our specials [music, art, and physical education classes], we weren’t meeting at all. So, she’s done her best to make it so that we can get together (SI-4).

There was an overall feeling that lower grade teachers and upper grade teachers had more opportunities for conversations in grade level teams than did middle grade teachers (due to the aforementioned scheduling problem). Two staff members’ responses addressed specific concerns about the reduced availability of adequate time for collegial conversations. One said, “I really haven’t had that many opportunities. Time is most of the issue, and it would have to be planned. A lot of times, we [just] talk when we can” (SI-7). The second staff member related the following:

That’s a problem this year, and I think she’s trying to address that. We used to have [multi-grade] cluster meetings each week. The way the schedule has worked out this year, we don’t have them. And I miss those a lot (SI-3).

The other staff members (11 out of 17) talked about how the principal had successfully built opportunities for collegial conversations into the schedule on a formal
or informal basis. The following comments were representative: (a) “she plans to have some collegial kind of aspect to staff meetings; she seems to want people to have those conversations, and as far as I can tell, encourages them” (SI-1); (b) “If I need to get together with and teacher to talk, we can find a time. And if that time happens to be while [the other teacher] is in class, [the principal] will step in to cover the class” (SI-6); (c) “I think the general feeling in the building is that if you need time to speak to another teacher, she’ll do whatever [it takes] to make that happen—she’s very good about that” (SI-10); and (d) “[The principal shows a] willingness to listen and give ample time to all” (SS-4).

Another staff member provided an example of the principal’s support for a special kind of collegial conversation:

When there was a misunderstanding between me and another staff member, she wanted us to talk with each other. That’s encouraged a lot, whether it’s between you and a student, or another staff member, she’s very supportive [with the idea] that [the conversation] should be between the people [involved] and not with her as a go-between (SI-10).

The principal and her staff acknowledged that the “by contract” once-a-month staff meeting was “not going to be enough.” Together, she and the staff created a solution that provides additional time to get together:

We chose the day [for the official staff meeting] and then we picked an alternate day, as well, that was not mandatory—and neither is the staff meeting at this school, but by contract it is. We picked the alternate [meeting] day where people could come if they had issues, they just wanted to share, or if there was something
in particular [like an optional staff mini-course] I was doing, I ran that on the alternate [meeting] day. Those [alternate meeting days] were not consistent; it depended on what people’s schedules were. It’s very, very informal, and it worked out great (PI).

_Because she believed that “to provide the space is as important as to provide the time” (PI), Lara made creating a suitable space for a teacher’s room a priority._ First, she found a more centrally located place for a teacher’s room—it had previously been a windowless room in one of the portable classrooms. “And we moved it into the [main] building, into the center, actually, of the building, and put a couch in and a big, long, table, so people could have shared conversations” (PI).

To sum up, the data regarding _collegial opportunities_ and the climate at Lawrence Elementary School, Lara’s willingness to take on recess and lunchroom duties so that staff could be freed up to meet with each other was the largest contribution to providing collegial opportunities. This action on Lara’s part sent a clear and widely appreciated message of support for collegial conversations to staff members. Staff members indicated that they appreciated that Lara made providing the time and space for collegial conversations a priority. It is important to note the data from two staff members, who saw a need for more opportunities for collegial conversations. Lara readily admitted that she wanted to create more opportunities for collegial conversations, and that a scheduling change she made resulted in reducing some previous opportunities the staff had had. She planned to remedy her mistake when she did the schedule for the following school year.
Climate: Respect and Appreciation

Data regarding respect were reported in both sections of Chapter 5. The data revealed that respect was seen as both an interpersonal aspect of principal-staff relationships and a more global characteristic of school climate.

A staff member summed up why she saw respect as a critical component of the school’s climate: “We respect each other, whether at a teacher’s meeting or in the hall. Occasionally, there is a little tension; it isn’t all peaches and cream. But for the most part, we work together as a team” (SS-3). It is important to note, again, that in their responses in the interview and on the questionnaire, 10 of 17 staff members specifically used the words “respect” or “respectful” to describe aspects of the school climate. No staff members reported any examples of Lara showing disrespect to any staff members.

An equal number of respondents (10 of 17) to the interviews/questionnaires included specific mention of evidence of appreciation and high regard the principal has for her staff. Again, there was no mention of any lack of appreciation shown by the principal to any staff member.

In addition to the principal’s verbal expressions of appreciation she directed to staff members, the staff recalled other ways the principal conveyed her appreciation and respect for the staff:

(a) “She gives us goody bags, she makes cookies, [and] she always smiles at you. The bag was individualized—how did [the principal] know I liked ____?” (SI-7);

(b) “If she has an appointment to see you, she’ll be there waiting for you. And that’s good. That makes me feel that there’s some validity in my concerns” (SI-1);
(c) "[The principal] just sets such a positive atmosphere, that you feel you can ask her or tell her anything" (SI-6);

The following story from a staff member provided a vivid picture of the climate of respect Lara created at Lawrence Elementary School through her actions:

The tone of this whole school has changed so much since she’s been here. I used to be down here on a daily basis, with one child or another [who] could not be controlled. This is a perfect example: one of the [students] I work with on a daily basis, on one of the first days of school this year was overheard saying f--- you to another student. I brought him in [to see Lara]. Now, [with] the last principal, he would have been telling her that she was this, that, and the other—and not pleasant words—I mean: “f--- this.” And Lara [the first time the student came to the office and said similar things to her] said, “You know I never would have expected that from you. I’m really surprised; I just would have never expected that from you.” Well, he had no where to go; there was no argument. And again she said, “I’m so surprised and disappointed; I would not have expected that.” That set the whole tone for that child for the whole year. He wasn’t going to get an argument; he wasn’t going to have anyone to fight back with. And then, she said, “I love you, but, you know, you just can’t say that stuff.” And that was the end of it. That’s the tone that has been set for all of us. And that child has not had a major issue since she has been here (SI-10).

In my researcher observations, I was not aware of any disrespectful language from students to teachers (or teachers to students) while I was observing at Lawrence
Elementary School. Discipline issues that I saw Lara assist teachers with were handled firmly, fairly, and with respect for the student. Another staff member stated,

[The principal] values everybody. And she shows all of us that in many different ways. I mean, she'll come right out and tell us that she appreciates what we do or what we think—she tells us. I think [the principal] is a very appreciative person, and she shows it, tells us, by the different things she does (SI-9).

As an example of how Lara showed value and appreciation for her staff, another staff member recalled the principal’s speech at the teacher in-service day prior to the first day of school (also the principal’s first year at the school):

I’ll never forget when she introduced us at all-staff two years ago, when she first started. And she was defending us and telling everyone—all the other schools—how things were going to change at Lawrence Elementary School. She wasn’t defensive, but she was more on the offense, like “Right now, things are going to change; things are going to be good. I only want to hear good things about [the town], and not [derogatory] talk about the school, the teachers, or the students.

We have a damn good staff here—there are good people at this school” (SI-7).

In addition to being evidence of how Lara valued and appreciated her staff, this example showed that Lara had strong initiatives—that she would not compromise on—planned for her tenure at the helm of Lawrence Elementary School.

