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The Perceptions of Implementation Teams on the Impact of Character Development Programs on School Culture, Student Behaviors, and Student Leadership Skills

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A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Dr. Shelly Fransen, Dissertation Chair	7/27/18 Date
Dr. Sherry DeVore, Committee Member	7/27/18 Date
Dr. Danny Humble, Committee Member	7/27/18 Date

Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree.

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Abstract

Creating a positive, engaging school culture is a goal of most school districts and school administrators (Clark, 2015). Many educators believe the most effective methods of instilling a positive school culture include school-wide systems of implementation (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). This qualitative study included an in-depth look at the perceptions of implementation teams from two counties in southwest Missouri on the impact of school-wide character development models on school culture, student behaviors, and student leadership skills. The study was also designed to determine the factors within a school that have the greatest impact on the implementation process. Interviews were conducted with focus groups to gather insight into the perceptions of teachers, administrators, and implementation leaders. After completion of all focus groups, it was evident many commonalities exist among the implementation teams across the varying buildings and districts. Most participants agreed their implemented character development model had a positive impact on school culture throughout the process. The impact associated with student behaviors and student leadership skills depended much more specifically on the goals associated with the school-wide systematic model. The study also resulted in data indicating factors that impact the implementation process are very similar to factors that impact any large-scale change initiative. The results of this study can provide insight for administrators and implementation leaders when considering the preparation and planning of systematic character development models.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Creating a positive, engaging culture is a goal of most schools and school leaders (Clark, 2015; Truby 2018). Developing a school-wide system to instill this culture through promoting good behavior and increasing academic progress is a starting point to meet this goal (Clark, 2015). According to Yeung et al. (2016), "Intervention programs with the aim of enhancing and supporting positive behaviors of students in schools have entered general use worldwide (p. 1). School leaders often search for systems or programs to promote positive culture throughout the school setting (Clark, 2015; Yeung et al., 2016). The use of common school-wide character development programs including Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS), First PLACE! Character, and The Leader in Me provides structure and consistency when implementing changes throughout a school (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Yeung et al., 2016). A positive school culture is critical to student success and promotes a safe place to learn and grow both academically and socially (Truby, 2018; Clark, 2015; Truby, 2018, Yeung et al., 2016).

This chapter includes a review of background information along with an overview of the three school-wide behavior management programs included in this study. Additionally, the theoretical framework, the statement of the problem, and the purpose of the study are presented. Research questions used to guide the study are posed, and limitations to the study are delineated.

Background of the Study

School climate, although a critical aspect of successful schools, is viewed in different ways by many individuals (Collins, Thomas, & Parson, 2010). Collins et al. (2010) described:

> Researchers have conceptualized school climate in several different ways and have utilized a variety of methodologies to define the construct of school climate as it relates to various student outcomes. It is difficult to generalize findings in the research to recommend change in practice because many scholars have developed various constructs of school climate that include but are not limited to factors such as: school organizational structure, facilities management, stakeholder perceptions of the school, interpersonal relationships, the level of community support and engagement. (pp. 34-35)

As educators recognize the importance of a positive school culture, their efforts have led to an influx of focus and attention on school-wide character development programs (Lockwood, 2013). Although there are many ways schools develop and instill culture, educators agree providing a positive culture is crucial to academic success and the creation of safe environments (Collins et al., 2010).

Many educators believe the most effective method of instilling a positive school culture involves school-wide systems of implementation (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). For years, teachers and parents debated whether or not to educate students on core values in the school setting (Great Schools, 2016). That discussion shifted in 1999 with the killing of 15 students at Columbine High School away from whether core values should be taught in school to which values should be taught and how to teach them effectively

(Great Schools, 2016). Today, character education programs are a common component of school improvement plans as decision makers strive to establish positive school culture and high academic and behavioral expectations (Lockwood, 2013).

The effectiveness of school-wide character development programs varies greatly (Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2013; Yeung et al., 2016). Effective programs tend to engage students in meaningful lessons where good character is modeled throughout the curriculum and in all school settings (Great Schools, 2016). Not only are efforts focused on establishing behavioral expectations but also on developing high academic expectations for success (Great Schools, 2016; Yeung et al.., 2016). This study involved examination of two school-wide character development programs and perceptions of their effects on factors leading to positive school culture.

Theoretical Framework

For this study, a theoretical framework focused on systems theory was utilized. Systems theory was first introduced in the 1930s and 1940s by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who espoused the importance of looking at a whole system rather than breaking it up into individual parts (Fullan, 2004; Learning Theories, 2017). Systems thinking is an important 21st-century skill built around the same concept of thinking about systems as a whole, rather than only individual components (Learning Theories, 2017). Within education, many schools implement systems due to a variety of reasons including cost-effectiveness, ease of implementation as part of comprehensive plans, and state accountability requirements (Betts, 2014).

This study was designed to examine the implementation of character education programs within southwest Missouri schools, specifically to analyze the impact of

school-wide systematic programs on school climate, student behavior, and student leadership. Examining these programs through the lens of systems theory allowed the data to reveal components within each program educators viewed as important to the success of the system (Learning Theories, 2017). Nearly a century of progress has left schools trying to change from previous structures, and going forward will require a whole-system approach to meet the educational system's evolving needs (Betts, 2014).

The societal structure where education is involved has been adapting at an increasing rate since about 1900 (Betts, 2014). It was not until 1950 the importance of change became necessary and is now becoming more evident as schools continue into the 21st century (Brown, 2004). Effective discipline and character programs must be established in schools to allow teachers to focus on academics (Scott, White, & Algozzine, 2015; Sugai et al., 2002).

Schools work to create a culture in which all students can reach full academic potential without the challenge of disciplinary disruptions negatively affecting learning (Deal & Peterson, 2014). The system approaches evaluated in this study—PBIS, The Leader in Me framework, and First PLACE! Character—each claim to develop the character traits of learners through systematic structures. The results of this study provided data as southwest Missouri schools make decisions about what systematic approach is most beneficial for a positive effect on school climate and culture.

Statement of the Problem

Although most agree positive climate and culture are necessary aspects of successful schools, there are many different ways to measure the climate and culture of schools (Collins et al., 2010). According to Truby (2018), "Relationships come before

everything. Building a positive environment in individual classrooms and throughout your whole school is a matter of cultivating and maintaining relationships" (para. 1). Collins et al. (2010) mentioned, "Regardless of the instrument used to assess school climate, research has demonstrated positive relationships between school climate and student achievement. What is necessary, however, is a consistent measure of school climate" (p. 36). Truby (2018) concluded even in the worst environment, change can happen by utilizing a whole team approach to create a positive school climate.

School climate and culture have become so crucial to academic success in recent years that policymakers have included measures of school climate in accreditation and accountability processes (Collins et al., 2010). MacNeil, Prater, and Busch (2013) indicated school leaders must find a way to simplify the complex environments of a school and "realize it is important that culture is complex because it has very unique and idiosyncratic ways of working. When an organization has a clear understanding of its purpose, the culture will ensure that things work well" (p. 74). With accountability now dependent on a school's culture, school leaders can get overwhelmed with the many factors to focus on for school improvement (Collins et al., 2010).

Aligning the actions of leaders within the organization to the purpose of the organization is an important task and one that becomes more challenging due to the difficulty of measuring school culture (MacNeil et al., 2013). The leaders in a school are the drivers of culture, not able to delegate the responsibility to others (Gordon, 2017). MacNeil et al. (2013) explained, "When the complex patterns of beliefs, values, attitudes, expectations, ideas and behaviors in an organization are inappropriate or incongruent the culture will ensure that things work badly" (p. 74). Developing a compelling vision and

plan will convey the idea there is always a way forward providing motivation for the organization (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015).

Students and teachers often share different perspectives and opinions on what the climate and culture are like within a school (MacNeil et al., 2013). Although being able to assess the climate or culture through honest evaluation will help schools plan for what they want, the process is difficult for schools (Gordon, 2017). Despite increased research and programming aimed at improving school culture, there has been limited research on the perceptions of teachers after implementation of character development programs (MacNeil et al., 2013). The teacher's perceptions vary significantly from school to school, and the factors for successful implementation need to be identified (Wasilewski, Gifford, & Bonneau, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to provide insight into the perceptions of implementation teams on the impact of school-wide character education programs in regard to school climate, student behavior, and student leadership. The perceptions were gathered from employees of rural schools in southwest Missouri. The study also addressed the common factors believed to have the greatest impact on school culture based upon responses from the focus groups. For the purpose of this study, the terms middle school and elementary school referred to schools serving students in grades K-8.

Research questions. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the perceptions of implementation teams of middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs in southwest Missouri in regard to school culture?