Another interviewee said that the principal always talked about “this great staff I work with,” and that when the staff member said, “Oh, you’re great—I don’t know how you do it,” the principal’s response was always “It isn’t me; it’s you guys!” (SI-5). She reflected the accolades right back at staff members.
In addition to all the principal’s positive comments staff members recalled, they stressed that she avoided using negative words or actions: “She’s not condescending of people down; she doesn’t just blow you off like you’re insignificant or unimportant” (SI-5). Among the staff members’ responses to questions in the interview and on the questionnaire, there was no mention from any staff members with regard to experiencing any negative “put-downs” from Lara.

Lara viewed the new staff evaluation system she introduced as another way of showing value and respect for her staff. Instead of the standard check-off list, she wrote a personal narrative for each staff member in which she tried to capture snapshots of their actual teaching. In the evaluations/observations, she included comments about their personal qualities, as well as their professional qualities. The principal believed that the teachers “need to be able to see for themselves what they said and did that supported how they behave as teachers and how they behave as people” (PI). In addition to serving as evaluations, these very personal narratives “serve as a really useful jumping off place for conversations” (PI). The principal found that people come back “months later” to talk about the evaluations. She gave an example of such a conversation: “You know in my evaluation, you said I always gave positive feedback to kids with smiles. You know that meant a lot to me. I’ve got a kid that I’m not smiling so much about . . .” (PI).

When asked how she fostered a climate of inclusion, Lara replied:

You either value and respect them or you don’t. And if you do, then everything you say and do should support that, in terms of how you ask the questions, in terms of the fact that you ask the questions, in terms of the kind of feedback you give people (PI).
Lara said that part of that valuing and appreciating was celebrating the good times together and providing support during the tough times. She concluded:

It has to feel good from the minute you walk through the door. It’s not your home and I have a friend who says you should never have such fuzzy boundaries as to think it might ever be. However, it is for most of us who are here. We’re here because we love the kids, and we love watching them grow, we love watching them learn, and we will kill ourselves to make sure that can happen. . . . when the philosophical base of the school is “we love the kids,” you can build anything on top of that, anything at all. As long as you care, I think that’s the most critical thing. I had a superintendent once who said, “When I die, I want them to say I was a good man.” And I thought, when I die, I want them to say I cared; it makes all the difference in the world.”

The data showed many examples of how the principal verbally and nonverbally expressed her respect and appreciation for staff members. Researcher observations confirmed how respect and appreciation were evident in the briefest of conversations. Although I did not see the purple bags, almost every staff member that I interviewed mentioned them to me. The personal nature of their contents resonated with the staff members. [N.B.: The “purple bags” were distributed to staff after the staff questionnaires had been returned, so it would not have been possible for staff members to refer to them in their answers on the questionnaire.]

In summary, responses from the staff members’ interviews and questionnaires indicated that staff members who participated in the study felt generally positive about the climate at Lawrence Elementary School. The Lawrence Elementary School staff
members created a profile of the school climate with the following characteristics: *inclusion, positive support, collegial opportunities, and respect and appreciation.*

**Perceived Impacts of Principal-Staff Conversations on School Climate**

As previously noted, it is important to remember that the collected data for Research Question #3 is thin, so these reported “impacts” are less trustworthy than are the ones for Research Question #2.

To address Research Question #3, I next examined whether any of the characteristics of principal-staff conversations highlighted in Chapter 4 could be seen as having an impact on the school climate. To do so, I arrayed the characteristics of principal-staff conversations along the side of a matrix and the characteristics of school climate as perceived by Lawrence Elementary School staff members across the top of the matrix and looked for intersections of the data.

As previously noted, in addition to the information from this study’s collected data, relevant literature was utilized to inform analysis regarding the possible impacts of principal-staff conversations on school climate. The review of literature in Chapter 2 generally informed my understanding and analysis of the data regarding the possible impacts of conversations on climate. The following literature offered more specific information that informed my analysis of the data and my decisions regarding the indicated findings displayed on the descriptive matrix (Appendix L) that provided responses to Research Question #3: *What were the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on school climate?*
Lara’s noted *ability to listen well* was a way she could have *conveyed respect* to staff members and, as a result, could have served to set a tone where *inclusion* thrived. In addition, her *listening skills* would have communicated a message of *positive support*, and *respect and appreciation* to staff members, which would provide a strong foundation for all these characteristics of the school climate.

Isaacs (1999) offers an example of how dialogue, offering *accessibility for conversation* and *listening*, created a climate of mutual *respect* between a prison warden and inmates, who participated in a dialogic conversation together (pp. 115-116). In Beck’s (1998) study, she found that honest, *open* communication contributed to a culture of *trust* and *support*. Deal and Peterson (1999) acknowledge that all the people in a school made contributions to the culture. However, school leaders’ “actions, conversations, [and] decisions” (p. 85) influence it.

Lara’s setting aside the *time and space to be accessible to staff members for various types of conversations* could have led to a *climate of inclusion* and provided opportunities for Lara to offer *positive support* to staff members. Her *open sharing of information* regarding students and curriculum/pedagogy topics would have made it possible to keep staff members in the loop regarding issues that affected them or their students. This open exchange of information could have also contributed to a climate of *inclusion* at Lawrence Elementary School.

Noting how principals can nurture feelings of *inclusion* and empowerment in their schools, Blase and Blase (1999b) cite five strategies used by principals who promote a climate of shared governance: building *trust*, developing *open conversation*, sharing *information*, building consensus, and embracing inevitable conflict. Rosenholtz (1989)
notes that principals who share information, thereby including staff members in decisions about their work, convey respect and value to their staff members. In his study, Martin (1990) concluded that interpersonal communication skills were requisite skills for principals to be effective with teachers. He also linked positive principal-teacher relationships to the principals’ trusting, supporting, and encouraging behaviors.

In their study of a principal’s daily interactions, Gantner, Newsom, and Dunlap (2000) found that teachers wanted to be able to depend on honest and consistent behavior from the principal and the opportunity to be included in decision-making. This would support the possible connections between providing accessibility for conversations and sharing information with inclusion. Rafferty (2003) explored the relationship between school climate and communication with a study of principal-teacher interactions and found that teachers in the study classified their school as “open climate” or “closed climate” according to the extent they felt their opinions made a difference in the day-to-day decisions that affected their work. This supports a connection in my study between the principal’s conversational characteristics of listening well, sharing information, and providing accessibility for conversations with inclusion.

Judith Jordan (interviewed by Edwards, 2000) avers how the kinds of relational practices characterized by Lara’s conversational behaviors can lead to mutuality (or inclusion) in the workplace. She states:

“Bringing mutuality into the workplace involves a profound shift in attitude and creates a very different work culture and atmosphere in which mutual learning, mutual influence, mutual growth is occurring. It involves an explicit investment in
the empowerment of others, of the team of the whole organization.” (Edwards, 2000, p. 14)

Jordan’s ‘model of mutuality’ also clearly addresses other aspects of the “workplace” climate at Lawrence Elementary School: support and respect. Rafferty (2003), too, includes respect as critical aspects of a school’s climate.

Kegan and Leahy (2001) note that a workplace climate is an environment where some ways of communicating are encouraged and where other ways of communicating are discouraged or impeded. Kegan and Leahy highlight the importance of ongoing regard, which consists of appreciation and admiration for another, and is, at least, related to respect. The principal in my study listened well, provided accessibility for conversations, and shared information with staff members; it could be inferred that these were behaviors that communicated ongoing regard or respect to staff members.

There could be possible links between Lara’s asking empowering questions (“What do you think?”, “How can I help?”), and the feelings of positive support that staff members reported were a part of the climate at Lawrence Elementary School (Martin, 1990). None of the identified characteristics of principal-staff conversations were seen as having an impact on the collegial opportunities that staff members described in the data regarding school climate at Lawrence Elementary School.

**Chapter Summary**

The principal-staff relationships at Lawrence Elementary School were generally healthy and positive. According to the profile staff members created, predominant characteristics of principal-staff relationships were support, respect and trust, openness,
and the *freedom to challenge and disagree*. All of the 17 questionnaires and interviews completed by staff members included positive comments about principal-staff relationships. The characteristics of the principal’s conversations that seemed to have an impact on principal-staff relationships were the following:

1. It is likely that Lara’s reported ability to *listen well* would have conveyed *support and respect* to staff members, providing a foundation for all the characteristics—*support, respect, trust, openness, and the freedom to challenge and disagree*—of the principal-staff relationships.

2. Lara’s *openness* and transparency in *sharing information* with staff members regarding students and professional and curriculum-related topics were ways she could have communicated this *trust and respect* to the staff. It is likely that this approach of Lara’s would have provided *support* for staff members with various professional or personal issues and *allowed for dissenting viewpoints to surface*.

3. Another characteristic of Lara’s conversational practice that seemed important to these principal-staff relationships was the way she *provided accessibility for conversations*. This provided frequent opportunities Lara to listen and build *principal-staff relationships based on respect, trust, and openness*. This accessibility would have also offered opportunities for staff members to challenge or disagree with Lara.

4. It can be argued that Lara’s practice of *asking empowering questions* was a characteristic of her conversations that would have played a role in *transmitting her trust in and respect for* staff members’ ability to take charge of their own problems by communicating *support*, without taking away ownership. In this way, this *questioning approach included staff members* in problem-solving. One of Lara’s key questions—
“What do you think?”—offered the opportunity for staff members to challenge or disagree with Lara’s opinion.

5. The enthusiastic, supportive responses that were a hallmark of Lara’s conversations with staff members conveyed support for staff members’ ideas. As previously noted, The principal’s enthusiastic and supportive responses to staff members’ requests and ideas were noted as a characteristic of principal-staff conversations by the researcher, but as a characteristic of principal-staff relationships by staff members. It is likely that these enthusiastic “go for it” responses from the principal had an impact on the climate characteristic of positive support.

The Lawrence Elementary School climate was perceived as generally healthy and positive by staff members, who characterized it as including the following elements: inclusion, positive support, collegial opportunities, and respect and appreciation. The attributes of climate identified in this study are what the literature would indicate as positive aspects of climate (Saphier & King, 1985; Rafferty, 2003; Ganther, Newsom, & Dunlap, 2000; Vernadine, 1997). The characteristics of the principal’s conversations that seemed to have an impact on the school climate at Lawrence Elementary School were the following:

1. Lara’s noted ability to listen well could have conveyed respect to staff members and also set a tone where inclusion could have occurred. Additionally, her listening skills could have communicated a message of positive support, respect, and appreciation.

2. Lara’s accessibility for various types of conversations would have likely led to a climate of inclusion and provided opportunities for Lara to offer positive support to staff members.
3. Lara’s open sharing of information regarding students and curriculum/pedagogy topics would appear to have kept staff members in the loop regarding issues that affected them or their students and could have contributed to a climate of inclusion at Lawrence Elementary School.
Chapter 6
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Review of the Study

Principals spend a significant percentage of their workday involved in verbal interaction. A number of studies (Martin & Willower, 1981; Wolcott, 1984; Blumberg & Greenfield, 1980; Bredeson, 1987) that are part of the relevant research tell us about the more quantifiable, rational aspects of conversation, but less about the more affective aspects of principal-staff conversations. The purpose of this study was to explore principal-staff conversations and the perceived impacts these conversations might have on principal-staff relationships and school climate through a case study of a successful principal.

Learning more about principal-staff conversation is important, because there is evidence in the literature (Rafferty, 2003; Barth, 1990; Edmonds, 1984) that anything that has an impact on the professional relationships and climate for the adults in a school can also have an impact on the learning climate for students and a school’s general effectiveness. A principal considered to be successful was chosen for this study because it provided a chance to explore how a principal with a reputation as one of the better educational leaders conducts her conversations with staff members and to examine the kinds of impacts these conversations might have on principal-staff relationships and school climate. Designing the study to include the voices of both professional and nonprofessional staff members offered the potential for a greater variety of viewpoints to surface.
This study looked at staff members’ perceptions of a successful principal’s conversations and the potential impacts on principal-staff relationships and school climate by building on what other researchers have done in the areas of conversation (including: Wheatley, 2002; Bredeson, 1987; Isaacs, 1999; Lambert, 2002), principal-teacher relationship and climate issues (including: Blase & Blase, 1999, 2001, 2004; Barth, 2001; Johnson, 1990; Rosenholz, 1989; Lieberman, 1992; Fullan, 1998; Little, 2002), emotional intelligence and caring (including: Noddings, 1984, 1992; Beck, 1984; Goleman, 1997; Buber, 1970), and responding to claims that these relational aspects of leadership are understudied (Beatty, 2000; Hargreaves, 1997; Fullan, 1998). To contribute to our understanding of the possible relationships between these elements of educational leadership, I focused on three research questions:

1. **What were the characteristics of conversations between a successful principal and her staff members?**

2. **What were the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships?**

3. **What were the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on school climate?**

To address these research questions, I employed a qualitative case study approach using multiple data collection methods. I conducted the research at a rural, New England K-8 elementary school with the principal and her 14 teachers and 8 other staff members. Teachers in the study were mid-career professionals with an average of 20 years teaching experience. The principal had been in her current position at the school for two years at
the time of this study. This was her fourth principalship after 27 years as an elementary teacher.

Approximately 108 hours were spent collecting data in the school setting from March 1st to July 1st 2004. Three methods—interviews, questionnaires, and observations—were employed to gather data. Ten of the 22 staff members volunteered to be interviewed; the principal was also interviewed. Open-ended questions were used in the interviews and for the survey questionnaires. Seven of 22 staff members completed and returned questionnaires.

Content analysis of the data was done to surface emergent patterns and themes. Using these emergent patterns and themes, additional data reduction and coding were done within and across categories. Frequency counts assisted in evaluating the emergent concepts. Descriptive matrices were created to display the emergent patterns and themes and to assist in analyzing the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships and school climate.

**Limitations**

Despite spending 108 hours over four months at the research site, there were a number of limitations to the conclusions I could draw:

Since this was a single, qualitative case study of one educational leader in a small rural elementary school with 22 staff members, it is not generalizable in the statistical sense. However, its findings may be transferable to other principals and their schools, and other leaders and their organizations.
There was a noted lack of minority viewpoints in the data. I did make efforts to make it easy for staff members to participate in interviews and extended the deadline for returning the staff survey questionnaire a number of times to encourage participation. I felt I was well-received by the Lawrence Elementary School staff and was able to establish a certain level of trust and acceptance. I believed I behaved in a way that would have made me “approachable” to staff members who wished to participate. Based upon my observations during my time at the school, I think it is likely that there were very few minority viewpoints. I witnessed no obviously negative principal-staff interactions.