2. What are the perceptions of implementation teams of middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs in southwest Missouri in regard to student behavior?

3. What are the perceptions of implementation teams of middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs in southwest Missouri in regard to student leadership?

4. What common factors found in middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs have the greatest impact, both positively and negatively?

Significance of the Study

Although the frameworks of PBIS and The Leader in Me have become common practice in many schools across the country, there are fewer than 15 years of compiled data to demonstrate their effectiveness in regard to impacting school climate, positively affecting student behaviors, and increasing student leadership skills (Boody, Lasswell, Robinson & Reade, 2014). These data are even less-established in schools within the region of southwest Missouri (Participating Schools, 2017). Perceptual evidence from implementation teams and site directors may establish common factors impacting implementation and reveal implementation challenges. Schools continuously strive to create a culture built upon positive student behaviors and actions (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2016). This study provided significant insight into implementation challenges and data to demonstrate effects on various important aspects of school culture.

Definitions of Key Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined:

Implementation team. For this study, implementation team refers to the team of teachers, support staff, counselors, or building administrators who are leading the school staff through implementation of the character development model. The implementation team represents the voices of the students, families, staff, and community in developing a strong school-wide system (Yeung et al., 2016).

The Leader in Me school. For this study, The Leader in Me school refers to a school that has gone through the formal process of The Leader in Me implementation. The school is in the process or has completed the required professional development and coaching provided by FranklinCovey Education (Lund, 2018).

Positive behavioral interventions and support (PBIS). Established in 2001 at the University of Oregon, PBIS is an approach or framework for providing school personnel with processes and procedures to provide evidence-based behavioral interventions in an integrated systematic process (Hall, Bohanon, & Goodman, 2016). The implementation of the PBIS framework is intended to enhance academic and social behavior outcomes for all students within a school setting (Sugai & Horner, 2010).

PBIS school. For this study, a PBIS school is a school that has gone through the formal process of PBIS implementation by actively participating in training provided by regional professional development agencies or outside sources (Courtney, 2016).

School culture. In this study, the term school culture refers to the way social interactions and daily decisions are carried out within a school setting, establishing an overall feeling of safety and trust among the students and staff (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015).

School-wide character development program. In this study, the term school-wide character development program refers to a system approach to teaching behavioral and social skills to develop character and positively affect school culture (Horner, Sugai, & Lewis, 2015). Character education advocates hope their programs encourage positive ethical behaviors throughout the student body and lessen or eliminate destructive behavior both socially and personally (Lockwood, 2013).

Limitations and Assumptions

The following limitations were identified in this study:

Sample demographics. This study included participants from four rural public school districts in southwest Missouri. The schools chosen were similar in demographics and size. The varying stages of implementation of each school's specific character development program were a potential limitation.

Instrument. The questions used for the interviews were created by the primary investigator, which must be considered a limitation.

The following assumption was accepted:

1. The responses of the participants were offered honestly and without bias.

Summary

A school's focus on developing positive school culture and teaching students to become proficient in basic life and social skills is a necessity in today's landscape (Clark, 2015). As a result, the search for a systematic program to teach these components leads many decision makers toward character development programs including PBIS, The Leader in Me, and regional efforts like First PLACE! Character. In Chapter One, the background of the study and statement of the problem provided evidence supporting the

positive effect of a school's culture on student success while also identifying the need for further research comparing the perceptual success of three character development programs in rural schools. The theoretical framework provided evidence of the systems approach used in many character development programs. The study was defined with the research questions listed and the significance of the study explained.

In Chapter Two, a literature review is provided to include information on relevant topics pertaining to the study. The review provides background information on the effect of school culture on student success and learning, historical perspectives regarding school culture, student leadership and voice in relation to school culture, and basic information pertaining to school-wide programs focused on developing school culture. The review specifically outlines three school-wide character development programs implemented throughout the nation with varying success.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Developing a culture conducive to learning is a challenge all schools face on a regular basis (Clark, 2015). According Yeung et al. (2016), "Positive behavior interventions have been widely used in early childhood, elementary and high school settings to reduce students' problematic behaviors and improve educational outcomes" (p. 1). Implementation of a systematic process is the method many use to advance positive environment and culture (Clark, 2015). The programs detailed within Chapter Two—PBIS, The Leader in Me, and First PLACE! Character—focus a school's efforts toward teaching positive character and positive social and behavioral skills within the entire student body (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MODESE], 2016).

Chapter Two begins with a review of the theoretical framework. The systems in place in each of the three programs provide school leaders with the necessary structures and support for full implementation (Clark, 2015; Fullan, 2004). The chapter continues with information pertaining to the importance of a positive school culture and relating to student leadership and opportunities to provide student voice within the school climate. Next, specific information is offered for each of the school-wide character development programs studied. Then, the challenges of systematic program implementation are discussed, as well as the strategies for successful implementation.

Theoretical Framework

As introduced in Chapter One, the basis of this study was the development of character traits of learners through systematic structures and programs. The system approaches of PBIS, The Leader in Me, and First PLACE! Character are structures many

southwest Missouri schools have implemented in the past decade (MODESE, 2016), The systems theory was utilized, which includes the process of studying a procedure or business to identify its goals and purposes to create efficient systems and procedures (Clark, 2015; Fullan, 2004). The systems theory approach focuses on the importance of the intricacies of a situation to recognize its most effective implementation and potential impact on school culture (Fullan, 2004; Lockwood, 2013).

A systems approach requires understanding the entire process and not just a portion, seeing the broader context, noticing interactions among others, and recognizing the broader picture (Clark, 2015). While stakeholders must develop limits to define the character development system being implemented, they must also understand each system develops within and interacts with multiple levels of a scaffolded system (Fullan, 2004; Lockwood, 2013). A school district's main task is to develop an optimal learning environment focused on educating and maximizing the growth of students (Clark, 2015; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). The advantages of a well-developed system of implementation are important for educators targeting school climate, given the greater impact on the student population (Lockwood, 2013).

Schools develop different paths to meet this goal; however, in the end, all schools must grow a climate and culture focused on students feeling safe, nurtured, and accepted (Clark, 2015, Gordon, 2017). Potential answers should be developed to optimize benefits and minimize detrimental consequences (Lockwood, 2013). Schools must also be environments where structure, order, and ethical standards are expected and maintained (Clark, 2015; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). According to Gruenert and Whitaker (2015), "Culture is not a problem that needs to be solved, but rather a framework that a group can

use to solve problems" (p. 6). As leaders begin addressing school culture, it is essential to understand culture is dependent on the strength of the organization behind the change and power of the previous culture (Gordon, 2017; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015).

A general thought of PBIS is that all students who attend school need varying levels of behavioral support (Crone, Hawken, & Horner, 2015; Diggan, 2013). The framework behind PBIS and other systematic character development programs is considered a comprehensive structure a district or building can commit to making a successful impact on school culture through positive reinforcement and consistent student expectations (Sugai & Horner, 2010, Yeung et al., 2016). According to Crone et al, (2015), through a multi-tiered focus for an entire school social culture, PBIS empowers students to gain confidence both academically and behaviorally to build upon and develop the entire time they are attending school.

The amount of support given to each student depends on the level of problematic behavior the student demonstrates (Burke , Davis, Hagan-Burke, Lee, & Fogarty, 2014; Crone et al., 2015). Schools implementing PBIS and other character development models have improved student attendance, reduced problem behaviors through analysis of discipline referral data, and increased student engagement (Sugai & Horner, 2010; Yeung et al., 2016). Schools in every country have the challenge of creating an environment that fosters learning while maintaining student discipline, instilling high academic expectations, and developing students ready for success at the next level (Benson, 2014).

Educators are challenged with developing appropriate social behaviors within their students in a time when parents, communities, and stakeholders continue to add

accountability expectations to the school's responsibilities (Clark, 2015). Moreover, Rodwell (2015) suggested creating "policies promoting social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual skills, knowledge, dispositions, and engagement, plus a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching to re-engage students who may veer off-track" (para. 4). Educators who focus on school climate and culture are in a better position to reach the academic results they desire for students (Shah & McNeil, 2013).

School Culture and Its Heritage

The concept that schools have distinctive cultures is not new. In 1932, Willard Waller (as cited in Clifford, 1991) stated:

> Schools have a culture that is definitely their own. There are, in the school, complex rituals of personal relationships, a set of folkways, mores, and irrational sanctions, a moral code based upon them. There are games, which are sublimated wars, teams, and an elaborate set of ceremonies concerning them. There are traditions and traditionalists waging their world-old battle against innovators. (p. 4)

Students, educators, parents, and community members have always felt something different about their schools (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). Culture is something undefined, yet powerful, helping to define the social interactions, prototypical norms, and everyday events that occur in a school (Deal & Peterson, 2014; Hoffman, Hutchinson, & Reiss, 2014). For decades, terms such as climate and ethos have been used to attempt to capture this feeling which absorbs everything: the way people act, what they talk about, whether they seek out peers or isolate themselves, and how educators feel about their overall work and current situation (Diggan, 2013).