There were some weaknesses in the methods I used for my researcher observations. These observations were not tape recorded. Therefore, what was noted was dependent upon my note-taking ability and objectivity regarding which observations of the principal’s conversations I portrayed as representative. To counter this potential weakness, I was highly vigilant during the observations, listening especially carefully for, and ready to note, any “negative data” that emerged regarding the principal. Because of privacy and confidentiality issues, I was not able to listen to all of the principal-staff conversations that occurred during my time on site at Lawrence Elementary School.

Data from staff members for all three research questions were collected from seven survey questionnaires and ten interviews, which yielded a total of 17 data sources from staff members. However, because the survey protocol insured complete anonymity for staff members, there was no way to determine whether there was any overlap between staff members who participated in the staff interviews and staff members who completed and returned questionnaires used in the staff survey. Therefore, the number of research participants could have been as low as 10, i.e., 10 of the 22 members of the entire staff.
I did not have a lot of strong data to report that pertained specifically to the Lawrence Elementary School climate. Because of the interview and survey protocol, the data staff members reported about the school climate were linked with data about the principal in my study. Therefore, the reported data and analysis are more about her influence on the climate at Lawrence Elementary School, than about isolated data regarding the school’s climate. Having acknowledged the limitations of this data, it was still possible to extrapolate some information regarding aspects of the Lawrence Elementary school climate from the data.

The foci of the study—the characteristics of conversation and their potential impacts on relationships and school climate—are generally difficult topics to describe and collect data on. This reality made it challenging to collect data that specifically addressed these phenomena. Further, analyzing the potential impacts of the characteristics of conversation on characteristics of relationships and climate is very difficult. I relied a lot on my subjective antennae and interpretation, in addition to the collected data and the relevant research.

**Discussion of Findings**

The results of my study support a claim for the importance of certain qualities of a principal’s conversations by surfacing indications that characteristics of principal-staff conversations have perceived impacts on principal-staff relationships and school climate.

1. This successful principal had a noted ability to listen well. The study indicates that when Lara listened, it led to impacts on the following characteristics of principal-staff relationships: support, respect & trust, openness, and the freedom to challenge or
It may also be argued that the Lara’s ability to listen well had an impact on the following characteristics of school climate: inclusion, positive support, respect & appreciation. Data indicated that these small conversations between a principal and a staff member create a larger climatic effect by building relationships one at a time. In these conversations with her staff members, Lara took the time to listen well; data from staff members showed that this ability to listen well was received as a clear message that she valued staff members.

The principal in the study was consistent about listening and taking time with all staff members so that they knew what to expect from their principal. She took the time to get to know her staff members; and consequently, they knew her. Even when they got an “on the fly” conversational snapshot, they automatically filled in the missing parts of the image, and, based on the data, they liked what they saw in these principal-staff conversations. The consistency of the principal’s conversational behaviors influenced the staff members’ feelings about the principal’s trustworthiness. These staff members’ perceptions about the principal’s trustworthiness appeared to have had an impact on the climate for the adults at this school.

Scholars (Buber, 1970; Noddings, 1984; Wheatley, 2002) note that the simple act of listening communicates that ‘you are worth my time; your words and your story matter to me.’ Other scholars note what can happen when principals are too busy dashing through their days to take the necessary time to listen and have a conversation (Barth, 2001; Donaldson, 2001; Wheatley, 2002). Conversations are the primary way the principal and staff members interact with each other. When a principal does not take the time to do the listening that nurtures relationships and creates a healthy school climate,
dysfunctional relationships and toxic climates are the result (Rosenholz, 1989; Little, 2002; Lieberman & Miller, 1992; Blase & Blase, 2004). As you can see, the ability to listen well is closely entwined with making time for conversations a priority, which leads to my next finding.

2. This successful principal provided accessibility for conversations with her staff members.

The principal whose conversations were the subject of this study faced the same challenges and demands in her day that all principals face (Bredeson, 1987). These realities have the potential to pre-empt conversation. However, according to the data, Lara created the time and space in the “cyclone that is school” (Lieberman & Miller, 1992) for multiple opportunities for various kinds of conversations with her staff members.

Lara’s conversations fell along a continuum, from the briefest, “How are you today?” to honoring a request from a staff member for a longer exchange on a matter of some urgency: “Could I have five minutes?” to the scheduled weekly meetings with each teacher during their prep period and with other staff members during their free time, to the ‘infinite’ after school conversations, where Lara would stay “as long as it takes” for a staff member who needed to talk with her about something.

Martin (1990) pointed to a connection between a principal’s availability and the creation of collegial relationships between principals and teachers. My study indicates that providing accessibility for conversations, an identified characteristic of the principal’s conversations with staff members, had an impact on the following identified
characteristics of principal-staff relationships: *respect and trust; openness;* and *freedom to challenge or disagree.*

3. This successful principal included staff members in issues and decisions that affected them professionally and personally by being open and transparent in *sharing information regarding students, professional and curriculum-related topics, and personal issues.*

The frequently cited literacy grant experience was a key event for the principal and staff members; the autonomy the principal gave staff members with the literacy grant initiative was the most common anecdote in the data. Based on the data from this study, it is likely that *sharing information regarding students, curriculum, and personal issues,* an identified characteristic of the principal’s conversations with staff members, had an impact on the following identified characteristics of principal-staff relationships: *support; respect & trust; openness; freedom to challenge or disagree.*

Rafferty (2003) noted that open communication was a critical aspect of an effective school. It could also be argued that *sharing information regarding students, curriculum, and personal issues* could have had an impact on the following identified characteristic of school climate: *inclusion.* Ganther, Newsom, and Dunlap (2000) reported that including teachers in decision-making contributed to a productive climate and effective communication. Vernadine (1997) posited a connection between involving staff members in the decision-making process and creating a collaborative school climate. My study points to the impacts of this open sharing of information on characteristics of principal-staff relationships (*openness*) and school climate (*inclusion*). I aver that it is the characteristics of this principal’s conversations that create the opportunities for *openness* and *inclusion* to occur.
4. The *empowering questions* the principal asked in her conversations with staff members were only noted as a significant characteristic of principal-staff conversations by me in my observations. The questions Lara used appeared to communicate trust in and respect for staff members’ ability to take charge of their own problems and decide what kind of support they needed from her. The messages of support and respect that can be conveyed by such an approach were important; equally so was the message to each staff member that s/he owned the decision about how a problem would be solved. It was clear to the researcher that this was an empowering, respectful kind of support: the principal did not offer to solve staff members’ problems; she was there to support them in solving their own problems.

Ackerman, Donaldson, and Van de Bogert (quoted in Lieberman, 2002, et. al) argue that leaders who promote inquiry and a collaborative leadership style “will foster creativity, resourcefulness, and collaboration (p. 75). Lieberman (2002), too, writes about the virtues of “inquiring conversations” (p. 75). The conclusions from these scholars lend some support to the possible impacts of the principal’s *empowering questions* on characteristics of principal-staff relationships—support, respect and trust, openness, and freedom to challenge or disagree—and a characteristic of school climate—positive support.

5. The *supportive responses* that the principal invariably gave staff members in response to staff members’ ideas and requests were only noted as a significant characteristic of principal-staff conversations in my observation data. (As reported in Chapter 5, staff members did note *support* as a characteristic of principal-staff relationships and the school climate.) It can be argued that the principal’s *supportive*
responses had an impact on the following identified characteristic of principal-staff relationships: support. It is also likely that the principal’s supportive responses had an impact on the following identified characteristic of school climate: positive support.

A more general finding from the study was the consonance between the data from the staff members’ perceptions of the principal’s behaviors and the data from the principal’s interview, which suggested that the principal’s behaviors in her conversations with staff members were not ‘random acts of kindness.’ The data from the staff members about the principal’s behaviors when she was in conversation with them made the principal’s conversations seem very emotionally intentional, as if guided by a compassionate compass, which would help explain the congenial, supportive portrait staff members painted of the principal and the summative comment: “I’ve never seen her blow.” The findings from my study, which provided the positive picture of this successful principal, would not surprise Goleman (1998), who found that “the greatest difference between average and superior leaders was their emotional style.”

Another overall observation from the study was how the principal understands and was intentional about her relationship-centered leadership strategy. Comparing the collected data from the study with Beck’s (1994) indices of a caring administrator’s behaviors toward staff members—respect, support, collaboration, shared decision-making [an inclusion-related behavior]; and listening—offered support for a claim that this principal was caring toward her staff members. In one of her interview responses, the principal said:

12 Goleman (1995) reported results of a weighted study that put the “value of emotional competence in contributing to outstanding leadership at just below 90 percent” (p. 356).
As long as you care, I think that’s the most critical thing. I had a superintendent once who said: ‘When I die, I want them to say I was a good man.’ And I thought, when I die, I want them to say I cared; it makes all the difference in the world.

This would support a claim that this principal’s conversational characteristics were representative of her values and beliefs. Based on the observations in this study, it appeared that the characteristics of this principal’s conversations with her staff members conveyed the message that the principal cared about them.

In sum, Lara showed that she valued conversations by devoting the necessary time to them. The data showed that these conversations made a difference in the daily lives of her staff members. There was congruence between Lara’s talk and action: she did what she said, and said what she did. She presented information and ideas coherently and with a manner that others could trust. Within these glimpses of Lara that the staff members shared, there was a feeling of care (How are you?), support (What would you like me to do?) inclusion (It is your decision) trust (keeps her word; follows through) that appeared to have positive impacts on principal-staff relationships and school climate.

**Implications for Practice**

An abundance of studies that are part of the existing research tell us a great deal about the quantifiable, rational dimensions of principal-staff conversations, but less about their more affective aspects. My study focused on the more relational characteristics of principal-staff conversations and their perceived impacts on principal-staff relationships and the climate for school staff members. Based on the findings in this qualitative case
study, several patterns linking characteristics of a successful principal’s conversations to school benefits surfaced.

It is an assertion of this study that a principal’s ability to listen well is a vital characteristic of a successful principal’s conversations. The presence or absence—as well as the proficiency—of listening skills surfaced in my study as key determinants in the quality of principal-staff conversations. An educational leader’s ability to listen in conversation appears to have critical consequences for positive or negative impacts on both principal-staff relationships and the school climate for staff members. My study indicates that when a principal is a good listener, s/he can convey messages of respect in her/his conversations with staff members, and consequently, contribute to the creation of egalitarian, not hierarchical, principal-staff relationships.

The kinds of conversations that make a difference in principal-staff relationships and the work climate for staff members take time. Therefore, the requisite time must be allocated for these principal-staff conversations in order for them to happen. This requires commitment and intentionality on the part of a principal. Based upon my findings, when a principal builds regular, dependable, on-to-one blocks of time with each staff member into the weekly schedule, it insures the essential time to have such conversations. Staff members in my study learned to count on these regular opportunities for conversations with their principal.

Based on my study, it is clear that when a principal is transparent about sharing information with staff members, it can create openness in principal-staff relationships and a climate of inclusion for the adults in the school. These were clearly important aspects of relationships and climate, respectively, to the staff members in my study because they
made repeated references to them. Additionally, the openness and inclusion created by this characteristic of the principal’s conversations have the potential to generate feelings of trust, empowerment and autonomy in staff members.

Findings from my study indicated that the studied principal’s conversations were artifacts of her belief system. It was clear these core beliefs informed and infused her conversational behaviors, which, in turn, had perceived impacts on principal-staff relationships and the working climate for staff members. My study points to how a leader’s beliefs are exposed and expressed through her/his conversations.

It is beyond the scope of this study to posit a direct relationship between the relational impacts of principal-staff conversations on school climate and school effectiveness for students. However, other scholars (Rafferty, 2003; Barth, 1990; Saphier & King, 1985; Edmonds, 1984; Lambert, 2002; Noddings, 1984; Barth, 2002) have made connections between the conditions of a school’s climate for the adults in a school, the consequent climate for students, and a school’s overall effectiveness. Therefore, the impacts of principal-staff conversations are potentially powerful for both schools’ staff members and students.

It is beyond the scope of this study to unequivocally link conversational characteristics to a principal’s success. However, there are strong indications in this study that certain characteristics of a principal’s conversations with her staff members have positive impacts on principal-staff relationships as well as the climate for staff.
Implications for Further Study

Additional studies are needed to explore the relational characteristics of a principal’s conversations:

Studies of the characteristics of conversations of principals (not just principals considered successful) in urban and suburban settings, with larger student and staff populations, and in secondary schools, as well as elementary and middle schools, would be informative for comparing and contrasting the results with this single case study of one principal and her staff. There were acknowledged limitations to the conclusions that could be drawn from the small sample in my study.

Studies designed to include data from all staff in a building and document conversations of the principal more broadly would add reliability to findings. More extensive researcher observations and recordings of a greater number and variety of principal-staff conversations would offer opportunities for collecting more descriptive data.

Studies that looked more closely at how staff members interpret a principal’s conversations and how and why these have an impact on their relationships and the school climate would offer opportunities to propose more definitive connections between these factors. Additionally, studies that directly evaluated school climate, rather than perceptions about a principal’s influence on the climate, would be informative.

Studies of a larger sample of “successful” principals could surface informative similarities and differences in their conversational characteristics. Such studies would offer opportunities for different or additional characteristics of conversation to emerge as
Principal-staff conversations matter to staff members. Conversation is the primary way staff members experience their principal. Through these conversations, the principal has multiple opportunities each day to offer snapshots of herself or himself, giving staff members glimpses of what s/he values and what s/he believes in. Those collective characteristics of conversations, relationships, and school climate present challenges for data collection and analysis. However, just because it is hard to look at these relational aspects of schools, doesn’t mean we should avoid exploring them. My study adds to the existing literature on these more qualitative dimensions of schools, which suggest that important keys for school improvement lie within these phenomena.