School culture has been defined in many ways over the course of history. One scholar defined culture as the social glue that holds people together (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). Another suggested definition explains culture as "the way we do things around here" (Feuerborn, Wallace, & Tyre, 2013, p. 28). Others have identified culture as the shared beliefs and values closely holding a community together or the behavioral patterns distinguishing a group from others (Brown, 2004; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015).

In the end, history supports the conclusion that shaping culture is one of the most important tasks required of any leader (Feuerborn et al., 2013). Principals must learn that creating an exciting and reinforcing learning environment, or a positive culture, provides the conditions under which students and teachers want to do what needs to be done and create a supportive atmosphere with a shared sense of purpose (Clark, 2015; Deal & Peterson, 2014). It is within this climate, the energy of students and teachers is filtered in productive directions (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015).

Role of Student Leadership and Voice in School Culture

Education reform and successful change initiatives must consist of student engagement and student involvement to be effective (Weiss, 2018). Student voice is the students' ability to speak their opinions and ideas on important school issues, giving them ownership in the learning culture evident in the school and affecting their day-to-day interactions (Chan, 2013; Fox, Bedford, & Connelly, 2013). When students consistently have an opportunity to ask questions, offer their personal opinions, and share their thoughts through encouragement and intentional structures, they develop a sense of thoughtfulness and see their surroundings as full of opportunity and a place where they can confidently challenge misconceptions and face their problems (Fox et al., 2013).

Effective implementation of initiatives focused on changing school culture or regular practices requires participation and involvement through buy-in from all groups involved in the change initiative, including students (Weiss, 2018).

Although student-centered opportunities are the structure and foundation for student voice, the intricacies and demands of teaching make focusing on providing platforms for student voice another added responsibility for teachers (Chan, 2013). Speaking out on school issues enables students to develop and take charge of their futures, change the climate around them, and make a difference in their surroundings (Chan, 2013; Fox et al., 2013). By involving students in meaningful decisions and the process of policymaking, schools provide students with opportunities to not only develop outside an academic model but also to develop problem-solving skills, communication strategies, and belief in themselves (Fox et al., 2013).

Schools can encourage involvement of students and give them opportunities for voice by first assessing the culture of the school to ensure the environment and climate are conducive to students talking and schools listening (Chan, 2013; Weiss, 2018). No matter who students are or the backgrounds they bring to the classroom, they are interested and motivated by the idea of providing voice in the decision-making process and seeing their ideas drive the culture surrounding them (Weiss, 2018).Creating opportunities to not only effectively assess strengths but also to identify the areas students see as weaknesses within the school environment provides areas of focus for staff development and culture adjustments (Chan, 2013).

According to Rodwell (2015), “Students who feel safe, connected, and engaged” foster an improved school culture (para. 4). Schools can effectively include and

encourage student voice, participation, and leadership throughout the school and academic settings by conducting student focus groups, providing opportunities for students to be engaged in building committees, collecting data and perceptions from students using surveys, inviting students into staff meetings and conversations, and providing students with choices in assignments and experiences within the school day (Fox et al., 2013). Encouragement within structures and development of opportunities for student voice and leadership are an investment into the students' worth and provide an opportunity for students to develop shared responsibility in the goals of the school and structures of the school's overall culture (Weiss, 2018).

Culture and Its Effect on Student Success

The word *culture* indicates a growing range of impact on how individuals react and behave in communities, organizations, and given situations (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). Culture refers to a collection of common beliefs, values, and traits organizations share even though they might not understand their influence on actions (Barkley, Lee & Eadens, 2014; Scott et al., 2015). Organizations and individuals act and talk in the way they do because it has become the way they do business and the way things are commonly done (Brown, 2004).

Peters and Waterman (2014), in their 1993 research, found highly rated companies develop unique cultures passed to the next generation through word of mouth, slogan, and legend. These slogans and cultures served to motivate the company's workers by providing meaning to their work and developing a common connection between a company's shared values, or culture, and the way the company is managed and organized (Gordon, 2017; Peters & Waterman, 2014). Peters and Waterman (2014) also

proclaimed struggling companies have either no identifiable culture or a failing structural culture. Peters later addressed the topic of school culture and leadership, stating outstanding principals are visionaries and super salesmen (Gordon, 2017; Peters & Waterman, 2014). As researchers continue to focus on the leadership traits of school leaders and implementing change in a successful and transparent way, it is understood if educators want to improve the success of schools, they must change cultures and overall structures through the improvement of leadership and leadership styles (Brown, 2004; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015).

Since schools serve students and are not businesses, the many steps of implementing change have proven to make it much more difficult for change to take place in an educational setting (Searle, 2014). Many factors play into the difficulty of implementing change to educational culture including the separate cultures of the impoverished, the middle class, and the wealthy (Payne, 2013). Each of these external cultures affects the structural culture of the school (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Payne, 2013).

Payne (2013) recognized these external societal cultures differ greatly in ways affecting literacy acquisition and attitudes toward education. Another factor educational structures have weighing on them is the culture of bureaucracy and lawmaking entities with a variety of values, beliefs, norms, and assumptions (Learning Point, 2015). The formal education structure itself is a result of middle-class traditions and mindsets; however, society, individuals, and current business structures have different values, virtues, beliefs, and norms (Payne, 2013). All of these cultures and influences converge

upon the school setting, creating a structure with positive or negative consequences for both teachers and students (Brown, 2004).

As educators make changes to the framework of schools, they are asking those engrained in the highly complicated structure to develop a set of beliefs, stories, and values while disregarding all other outside pressures and tensions and focusing everyone back to the overall purpose of learning (Brown, 2004). Developing successful school climate must be the focus of the entire school community (Clark, 2015; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2017). Each day students, educators, and community members walk into schools and form judgments on the school's quality based on perceptions and emotions of the culture developed through multiple factors (Brown, 2004).

Decades of research have revealed support for the role of positive school culture and climate on teaching and learning (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). The National School Climate Council reported, "Positive school climate promotes student learning, academic achievement, positive youth development and increased teacher retention" (Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2013, p. 7). The council continued, "School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. It is based on patterns of school life experiences and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures" (Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2013, p. 5). Analysis of detailed data including survey and disaggregated data on discipline and attendance provides the information necessary to address the issues (Learning Point, 2015).

Over the past 10 to 15 years, the school-wide culture programs of PBIS, First PLACE! Character, and The Leader in Me have become relevant in schools across the

nation and in southwest Missouri (MODESE, 2016). Each of these models is a systematic process focused on developing the school culture to support necessary shifts in climate, student leadership, and positive behavior trends (Hall et al., 2016; MODESE, 2016; Yeung et al., 2016). School districts must consider carefully which initiatives best fit their needs and district goals (MODESE, 2016).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) refers to a system change process utilized by an entire district or school (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2015; Hall et al., 2016). The main focus of this framework is the theme of teaching behavioral expectations in a consistent manner throughout the building (Sugai et al., 2002, Yeung et al., 2016). Teams of teachers, administrators, and behavioral specialists from the implementing school participate in training provided by skilled trainers (Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002; Yeung et al.,2016). Following the training, the school develops school-wide expectations and rules focused on three to five positively stated and easy-to-remember behavioral expectations (Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2016). Throughout the implementation, schools embed curriculum lessons, positive approaches to behavior, common language, and a culture focused on behavioral successes and education (Sugai et al., 2002; Warren et al., 2006).

The history of behavioral research leading to PBIS. In the early 1900s, Edward Thorndike introduced the Law of Effect, stating, “Responses that produce a satisfying effect in a particular situation become more likely to occur again in that situation, and responses that produce a discomforting effect become less likely to occur again in that situation” (as cited in Mazur, 2013, p. 101). Watson, the father of American

behaviorism, claimed the science of behavior is the idea of psychology (Barnett, 2016). Almost half a century later, B. F. Skinner also developed a behavioristic method of analyzing the way typically functioning organisms actively react to the environment, adapt to control it, and to a certain degree, manipulate it (Barnett, 2016; Walker, 1984).

Skinner demonstrated this concept of operant conditioning, as well as reinforcement, punishment, and extinction of behaviors (Barnett, 2016; Resnick, 1984). Skinner's developments continue to influence the teaching reinforcement theory that a combination of both positive rewards and punishments can be used to reinforce optimal behavior or prohibit undesired actions, and proposed incorrect responses create such negative results in learning that individuals should avoid them entirely (Barnett, 2016; Resnick, 1984). Skinner's work advanced to influence the following behavioral approaches now used in the teaching field: scaffolding information to be learned into smaller units, checking student work regularly and providing effective feedback as well as reinforcement, teaching "out of context," and implementing direct or student-centered instruction (Burke, Ayres, & Hagan-Burke, 2014).