**Conclusion**

Bohm (1996) wrote:

During the past few decades, modern technology, with radio, television, air travel, and satellites, has woven a network of communications which puts each part of the world into almost instant contact with all the other parts. Yet, in spite of this world-wide system of linkages, there is, at the very moment, a general feeling that communication is breaking down everywhere, on an unparalleled scale. People living in different nations, with different economic and political systems, are hardly able to talk to each other without fighting. And within any single nation, different social classes and economic and political groups are caught in a similar pattern of inability to understand each other. (p.1)

Principal-staff conversations matter to staff members. Conversation is the primary way staff members experience their principal. Through these conversations, the principal has multiple opportunities each day to offer snapshots of herself or himself, giving staff members glimpses of what s/he values and what s/he believes in. Those collective
snapshots create a collage that conveys who the principal is and what staff members can expect in principal-staff relationships and the school climate. Scholars aver that the way a principal conducts the interpersonal business of a school determines a school’s climate/culture and that principal-staff relationships are representative of all other relationships in a school. Based on the findings of my study, I argue that at the heart of these climate-building and relationships-forming forces lay the characteristics of a principal’s conversations, which serve as the catalysts for creating healthful or toxic principal-staff relationships and school climates.

For myriad reasons, communication in schools is in jeopardy, which imperils both the adults and children in our schools. Impaired principal-staff conversations are part of the problem; improved principal-staff conversations can be a paramount part of the solution. Recognizing the power of an educational leader’s conversations to make a difference—for good or ill—is of vital importance for the interpersonal landscapes of our schools.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

STAFF MEMBER CONSENT FORM FOR STAFF SURVEY
April ___, 2004

Dear Participant:

You are invited to participate in a dissertation research study conducted by Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier, a candidate for the Ed.D degree in Educational Leadership at the University of Maine, Orono. The questions on the survey focus on your experiences with your principal, (principal’s name). The study examines how teachers experience daily conversation/communications with a school principal, how these conversations/communicatons affect their relationships with the principal, and how these same teachers perceive the health of the working and learning environments in their school. In addition, the survey is intended to examine the role of principal-staff conversation in the encouragement or discouragement of reflection and critical thinking.

Your decision to complete the survey is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you will complete the enclosed survey, which could take up to an hour of your time. There is a possibility that you may be uncomfortable answering some or all of the questions, and you may at any time choose to skip questions or cease participation altogether.

Of course, I hope you will choose to participate by answering the questions, and, if you do, please return the completed survey to me in the enclosed stamped envelope no later than (date chosen by the staff members as reasonable). For those of you who do elect to complete the survey, I sincerely appreciate your taking the time to answer my questions. I am asking participants not to put their name anywhere on the survey (or return envelope); your name will not be on any other documents or records.

The only individual who will read the completed surveys is Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier. The data collected will be analyzed and used in writing a dissertation, articles for professional journals and periodicals, and in presentations at conferences.

You may benefit from the opportunity to reflect upon and respond to these questions regarding your perceptions about your conversation and relationship with this principal. You may also benefit from how the data collected from the study influences the principal’s conversation and professional relationships with staff members.
If you have decided to participate, please complete and mail the survey by the date chosen by the school staff. If you have any questions about this study at any time, or would like to follow up with me individually, I encourage you to contact me via email or telephone. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Anderson, Assistant to the University of Maine’s Protection of Human Subjects Review board at 581-1498 (or email gayle@maine.edu).

Sincerely,

Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier
Doctoral Candidate
University of Maine
Orono, Maine 04469
Appendix B

STAFF MEMBER RESEARCH SURVEY
STAFF MEMBER RESEARCH SURVEY
Conducted by Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier
Doctoral Candidate, University of Maine

Please complete this survey and return it in the stamped envelope.
Do Not write your name or address on the survey or the envelope.
Thanks very much for your time. Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier

Survey

1. How would you describe or characterize your relationship with your principal? Please give an example of your interactions with her that support your description.

2. How does your principal make you feel included or excluded from issues or decisions that directly affect you and/or your teaching?
3. What are the characteristics of a typical conversation between you and your principal? Please use examples that illustrate these characteristics.

4. To what extent does your principal convey value and respect for all staff members and their viewpoints? Please give examples that illustrate your answer.

5. What does your principal do when you challenge or disagree with her position in a conversation?
6. When your principal is in conversation with you, do you feel her/his goal is usually to convince you of her/his position, to understand your point of view, or some other possibility? Please describe the principal's words and actions that convey this message.

7. How does your principal encourage and/or limit opportunities for you to appreciate and critically examine all points of view? Please give example(s).

8. How well does your principal listen to you? Describe her words and behaviors that make you feel this way.
9. Describe ways your principal does or does not provide a school climate that allows staff members opportunities for freedom of expression, risk taking, and exploration.

10. Describe ways your principal does or does not provide opportunities for staff members to have the chance to clarify their values and share in developing the vision and purpose for the school.

11. Describe ways your principal does or does not provide opportunities for staff members to share ideas, elaborate on their own thoughts, and consider the ideas of others.
Appendix C

STAFF MEMBER CONSENT FORM FOR OBSERVATION
OF PRINCIPAL-STAFF CONVERSATIONS
Dear Participant:

You are invited to participate in a dissertation research study conducted by Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier, a candidate for the Ed.D degree in Educational Leadership at the University of Maine, Orono. This phase of the study involves observations of your principal in conversation with staff members. These observations of the principal in conversation with staff members would take place over a two-week period.

If you agree to take part in this phase of the study, you will allow the researcher, Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier, to observe your principal having a non-private conversation with you. Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You have the right not to have the researcher present during any conversation you have with your principal. You are free to ask the researcher to leave at any time.

I will do everything we can to protect your confidentiality. I will not note or discuss your individual remarks in connection with your name with other faculty or anyone else. The focus of these observations is your principal; it is her part of the conversation that I will be observing and taking notes on.

There is a possibility that you may be uncomfortable with my presence during a conversation with your principal. Please remember you have total control over if and how long I am allowed to be present. You may ask me to leave before the beginning of a conversation with your principal, or at any time during the conversation.

Your participation in this study may or may not have benefits for you. Your principal chose to participate in the study as a means of improving her practice by learning of possible connections between principal-staff conversations and the creation of caring relationships and mutuality in the workplace.

If you still wish to participate in this phase of the research, please sign below. Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the above information. If you have questions about this study at any time, or would like to follow-up with me individually, I encourage you to contact me through email or telephone. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Anderson, Assistant to the University of Maine’s Protection of Human Subjects Review Board at 581-1498 (or email gayle@maine.edu)

Signature of Staff Member: ________________________________

Sincerely,

Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier
Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership
University of Maine
Orono, Maine 04469
Appendix D

STAFF MEMBER CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEW
Dear Participant:

You are invited to participate in a dissertation research study conducted by Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier, a candidate for a doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Maine, Orono. This phase of the study involves interviews with staff members conducted by the researcher, Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier. If you choose to participate in these private, one-on-one interviews, you will be asked questions about your conversations and working relationships with your principal. The researcher will audiotape each interview.