The reinforcement-behavioral perspective of the 1970s changed its direction of focus toward a cognitive-interpretive movement in schools (Brandt, 1992). Hank Levin, renowned educational psychologist, developed the Accelerated Schools model and prompted an internal transformation of culture (Brandt, 1992). A program titled, *Conscious Discipline*, followed the framework for this model with a focus that included changing school culture by training staff in the advancements of classroom management and emotional intelligence:

> The training specifically provides teachers with procedures, attitudes and understandings that enhance their own emotional intelligence, so the teachers could then move from an external model of classroom management (providing incentives for positive student behaviors and classroom punishments) to a relational-cultural view of classroom management (based on a positive cooperative class climate and conflict resolution). (Hoffman et al., 2014, p. 15)

As Hoffman et al. (2014) noted, the model of Conscious Discipline integrates ideas and development of classroom management, character education, and emotional intelligence into a single continuous process.

Teachers organize and structure a classroom to create safe environments and opportunities for student learning and success to take place developed around the idea of a school family and apply specific strategies to teach social skills through real-life opportunities of conflict (Marzano, 2014; Wong, 2014; Yeung et al., 2016). Yeung et al. (2016) stated, " The process emphasizes analyzing data to inform decision making, identifying systems that support staff, and identifying, implementing, and evaluating evidence-based practices that improve the social-emotional and learning outcomes of all students" (p. 2). The result is a focused approach to motivation and behavior management emphasizing development over time of positive social behavior, while placing less focus and importance on external rewards and punishment (Marzano, 2014; Wong, 2014). Marzano (2014) concluded the mental approach to classroom management has the greatest impact on reducing classroom misbehaviors.

On June 4, 1997, changes to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act were approved into law, which reformed the way educators dealt with children whose

behaviors violated behavior codes and policy or students whose behaviors were outside the social norm of acceptable behaviors (PBIS, 2017). Two of these changes focused on the implementation of PBIS models and Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBAs) in relation to a child's Individualized Education Plan (Horner et al., 2015; PBIS, 2017; Sugai et al., 2002). Both the PBIS and FBAs include documentation of a district's efforts to improve the interventions used to address behavioral issues and meet the behavioral needs of students (Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2016).

Over the last 20 years, researchers have been focusing on the effects of behavioral interventions, leading to the shift of focus toward PBIS (PBIS, 2017; Sugai et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2016). The idea of positive behavioral support was developed and implemented in special education structures as an alternative form of discipline in contrast to more controversial methods used for students with severe behaviors (Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002). Sugai and Horner headed a collaborative effort involving universities and educational agencies with a focus to support large-scale implementation of PBIS to promote both a reduction in behavior problems and improvement of learning environments (Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002).

The PBIS model and framework. School-wide PBIS is a systems approach focused on developing a school culture of supports for behavioral needs for the entire school population with a goal of achieving both social and academic success (Horner et al., 2015; Yeung et al., 2016). This framework is a positive change compared to the traditional behavior management procedures used in many schools focused on punitive punishments without teaching skill development (Crone et al., 2015; Horner et al., 2015). The school community works in a collaborative effort to improve culture through

teaching of behavioral expectations and skills in all settings throughout the school (Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002).

School-wide PBIS is not a new theory of behavior management, nor is it a collection of new interventions (Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2016). It is an implementation of research-based practices focused on behavioral expectations and social skills designed to enhance the overall school, home structures, and community (Crone et al., 2015; Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2016). Positive reinforcement is widely used to recognize students who demonstrate expected behaviors (Crone et al., 2015; Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2016). This allows teachers to use behavioral data to monitor progress and develop future plans (Crone et al., 2015; Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2016). Students who have not shown success in terms of the focused expectations are given a plan including implementation of a collection of interventions designed specifically to fit the needs of the individual student (Crone et al., 2015; Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2016).

Key elements of PBIS. The PBIS framework is comprehensive and can be implemented by any school with the desire to develop a system of behavioral supports for students (Mathews, McIntosh, Frank, & May, 2014; Yeung et al., 2016). Through the development of a school-based PBIS representation with teacher leadership and administrative support, implementation of the model creates buy-in and becomes a standard way of doing school business (Crone et al., 2015; Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2016). School-wide PBIS is set up to provide individual schools

with the freedom to choose paths based on analysis of behavioral assessments and data collection (Mathews et al., 2014; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2014; Yeung et al., 2016).

When PBIS activities are embedded into school improvement plans and existing school procedures, a system is created for addressing behavior specific to the school's needs and is sustainable through school administration change and staff turnover (Horner et al., 2015; Mathews et al., 2014). The model is considered to be sustainable and set up in a way that will develop competency throughout years of implementation (Mathews et al., 2014). However, Yeung et al. (2016) found:

> It is argued that in order to sustain positive effects of positive behavior intervention, future implementation efforts need to emphasize administrator support for the school team, ongoing high quality professional development and technical assistance. Moreover, a focus on coaching classroom-level implementation fidelity is of significant importance, as is the development and validation of evaluation tools for sustainability. (p. 1)

The PBIS model's focus on three tiers of interventions results in the structure necessary for sustainability and meeting the needs of all learners.

Shown in Figure 1 is a visual presentation of the three tiers and components involved within each tier, while the text around the pyramid represents the necessary components for successful implementation (Dunlap et al., 2010; Horner et al., 2015; Yeung et al., 2016). Following a report generated from the North Carolina Schools review of PBIS implementation, district administrators commented on the areas perceived as providing the most adequate structure and growth for the model (McIntosh et al., 2014). At the core of the process of developing a consistent resource of behavioral

supports specifically for the school setting are universal behavior practices applied to all students, staff, and settings (Wasilewski et al., 2013). Behavior exemplars are developed for all settings to address current behavior concerns (Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2016). Researchers have consistently demonstrated approximately 80% of the school population can show behavioral success, defined as one or fewer office discipline referrals, when consistent implementation of universal supports is in place (Crone et al., 2015; Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002).

The second level of the framework is focused on students who demonstrate at-risk tendencies due to their lack of success with the universal expectations (McIntosh et al., 2014; Swoszowski, McDaniel, Jolivette & Melius, 2013; Yeung et al., 2016). At this level, small group or targeted interventions are provided for groups of students who exhibit behavior patterns similar to other students (Horner et al., 2015; McIntosh et al., 2014; Swoszowski, McDaniel, Jolivette & Melius, 2013; Yeung et al., 2016). These behavior patterns are identified as disruptive enough to require alternate forms of discipline and go against the universal procedures and behavior exemplars created to demonstrate appropriate behaviors (Horner et al., 2015; McIntosh et al., 2014; Yeung et al., 2016). Social skills instruction, personal behavior management techniques, and behavior monitoring are common strategies shown to be successful for students or groups in tier two (Horner et al., 2015; Yeung et al., 2016). Nearly 10-15% of the school population required some type of small group intervention (Horner et al., 2015; Swoszowski, McDaniel, Jolivette & Melius, 2013; Yeung et al., 2016).

The third tier of support for students who consistently demonstrate the inability to show success is individualized and extensive (Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002;

Yeung et al., 2016). This level starts with conducting an FBA and developing an individual behavior plan incorporating specific resources from a variety of agencies including special education (McIntosh et al., 2013). Approximately 5% of the school population require individualized behavior plans (McIntosh et al., 2013; Yeung et al., 2016).

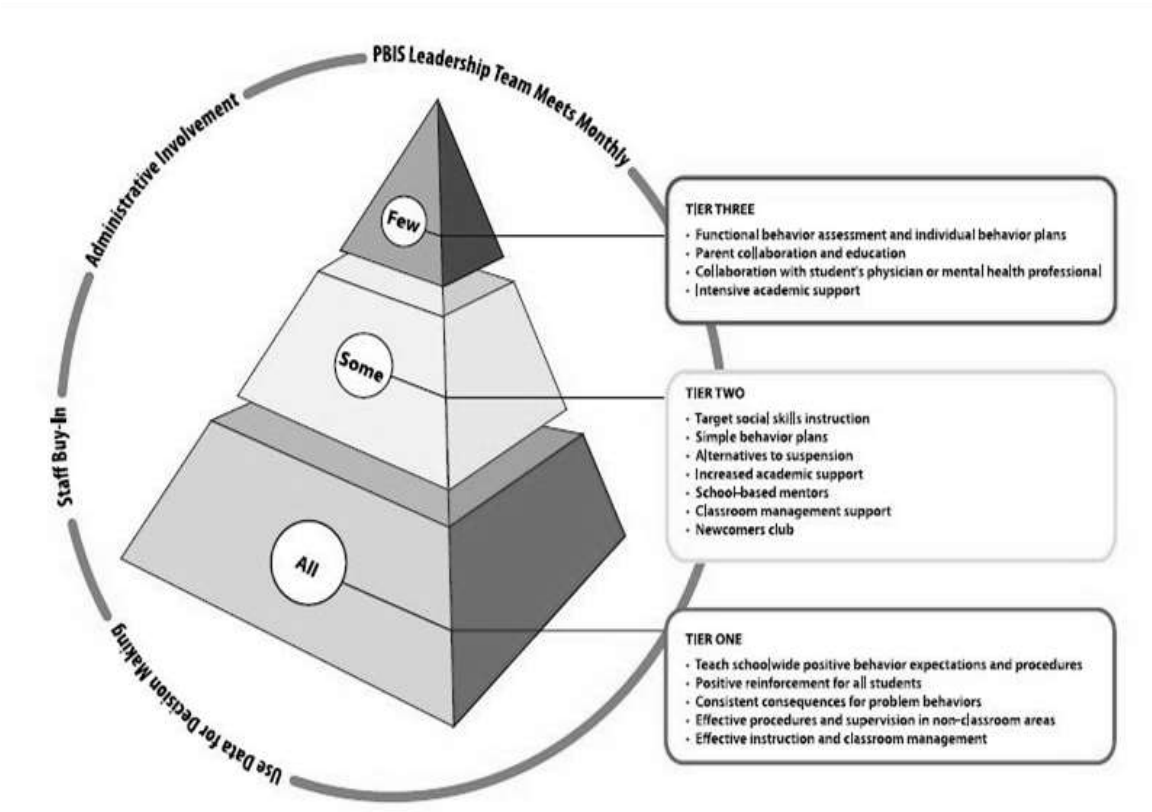

Figure 1. School-wide positive behavioral interventions and support: Three-tier model. Adapted from *School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports: Implementation Guide 2010* by K. Dunlap, S. Goodman, C. McEvoy, & F. Paris, 2010. Copyright 2010 by the Michigan Department of Education.

Although many schools are capable of recognizing factors leading to student challenges, many schools implement support strategies different from each other (Horner et al., 2015; Yeung et al., 2016). Within the PBIS framework, student behavior plans are firmly connected to whole school structures and supports by using common expectations and universal language consistent with building expectations (McIntosh et al., 2013; Yeung et al., 2016). The behavior plans tie goals into all other school-wide reinforcement systems and consistently communicate information to staff, ensuring they recognize the connections and their role in each child's behavior plan (McIntosh et al., 2013). By building a true, connected system of support consistent throughout the educational structure, schools increase their effectiveness in supporting children with more challenging behaviors (Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002).

Effective implementation of PBIS. The goal of PBIS is to create interventions for students that will not only effectively provide support for behavior issues, but will hopefully prevent the problems from occurring in the future (McIntosh et al., 2013; Yeung et al., 2016). The PBIS program is considered to have core characteristics focused on preventing negative behavior, teaching life skills to students in school-wide settings, and providing ongoing assessment to determine effectiveness of the program (Horner et al., 2015). These program characteristics can be found in many different school-wide models, but PBIS is different than many models because it provides support for all these characteristics in the structured model of implementation (Marin & Filce, 2013).

Another key component of PBIS includes a team consisting of teachers, support staff, administration, parents, and students who guide the implementation and planning process (Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002). Throughout the planning process and

implementation of the program, the team defines behavioral rules and expectations for specific school settings, develops behavioral expectations and lessons to teach expectations to students, structures and develops a behavior management system to recognize positive behaviors and discourage inappropriate actions, while consistently monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the program using data collected (Warren et al., 2006; Yeung et al., 2016).

The first step for implementation of PBIS is to develop a team to lead the school throughout the process (Crone et al., 2015; Warren et al., 2006). It is important for these teams to meet regularly to identify the needs of the school, develop and implement interventions to meet goals targeted to specific behaviors and students, and ensure the goals of the team are kept at the forefront of the building's efforts (Marin & Filce, 2013). The team then develops a method for teaching students the behavioral expectations and rules developed by the team (Marin & Filce, 2013).

To effectively teach the student expectations, Warren et al. (2006) stated a school should:

> Utilize didactic instruction on the expectations and how they apply in various settings around the school, allow for a demonstration of appropriate behavior skills, and allow for opportunities for students to practice these skills through role-plays and in-vivo situations in different settings within the school and with a variety of people. (p. 189)

Another step to successful implementation for a school PBIS team involves creating a system to discourage negative behaviors and to reward or encourage positive, expected behaviors (Horner et al., 2015; Warren et al., 2006; Yeung et al., 2016). Many schools

have utilized a token or monetary system, providing students with physical tokens when exhibiting appropriate behavior and allowing students to redeem these items for some type of desired reward (Jones, 2015). Schools who have effectively implemented PBIS have developed token systems that creatively reward students for their positive behaviors while developing motivation for these rewards (Crone et al., 2015; Warren et al., 2006; Yeung et al., 2016).

Another key aspect of a successfully implemented PBIS program is developing a system for identifying and monitoring students who struggle to meet expectations (Horner et al., 2015). To ensure students are identified, schools have to develop a method for collecting and analyzing student behavioral data on a consistent and regular basis (Diggen, 2013; Warren et al., 2006). Data are critical components of effectively monitoring behaviors and systems within the PBIS framework, because data are evidence to educators and the PBIS team if interventions are successful or what impact they are having on student behavior (Wasilewski et al., 2013; Yeung et al., 2016).

To ensure data are accurate and valid, teams must effectively train staff on consistent classroom management techniques including common language and referral processes (Horner et al, 2015; Wasilewski et al., 2013). Not only are data needed for effective implementation, but teachers need appropriate professional development specific to positive reinforcement, monitoring of student behaviors, and positive relationship skills to effectively carry out a PBIS program (Horner et al., 2015; Yeung et al., 2016). When teachers experience success in these areas, they typically enforce an effective PBIS program and should experience a decrease in teacher corrections, more

effective use of praise to correction, and a decrease in discipline referrals and negative behavior incidents (Scott et al., 2015).

Research on effectiveness. A collection of researchers have provided evidence to support the primary features of PBIS; for example, extensive research has shown social skills instruction to be effective (Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2016). Schools implementing universal systems of school-wide PBIS have reported overall improvements of 40-60% in discipline reports (Marin & Filce, 2013; Yeung et al., 2016). Implementing school-wide systems of PBIS positively affects overall rates of behavior issues in schools (Crone et al., 2013; Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002; Yeung et al, 2016). Research completed at the elementary grades has demonstrated improvements in behavior, academic successes, and increased amounts of instructional time (Horner et al., 2015).

While the data show the success of school-wide PBIS systems on decreasing overall rates of problematic behavior displayed by the school population, little is known about the effects of PBIS on at-risk students (Marin & Filce, 2013). The research and results demonstrate signs of increased abilities of school personnel to implement more systematic and targeted individual and small group interventions (Horner et al., 2015; Yeung et al., 2016). Early data from pilot studies revealed functional-based interventions outperformed traditional behavioral interventions, and behavior plans were of higher quality when school-wide PBIS systems were in place (Horner et al., 2015).

Data analysis. Another aspect of the PBIS model is the emphasis on data analysis and its use in a school's decision-making processes (Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2016). The goal of the PBIS model is to use information gathered

through FBAs, data analysis of all behavior referrals, and school surveys of implementation and staff perceptions (Horner et al., 2015; Yeung et al., 2016). This focus on data is designed to provide information during the decision-making process to support and encourage adaptive behavior and lessen the effect of problem behaviors (Wasilewski et al., 2013).

Evaluation data are an integral part of implementation and developing a model of growth and improvement as a team begins the process of a PBIS program (Wasilewski et al., 2013; Yeung et al., 2016). Two various types of data used and analyzed in a successful PBIS program are data focused on the effectiveness of the program and data focused on the reliability of all PBIS programs (Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002). Data used to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation are most commonly discipline records to determine if the interventions in place are effective and if additional interventions need to be assigned to address any areas of concern (Hoyle, Marshall, & Yell, 2011). The second type of data used to evaluate the effectiveness of implementation through evaluating the reliability of all PBIS program implementations are tools created to gather data: the Schoolwide Evaluation Tool, the Effective Behavior Supports Survey, and the School-Wide Benchmark of Quality (Hoyle et al., 2011; Yeung et al., 2016).