There is a possibility that you may be uncomfortable answering some or all of the interview questions, and you may at any time choose to skip questions or cease participation altogether. The only individual who will have access to audiotapes or transcripts is Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier. All audiotapes, transcripts, and signed consent forms will be kept in locked files separate from identifying information. The data collected will be analyzed by the researcher and used in writing her dissertation, as well as in possible articles for professional journals and periodicals, and in presentations at conferences. Audiotapes will be destroyed after being transcribed.

You may benefit from the opportunity to reflect upon and respond to the interview questions regarding your perceptions about your conversations and your professional relationships with your principal. The data collected from the study will inform her practice and may positively influence her future interactions with staff members.

Your participation in this study may or may not have benefits for you. Your principal chose to participate in the study as a means of improving her practice by learning of possible connections between principal-staff conversations, the creation of caring relationships and mutuality in the workplace.

If you still wish to participate in this phase of the research, please sign below. Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the above information. If you have questions about this study at any time, or would like to follow-up with me individually, I encourage you to contact me through email or telephone. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Anderson, Assistant to the University of Maine’s Protection of Human Subjects Review Board at 581-1498 (or email gayle@maine.edu)

Signature of Staff Member: ________________________________

Sincerely,

Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier
Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership
University of Maine, Orono, Maine 04469
Appendix E

STAFF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
STAFF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

In this study, multiple interviews serve as one method of data collection. The principal investigator, Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier, will conduct interviews with staff members. The dialogues of each interview will be audio-taped and transcribed.

The following questions will help focus and guide the staff interviews:

1. Please describe the kinds of conversations you have with your principal at school on a typical day.

2. Who usually initiates these conversations and for what reasons?

3. Let us focus on the ones the principal initiates. What do you think her usual goal is? How do you respond?

4. What is your principal's tone and style in her conversations with you? How does this make you feel?

5. How comfortable do you feel about challenging or disagreeing with your principal on a matter?

6. Does your principal make you feel included and/or excluded in conversations with her? Describe her behavior(s) toward you that make you feel this way.

7. When you disagree with your principal during a conversation, what normally happens? How does your principal usually respond? In such situations, do you believe the principal treats you any differently than any other staff member? Please give some examples.

8. How often does your principal solicit your opinions on various issues?

9. How well-informed do you think the principal keeps you regarding issues that affect you or your practice?

10. What kinds of opportunities does the principal provide for constructive, collegial conversations? Please give examples.

11. How does your principal convey value and respect for you and your opinions? Please describe her words or actions.
Appendix F

PRINCIPAL CONSENT FORM
PRINCIPAL CONSENT FORM

March ___, 2004

Dear Participant:

You are invited to participate in a dissertation research study conducted by Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier, a candidate for the Ed.D degree in Educational Leadership at the University of Maine, Orono. The study examines how teachers experience daily conversation/conversations with their principal, how these conversations/communiqués affect the professional relationships between the principal and staff members and the mutuality of the workplace.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to (1) allow each of your staff member to complete a survey focused on your conversations and relationship with each of them; (2) participate in multiple interviews with Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier in which you will answer questions about your conversations and working relationships with staff members; and (3) allow non-private conversations between you and staff members to be observed by Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier.

Your decision to participate in this research is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you will allow copies of the enclosed staff survey to be disseminated to each of your staff members, you will participate in audio-taped interviews with the researcher, and you will allow the researcher, Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier, to observe and record data about your behaviors during conversations with members of your staff.

There is the possibility that negative responses on the staff survey could adversely affect your employment, were they publicly connected with you. Since I will be the only person with access to completed surveys, and careful measures will be taken to ensure confidentiality, there is little risk of this happening. However, this is a potential risk.

There is a possibility that you may be uncomfortable answering some or all of the interview questions, and you may at any time choose to skip questions or cease participation altogether. There is a possibility that you may be made uncomfortable by the presence of the researcher when she is observing principal-staff conversations; you may at any time call a halt to her observation(s).

To protect the privacy of research participants, their names and any identifying data will not be on any documents or records. The only individual who will read the completed surveys is Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier. Any names or identifiers of your conversations with staff members will not be included in the researcher’s notes or transcripts. The only individual who will have access to audiotapes, raw data or transcripts is Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier. All transcripts, completed surveys, and signed consent forms will be kept in locked files separate from identifying information. The data collected will be analyzed by the researcher and used in writing her dissertation,
as well as in possible articles for professional journals and periodicals, and in presentations at conferences. Audiotapes will be destroyed after being transcribed.

You may benefit from the opportunity to reflect upon and respond to the interview questions regarding your perceptions about your conversations, your professional relationships with staff members, and mutuality in your school. The data collected from the study will inform your practice and may positively influence future conversations and professional relationships with staff members.

If you have decided to participate, please read and sign the accompanying consent forms. If you have any questions about this study at any time, or would like to follow up with me individually, I encourage you to contact me via email or telephone. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Anderson, Assistant to the University of Maine’s Protection of Human Subjects Review board at 581-1498 (or email gayle@maine.edu).

Sincerely,

Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier
Doctoral Student
University of Maine
Orono, Maine 04469
Appendix G

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

In this proposed study, multiple interviews serve as a primary method of data collection. The principal investigator, Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier, will conduct interviews with the principal in the case study. The interview will last about 120 minutes in duration and follow a moderately guided format. The dialogues of each interview will be audio-taped and transcribed.

The following questions (successfully field-tested in a Fall 2002 pilot study) will help focus and guide the interview:

1. Please describe the kinds of conversations you have with staff members at school on a typical day.

2. Who usually initiates these conversations and for what reasons?

3. Now let us focus on the ones you initiate. What is your goal? How do staff members respond?

4. What is your tone and style in your conversations with staff members? Why?

5. How comfortable does your staff feel about challenging or disagreeing with you on a matter?

6. How do you think you make your staff feel included and/or excluded in conversations with them? Describe your behavior(s) that you believe make your staff feel this way.

7. When you sense that staff may disagree with you, what normally happens? And what do you usually do in response? How does that vary according to the specific staff member(s) involved?

8. How often do you solicit staff opinions on various issues?

9. How well-informed do you feel you keep your staff regarding issues that affect them or their practice?

10. What kinds of opportunities do you provide for constructive, collegial conversations? Please give examples.

11. How do you convey value and respect for all staff members and their opinions? Please describe your words or actions.
Appendix H

RESEARCH QUESTION DATA ALIGNMENT
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Alignment: How and What Data It Will Be Answered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. What were the characteristics of the conversations between a successful principal and her staff members? | Staff Survey: #3,8,6  
Staff Interviews: #1,2,3  
Principal Interviews: #1,2,3  
Researcher Observations |
| 2. What were the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on principal-staff relationships? | Staff Questionnaire: #1,5,9  
Staff Interviews: #4,5,6,7  
Principal Interview: #4,5,6,7  
Researcher Observations |
| 3. What is the perceived impacts of principal-staff conversations on school climate? | Staff Questionnaire: # 2,4,7, 10, 11  
Staff Interviews: #6, 8, 9, 10, 11  
Principal Interviews: #8, 9, 10, 11  
Researcher Observation |
Appendix I

DATA COLLECTED FROM FALL 2002 PILOT STUDY STAFF SURVEY
DATA COLLECTED FROM FALL 2002 PILOT STUDY STAFF SURVEY

1. How would you describe or characterize your relationship with your principal? Please give example(s) of your interactions with him/her that support your description.