Data analysis has become a standard in the educational picture over the last couple of decades, and as schools are held more accountable for learning and continuous student growth, researchers have concluded educators use various forms of data analysis creatively (Horner et al., 2015). The ways data are used vary from the effect of instructional strategies on student learning to assessment results based on students'

socioeconomic status (Crone et al, 2013; Horner et al., 2015; Yeung et al., 2016). The framework of PBIS shares many of these data analysis tools to provide reasons for interventions and justification for changes in structures and procedures (Marin & Filce, 2013).

School PBIS teams compare their schools' averages to model schools' standards, previous years' data, and other neighboring schools' information to demonstrate growth and comparison models (Burke et al., 2014). The PBIS teams also identifies the most frequent problems, locations, times, students, and grade levels, analyzing patterns to determine needed changes in structures and procedures (Scott et al., 2015; Yeung et al., 2016). As they analyze these data, teams are able to better identify tier two interventions and goals for improvement to set dates for review (Scott et al., 2015).

First PLACE! Character Education

In 2005, a work-study college set forth a mission to lead a character education initiative implemented specifically for local students by partnering with all public schools in the county (College of the Ozarks, 2017). The initiative, called First PLACE! (Partners Linking Arms for Character Education), was implemented and developed within 17 schools throughout that county (College of the Ozarks, 2017). Upon kick-off, each building formed a team consisting of a building administrator, counselor, teacher, community member, and board member and sent them to CHARACTERplus training led by the college staff and character council (MODESE, 2016). The First PLACE! initiative has three goals:

1. To improve school climate to positively impact achievement, attendance, discipline, and dropout rate

2. Cultivate visible community support
3. Increase parent participation and awareness in character development. (MODESE, 2016, para. 2)

Not only did schools implement a number of ways to incorporate the monthly character words into classroom and school settings, but 355 businesses and community organizations, including churches and civic leaders, became committed to teaching and demonstrating good character (College of the Ozarks, 2017). Sue Head, executive director of the Keeter Center for Character Education at College of the Ozarks, stated:

> In order to change the culture, it is going to take everyone linking arms and moving towards a common goal. We don't have time to wait for someone else to come in and help our kids. We are responsible, and it's up to us to work together and change the culture in our county. (MODESE, 2016, p. 5)

Through the work schools have implemented over the course of nine years of implementation, efforts have been recognized as instrumental in the development and growth of character traits in students and cultures throughout the county (MODESE, 2016). First PLACE! continues its focus on increasing attendance, addressing discipline issues in schools, and increasing standardized test scores, while creating a positive climate for students and staff in schools (College of the Ozarks, 2017).

The Leader in Me

Another school-wide character development program many schools have implemented both statewide and on a national stage is The Leader in Me framework (Covey, 2013). The Leader in Me (2015c) was developed from the concepts and ideas associated with Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Schools

implement a structure consistent with the ideals outlined in the book to better educate students in positive social and emotional skills (Barkley et al., 2014; Covey, 2013). The framework provides schools with authentic opportunities to demonstrate these skills along with the structures to effectively teach vocabulary through class lessons and school-wide focus (Barkley et al., 2014; The Leader in Me, 2015c). Each principle developed in The Leader in Me framework is aligned with practices documented as effective at improving character development in an educational setting (The Leader in Me, 2015a).

History of The Leader in Me schools. The Leader in Me is a whole-school reform process developed from the concepts within Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,* along with Principal Muriel Summers of A. B. Combs Leadership Magnet Elementary School in Raleigh, North Carolina (Humphries, Cobia, & Ennis, 2015; The Leader in Me, 2017). The basis of the program is to build 21st-century social and emotional skills to help improve the success of students (Barkley et al., 2014; Covey, 2013; Humphries et al., 2015). Combs found essential to building these skills is success in teaching the habits found in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,* along with providing practice of the habits within and outside school walls (Barkley et al., 2014; Covey, 2013; Humphries et al., 2015).

Stephen Covey first elaborated on his instrumental habits in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (The Leader in Me, 2015a). The instrumental habits discussed include the following:

1. Be proactive
2. Begin with the end in mind

3. Put first things first
4. Think win-win
5. Seek first to understand, then be understood
6. Synergize
7. Sharpen the saw. (The Leader in Me, 2015b, para 2)

The Leader in Me schools integrate the concepts of leadership and personal effectiveness in everyday, age appropriate language throughout the day-to-day operations and curriculum within a school environment (Barkley et al., 2014; Covey, 2013; Humphries et al., 2015). This process aligns itself with the Standards for Staff Development established by Learning Forward (formerly the National Staff Development Council) (The Leader in Me, 2015c).

The three underlying beliefs of The Leader in Me call for a shift in thinking from a hierarchical model of leadership within a school to a system focused on the opportunity for all individuals, including students and teachers, to lead (Westgate Research, Inc., 2014). There are nine criteria used to govern The Leader in Me schools (Barkley et al., 2014; Hatch & Andersen, 2014). These criteria from The Leader in Me (2017) are provided as a rubric of how the program is to be performed on the school level:

1. Having a Lighthouse Team
2. Creating a leadership environment
3. Integrating leadership language into instruction and curriculum
4. Collaboration of staff members
5. Providing student leadership roles
6. Parental involvement

7. Producing leadership events
8. Tracking goals
9. Seeing improvements as a result of the implementation. (pp. 115-116)

Schools receive recognition based on the level of implementation and efforts evident within their organizations (Character Education Partnership, 2014; Humphries et al., 2015).

When a school shows progress in achievement, Lighthouse recognition is rewarded, indicating a school's achievement and the impact on its staff, students, parents, and the greater community (Character Education Partnership, 2014; Humphries et al., 2015). Recognition typically takes two to three years, but can be achieved sooner if schools make it a priority to achieve results sufficient to pass the Lighthouse review (Barkley et al., 2014; The Leader in Me, 2017). The review includes evaluation of the school's performance against the following nine criteria from the Franklin Covey Company (The Leader in Me, 2017):

1. A Lighthouse team is in place at the school, meets regularly and oversees school-wide implementation of the leadership model with students, staff, parents and community members.
2. The school campus environment reinforces the model by adding leadership language displays and bulletins to hallways and classrooms that emphasize individual worth and leadership principles.
3. Teachers integrate leadership language into school curriculum and instruction daily.

4. The staff collaborates and works together to effectively build a culture of leadership in classrooms and throughout the school.
5. The students are provided with meaningful student leadership roles and responsibilities.
6. The parents of students understand The Leader In Me model and the 7 Habits and are involved in activities that support the leadership model.
7. A system is in place for setting and tracking school-wide, classroom, academic and personal goals.
8. The school sees improvements resulting from implementing The Leader In Me process, which includes measuring, collecting baseline data and tracking results to determine how the leadership model is bringing improvements.
9. The school holds events to share their leadership model with the community and other schools and hosts a mini or full Leadership Day or a similar event that includes parents, business partners and educators. (p. 7)

According to Franklin Covey researcher Dr. David Hatch, due to the foundational role of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* in the transformational process within a school, significant improvements have been reported in relation to the students learning life skills necessary for adapting to the 21st century (Boody et al., 2014; Humphries et al., 2015). As students gain effective life skills, data suggest the school's culture improves and results in a relative increase in student achievement (Barkley et al., 2014; Boody et al., 2014).

Theory associated with change suggests transformation within a school culture is much like many businesses, complex and reluctant to significant progress with these key factors:

1. Change is a process, not an event.
2. An implementation dip is normal.
3. An organization does not change until the individuals within the organization change.
4. Taking intentional and actionable steps increases the likelihood of quality and impactful implementation.
5. Administrative leadership is essential.
6. A sustainability model is crucial. (Boody et al., 2014, p. 9)

Each of the principles taught throughout the curriculum of The Leader in Me and included in Stephen R. Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is in alignment with best practices in the educational world and is documented as an effective practice at improving student achievement within a school culture (Barkley et al., 2014; Covey, 2013; Humphries et al., 2015).

By teaching the skills to enable students to be proactive, set goals, be cooperative, and build positive relationships and emotional capacity, these principles improve the opportunity for positive learning outcomes, enhanced student experiences, and development of skills necessary to strengthen achievement (Barkley et al., 2014; Covey, 2013; Humphries et al., 2015). The principles also do well to guide students and educators toward the need to focus on developing school culture and cultivating learning, which are critical for academic success (Barkley et al., 2014; Covey, 2013; Humphries et

al., 2015). In a recently published survey of parents of five elementary schools, over three-quarters of the respondents said they were highly satisfied with the results of The Leader In Me program encouraging character-building and development in students (Lighthouse Research, 2015). The participants of the study also noted student leadership as one of the key values taught and encouraged in the children (Lighthouse Research, 2015).

Barriers to Effective Implementation of Systematic Models

In a time when states are issuing orders to address needs with whole school reform initiatives, it is necessary to recognize the importance of effective implementation ("What Makes 'Success for All'," 2014). Schools must ensure financially obligated systematic programs are implemented effectively and with fidelity to meet organizational obligations and public perceptions (Boody et al., 2014; Yeung et al., 2016). Even when schools follow the recommended program and begin to fully invest into the implementation process, there are still barriers that must be accounted for and factored into decisions for the program to be successful (Boody et al., 2014; Humphries et al., 2015; Yeung et al., 2016). In 2007, a study was conducted in Florida to address the major factors schools encounter that prevent successful implementation of systematic programs in school settings (Kincaid, Childs, Blase, & Wallace, 2007).

The academic study included extensive questioning of 70 public school educators from 26 varying schools, spanning across 18 different school districts (Kincaid et al., 2007). After examining the specific structures in place to facilitate the successful implementation of the program, the researchers concluded educators perceived the greatest implementation issues arose due to three different areas (Kincaid et al., 2007).

The areas identified as implementation challenges were consistent to other research including individuals not understanding their role in the systems, lack of program expertise and knowledge, and problems arising due to the lack of organization and structure during implementation (Barkley et al., 2014; Kincaid et al., 2007; Yeung et al., 2016).

Systematic programs aligned with issues during implementation specific to educator turnover and the amount of time and effort it takes districts to initially implement a program, then to reinvest enough time to train new staff in subsequent years (Boody et al., 2014; Yeung et al., 2016). To offset many of the issues experienced during implementation, including lack of program knowledge, it is recommended school districts offer and prepare professional development opportunities for not only new staff to the district but also for returning staff with previous experience implementing the chosen program (Kincaid et al., 2007). Professional development organizes learning opportunities for teachers and educators to help them understand the intricacies of the program along with how to effectively implement it (Horner et al., 2015; Yeung et al., 2016).

One of the most common challenges and barriers school districts must overcome during implementation of a systematic program is the idea of staff having vested interest, or buy-in (Pinkelman, McIntosh, Rasplica, Berg, & Strickland-Cohen, 2015; Yeung et al., 2016). Some of the reasons behind this difficulty include lack of commitment to the values and philosophy of the implemented model, perceptions of the program's lack of sustainability, unsuccessful or minimal staff training, and the stress on teachers from trying to implement multiple programs (Feuerborn et al., 2013; Kincaid et al., 2007;

Yeung et al., 2016). Due to a combination of these reasons, school implementation teams report that only 30% of their team members experience a majority of staff buy-in, or support, when they begin the implementation process (Diggan, 2013; Feuerborn et al., 2013).

The other implementation challenge addressed by Kincaid et al. (2007) was the opinion educators share of factors useful in facilitating a successful program. The facilitating factors include preparation from the school and implementation team, the amount of ongoing support, and perceived outcomes (Crone et al., 2013; Kincaid et al., 2007; Yeung et al. 2016). Preparing for implementation consists of individuals working as a team to accomplish a specific and agreed-upon goal including staff buy-in and the use of data to drive the decision-making process (Horner et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2016). Support from a variety of sources including district-level administrators, the implementation team, building-level administration, parents involved in the process, and the community is necessary for successful implementation (Diggan, 2013; Feuerborn et al., 2013; Yeung et al., 2016). Each of the factors necessary in facilitating the program is a key contributor, and without the support of all involved entities, a program's implementation will not succeed (Diggan, 2013; Kincaid et al., 2007; Humphries et al., 2015).

Overcoming Barriers to Effective Implementation

To successfully implement a school-wide systematic program it is essential certain system traits are present, including effective and meaningful professional development (Humphries et al., 2015; McClean & Grey, 2013; Yeung et al., 2016). Meaningful professional development is important for implementation teams including

building administrators, teachers, and staff members prior to and during implementation (Diggan, 2013; McClean & Grey, 2013; Yeung et al., 2016). A study was conducted wherein the participating individuals were provided professional development necessary for the program, and participants showed increased understanding while push-back and negative opinions were reduced (MacDonald & McGill, 2013). These data demonstrate teachers and staff not only need to be knowledgeable about the program implemented, but they also need to be educated and trained on the processes used with the system along with specific goals of the program (MacDonald & McGill, 2013; Yeung et al., 2016).

Determining the current perceptions and thoughts shared by the staff is another method used to effectively gauge the success of implementation (Feuerborn et al., 2013; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). The process of determining staff perceptions can include formulating and administering interviews or surveys (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Kincaid et al., 2007). Through surveys or interviews, it is necessary to gather data and perceptions from all departments and to give everyone involved with implementation an opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions on not only successes but also challenges (Feuerborn et al., 2013; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Kincaid et al., 2007). It is also vital to conduct a baseline form of the data collection process prior to implementation to compare results following implementation to determine growth, ongoing issues, and celebrations of successes (Feuerborn et al., 2013; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Kincaid et al., 2007). Collecting these data could allow new ideas or creative solutions to arise to address ongoing problems and to provide validation to strategies being used within the current implementation (Feuerborn et al., 2013; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Kincaid et al., 2007).

Another factor necessary to experience a successful implementation is the system of structures and funds available to provide necessary resources for teachers and program goals (Feuerborn et al., 2013; Yeung et al., 2016). Some of the resources necessary for effective implementation include administrative support, financial resources and funding, and time necessary for professional development and teacher clarity (Diggan, 2013; Feuerborn et al., 2013; Yeung et al., 2016). For administration to demonstrate support, it is imperative for district leaders to show ownership and buy-in and to commit to the program goals and implementation plan, or dissension could develop among the implementation team or supportive teachers and those who oppose the model's goals (Kincaid et al., 2007).

Leaders must be responsive to the people part of the change and provide supports and practices to move organizations beyond their current state (Frontier & Rickabaugh, 2014). Reminding teachers and staff they are part of a great school can be very empowering and reassures them when administrators demonstrate the positive effects the program and work being done by the teachers have on students (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2017). These factors demonstrate the importance of administrators being actively involved in meetings, initiatives, and implementation challenges along the way, as they build necessary time into the schedule for training and work to be completed toward the program goals (Kincaid et al., 2007). By analyzing finances and keeping goals and program implementation at the front of financial decision making, the administration can show support of the program while providing the necessary resources for implementation (Feuerborn et al., 2013).

An additional component of successful implementation of a school-wide systematic program is to demonstrate and communicate the benefits of the program by illustrating a need to teachers, parents, and decision-makers (Feuerborn et al., 2013). As an implementation team, demonstrating there is a need that could be rectified or improved by the proposed program can be an effective and meaningful way of opposing the resistance that can sometimes come with change (Clark, 2015; Yeung et al, 2016). One way to demonstrate this need is to create teams focused on providing data to support the goals of the program including data from district assessments, discipline referrals, student attendance, or other forms related to the goals of the program (Diggan, 2013; Feuerborn et al., 2013; Yeung et al., 2016).

Finally, it is imperative for teachers and staff to develop a shared mission and vision including the goals of the program to gain participant ownership (Diggan, 2013; Gordon, 2017; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). Allowing staff to be involved in the process of developing a program vision brings staff together to address the program goals and allows them to share their individual attitudes and perspectives about the process (Clark, 2015; Gordon, 2017; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). Throughout this process of creating the vision, staff will be involved in goal setting and developing a common language and needs for the implementation, providing staff members an opportunity to add their own sense of ownership and individuality to the process (Gordon, 2017; Feuerborn et al., 2013; Yeung et al., 2016).

Summary

A school district's main task is to develop an optimal learning environment focused on educating and enhancing the growth of students (Clark, 2015). Each of the

models researched in Chapter Two is a systematic process focused on developing school culture to support necessary shifts in climate, student leadership, and positive behavior trends (MODESE, 2016). School districts must consider carefully which initiatives best fit their needs and district goals (MODESE, 2016).

In Chapter two, the review of literature begins with the theoretical framework, providing details to the systematic models of The Leader in Me and PBIS. As schools began understanding the role school culture plays in their collective success and as more focus was placed on character development within schools, the implementation of systematic programs became a common practice across the nation (Hall et al., 2016). The review of historical research and findings provides background information on the heritage of school culture along with the role student leadership and voice has on a school's culture. Further research provides information on the effect culture has on academic success within a school.

Chapter Two included additional findings specific to behavioral research and its effect on the development of the PBIS model. Additional research specific to the PBIS framework highlighting key elements of the model was included. Additional support and research provided insight into effective implementation along with research on the effectiveness of PBIS. Also included in chapter two was an analysis of data specific to PBIS effectiveness.