This question proved effective at eliciting comments about levels of support, shared or differing opinions or philosophies, evidence of respect or disrespect, and principal-staff communication.

2. How does your principal make you feel included or excluded from issues or decisions that directly affect you and/or your teaching?

Responses to this question provided insights into respect and disrespect, valuing of opinions, support issues, chances for input, listening behaviors of the principal, and staff feelings about being a part of important decisions.

3. Describe how your principal does or does not convey value and respect for all staff members and their viewpoints.

Issues around support, respect, principal’s listening behaviors, principal’s positive or negative responses to staff input, and how often the principal invited staff opinions surfaced with this question.

4. Describe ways your principal encourages or discourages you with regard to challenging or disagreeing with her/his position in a conversation.

Responses included references to the principal’s degree of openness to other opinions, resistance to change or other viewpoints, and staff comfort levels about disagreeing with the principal.

5. When your principal is in conversation with you, do you feel her/his goal is usually to convince you of her/his position, or usually to understand your point of view? Please describe the principal’s words and actions that convey this message.
Responses to this question gave evidence of the presence or absence of conversation and dialogue, and acceptance or rejection of other viewpoints.

6. How does your principal provide or avoid opportunities for you to appreciate and critically examine all points of view? Please give example(s).

In the responses to this question, there was additional evidence regarding how the principal invites or discourages opposing viewpoints, trust or its lack between principal and staff, support or its lack, and respect or disrespect accorded staff members.

7. How often does the principal provide you with opportunities for thinking or writing about your own learning? Please give example(s).

The responses generated by this question indicated whether or not the principal valued reflection or introspective work.

8. How well or poorly does your principal listen to you? Describe her/his words and behaviors that make you feel this way.

This elicited responses regarding body language, respect and disrespect, kindness, trustworthiness, soliciting of opinions, attentiveness, validation or its lack, and support, or its lack.
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Appendix K

CHARACTERISTICS OF CONVERSATIONS & RELATIONSHIPS MATRIX
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Appendix L

CHARACTERISTICS OF CONVERSATIONS & SCHOOL CLIMATE MATRIX
# CHARACTERISTICS OF CONVERSATIONS & SCHOOL CLIMATE MATRIX

## CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Inclusion</th>
<th>Positive Support</th>
<th>Collegial Opportunities</th>
<th>Respect &amp; Appreciation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Started conversations with a greeting</strong></td>
<td>Staff felt included by multiple opportunities for staff to give input on lit initiative</td>
<td>May offer opportunities to express support</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Provided accessibility for conversations</strong></td>
<td>Opinions were solicited at staff meetings</td>
<td>May indicate support and being heard to staff</td>
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<td><strong>Listened well.</strong></td>
<td>Information (e.g., literature grant, made available to all involved can lead to feeling included.</td>
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<td><strong>Shared information re: students, curriculum, &amp; personal issues</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Used humor</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Asked empowering questions</strong></td>
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<td>May indicate support/belief in staff’s abilities.</td>
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<td><strong>Took notes that assisted with follow through and follow-up</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Gave supportive responses</strong></td>
<td>Enthusiastic “go for it” may create an atmosphere of support.</td>
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Appendix M

DESCRIPTIVE MATRICES KEY
DESCRIPTIVE MATRICES KEY

The following information pertains to the empty boxes and certain entries in each of the descriptive matrices (Appendix K and Appendix L):

1. Research participants noted that the principal in my study started conversations with a greeting. However, research participants did not connect this characteristic of principal-staff conversations with the perceived characteristics of principal-staff relationships or school climate. Blase and Blase (1994) noted “friendly” as one of the aspects of a principal’s personal behavior that have effects on teacher empowerment, specifically satisfaction (pp. 87-88). They note that friendliness and interpersonal warmth are both requisite ingredients are necessary for shared governance (empowering) schools (p. 91). This could provide some support for a possible connection between the greetings that the principal in my study began conversations interpersonal and school-wide feelings of support.

2. Humor was a noted as a characteristic of principal-staff conversations in the data from my study. However, it was not linked in the data to any of the characteristics of school climate. Senge (2000) notes physiological effects of smiles and laughter has on an individual (a reduction in pulse rate, the release of endorphins, and elevated oxygen levels in the blood), in addition to the effects on groups of people, where they have been found to “provoke higher level thinking and to liberate creativity” (p. 202). Osterman and Kottkamp (quoted in Blase and Blase, 2001) noted “playfulness and humor” (p. 97) as a factor associated with the process of group development. Blase and Blase (2001) noted these factors among those having a positive effect on how (adult) groups functioned in the schools in their study.
3. Asking empowering questions was a conversational characteristic of the principal in my study that I noted, but that was not revealed in the data from research participants. The critical nature of this behavior for a leader is noted by Ackerman, Donaldson, and Van de Bogert (quoted in Lieberman, 2002, et. al) who aver that “Leaders who embrace open inquiry, the sharing of problems and solutions, and collective responsibility will foster creativity, resourcefulness, and collaboration (p. 75). Lieberman (2002) writes that “Inquiring conversations involve action research, problem-finding, and uses of evidence, and examples of reflective conversations such as dialogue . . . “ (p. 75). The conclusions from these scholars may lend some support to the possible impacts of the principal’s empowering questions on characteristics of principal-staff relationships—support, respect and trust, openness, and freedom to challenge or disagree—and a characteristic of school climate—positive support.

4. In my study, I found that the principal took notes during conversations that assisted with follow-through and follow-up; this was not, however, noted by the research participants. Evans (2000) emphasizes the importance of the dependability this note-taking can contribute when he claims “consistency is the lifeblood of trust” (p. 288). He avers, “People who do what they say they will do—meet their commitments, keep their promises—are trustworthy; those who don’t, aren’t” (p. 288). The data from my study did indicate that the principal also showed this kind of consistency in sharing information and providing accessibility for conversations.

5. In my study, I noted the principal’s supportive responses that were a regular reaction to staff members’ requests or ideas. Although this was not noted as a characteristic of the principal’s conversations by research participants, they did note this
behavior as a sign of her personal support (in characteristics of relationships) and an overall atmosphere of support as an aspect of school climate.

6. Although Little (1982; 2002) notes the connection between a norm of collegiality and positive aspects of a school’s climate/culture, there were no perceived connections in my study’s data regarding characteristics of principal-staff conversations and collegial opportunities. However, the data from my study did reveal that the studied principal provided the time, space and opportunity for collegial conversations, which Little (2002) notes as prerequisites for collegial conversations to occur.
BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Heather Dwyer Jaquette Sadlier was born in Boston, Massachusetts and graduated from Holbrook High School in Holbrook, Massachusetts in 1968. She attended Vassar College, and went on to the University of New Hampshire where she received her B.A. in Psychology in 1974 and M.Ed. in Literacy in 1976. As a teacher for over twenty years, she has held various positions in grades K-12: classroom teacher; literacy specialist; and gifted and talented program teacher. She has also taught graduate courses for the University of Maine, as well as recertification courses and workshops for teachers.

After receiving her degree, Heather will be starting a tenure track professorship at the University of New England. She is a candidate for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership from The University of Maine in August, 2005.