A review of literature containing information and research focused specifically on the historical significance of First PLACE! Character education within two counties in southwest Missouri was presented. The final character model reviewed and researched in chapter two was The Leader in Me model, including the history of The Leader in Me in

schools across the nation. An overview of traits of successful implementation models along with barriers and challenges experienced when implementing school-wide systematic models was detailed.

In Chapter Three, an overview of the purpose is presented and the research questions are posed. The research design is described along with ethical considerations taken throughout the study. Specifics about the population and sample chosen for the study are provided. Further outlined in the upcoming chapter are the instrumentation design and structure, data collection processes, and data analysis procedures.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Systematic school-wide character development programs have provided structured implementation plans to address the need for positive culture within schools, focusing on teaching both behavioral and social skills (Covey, 2013). The perceptions of implementation leaders within schools provide valuable insight into the success of these programs in school settings along with the factors necessary for successful implementation (Horner et al., 2015). Within this chapter, an overview of the problem and purpose is provided and the research questions are restated. The design of the research study is documented along with ethical considerations to ensure a clear organization of the processes used to protect the identity of the districts, schools, and participants of the study. The population and sample size of the study are provided along with instrumentation consisting of interviews being conducted with focus groups of implementation leaders from schools participating in school-wide character development programs. The chapter closes with data collection procedures being documented, followed by a description of how the data were analyzed.

Problem and Purpose Overview

As schools recognize the importance of positive school culture, their efforts to establish this has led to an influx of focus and attention on school-wide character development programs (Lockwood, 2013). History supports the conclusion that shaping culture is one of the most important tasks required of any leader (Feuerborn et al., 2013). Principals must learn creating an exciting and reinforcing learning environment, or positive culture, provides the conditions under which students and teachers want to do what needs to be done (Clark, 2015). This environment or culture also promotes a

supportive atmosphere with a shared sense of purpose (Clark, 2015). It is within this climate the energy of students and teachers will be filtered in productive directions (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). As previous researchers have indicated, more focus and effort is needed to identify the components of character development programs that prove to be successful (Hirschi, 2015). Identifying these characteristics and aspects of programs is essential in determining the best tools for students regarding character development to positively affect behavioral and academic trends (Hirschi, 2015).

Both PBIS and The Leader in Me are research-based models for developing school climate through character development structures and focus (The Leader in Me, 2017). However, the number of studies that have addressed the common characteristics schools share in terms of developing a positive school culture, positively affecting student behavior, and developing student leadership skills have been minimal. The purpose of this study was to identify the common factors of school-wide character development programs that have the greatest impact on school climate, student behavior, and student leadership skills. The impact of each program was measured through the perceptions of implementation teams gathered through focus group interviews.

Research questions. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the perceptions of implementation teams of middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs in southwest Missouri in regard to school culture?
2. What are the perceptions of implementation teams of middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs in southwest Missouri in regard to student behavior?

3. What are the perceptions of implementation teams of middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs in southwest Missouri in regard to student leadership?

4. What common factors found in middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs have the greatest impact, both positively and negatively?

Research Design

Qualitative research methodology was utilized and designed to enable analysis of the perceptions of Missouri public school character implementation teams. Data for this study were collected via focus group interviews. Interview questions were developed to produce open dialogue and honest responses from the participants. These interview questions were designed specifically to gain insights and perceptions of the participants' site level implementation program and effectiveness. Prior to conducting the focus group interviews, the researcher gained informed consent of the participants according to Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. Potential interview participants were selected from schools located in two southwest Missouri counties. Participants were provided the purpose of the study along with a list of interview questions. The focus groups were scheduled and conducted in settings suitable for the participants where they felt comfortable sharing their perceptions. The interviews were conducted in a focus group setting with multiple participants participating simultaneously in the process. A total of four focus groups were interviewed, totaling 19 participants that were members of the school-wide character implementation team. The participants'

responses were analyzed to identify tendencies and similarities in themes and characteristics.

Ethical Considerations

Upon approval of the Lindenwood University IRB, consideration was made to assure confidentiality. All data and interview responses were stored electronically using a password-protected personal computer under the supervision of the researcher. All documents will be destroyed three years after conclusion of the study.

To assure anonymity, all information gathered remained confidential, and data were identified through generic names or codes. Codes were issued to all participants and school districts throughout the study. Each focus group member received a copy of the informed consent form along with a set of questions that guided the focus groups to allow participants the opportunity to opt out should they choose. At this time, possible risks of the study were shared with participants. Even with approximations and modifications in place, participants were notified there was a slight possibility individual comments might be recognizable due to small sample sizes.

Once the focus groups were completed, the responses were transcribed. Transcripts were then presented to participants for member checking to be utilized. Member checking allows participants to review, edit, or delete any information the participants deem necessary from the transcriptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After approval by all participants, the transcripts were finalized.

Population and Sample

The population for this study was determined by a selection process consisting of schools from two counties in southwest Missouri. A total of 10 schools were

implementing either The Leader in Me or the PBIS models. One elementary school within the two counties had fully implemented The Leader in Me model, and there were seven elementary schools and two middle schools implementing the PBIS model. The total population of implementation team members was 58.

Purposive sampling was utilized, which provided groups based on common characteristics of the population and the objectives of the study (Crossman, 2017). For participants to be selected for the study, they had to be original or current members of the implementation team. Participants selected for this study were also chosen based on the implementation team's willingness to participate in the focus group interviews. The sample size for this study was four focus groups and 19 participants.

The data gathered for this study were obtained from educators in the form of their perceptions of various factors resulting from the implementation of character development models. How participants perceive different concepts influences how they participate and respond in a study (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2014); therefore, perceptions may be determined and influenced by factors outside of program implementation or success.

Instrumentation

The interview questions were created by the researcher in a semi-structured interview format, which allowed the researcher to explore themes with the focus groups by straying from the pre-determined questions following conversations and collecting data relevant to the study (Wildavsky, 2018). Interview questions were also developed utilizing information obtained from research reviewed in Chapter Two regarding common obstacles implementation teams face when implementing systematic models

along with information pertaining to the systems theory focusing on the importance of a systematic model. It was imperative the interview questions and statements were aligned directly to the research questions and that solicited information from the focus groups came directly from the interviews.

Questions selected for the focus groups were field-tested by an area implementation team not participating in the study to help ensure validity from the interview questions. This field testing provided an opportunity for a pilot study which ensures validity is achieved (Dikko, 2016). Field testing in this example also provides an opportunity to confirm reliability of the study and assess the questions to ensure they are suitable to collect accurate and reliable data (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015). Questions were revised based on suggestions provided from the field-test subjects.

Data Collection

The data collection process implemented in this study was carefully selected and focus group questions were created by the researcher to ensure the research questions would be addressed. The quality of a research project is related to the ability to recreate the data and generalizability of the findings leading to the trustworthiness of the research (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). Throughout the study, efforts were made to ensure credibility was achieved, along with dependability, ensuring the findings could be repeated along with being consistently administered (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). To ensure credibility of the subjects and data, a triangulation of sources was established (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Triangulation of sources included examining different data sources and focus groups at different times in different settings. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016),

"*triangulation* – whether you make use of more than one data collection, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, or multiple theories – is a powerful strategy for increasing credibility or internal validity of your research" (p. 245). The varying viewpoints of each data source with different roles in the organization along with different individual experiences also added to the credibility of this study.

Qualifying districts were notified through email or by phone to ask for willing participants for the study. Participants were selected through electronic communication with individual district superintendents in schools who were currently implementing PBIS or The Leader in Me model and had previously participated in the First PLACE! Character model. First PLACE! Character participation ensured each school was provided an initial character foundation for the development of PBIS and The Leader in Me model. Electronic communication was sent to district superintendents requesting permission for the participation of an implementation team from one of the district schools to be involved in the research process..

Once permission was granted by district superintendents (see Appendix A) and the Lindenwood University IRB (see Appendix B), building administrators were communicated with electronically to request participation from their implementation team members. To ensure the potential participants understood the process and purpose of the study and that they agreed to participate, a copy of the informed consent form (see Appendix C) and the focus group interview questions (see Appendix D) were included. After participants received this information, focus groups were scheduled. Participants were reminded of the focus group sessions a few days prior to the scheduled meetings

through electronic communication and were given an opportunity to withdraw from the interview process at any time.

At the time of the focus group interviews, acknowledgment of consent to participate and permission for audio-recording responses to ensure accuracy in comments and responses were obtained from the participants. Focus group meetings and follow-up questions were administered with all focus group participants present in the setting to determine implementation group perceptions on the research topic. Following the interview process, the recordings were transcribed to text, saved digitally, and stored on a password-protected computer. Digital files were shared electronically with the participants for review to ensure both accuracy and privacy. This process of member checking provided an opportunity for the participants to ensure their responses were what they intended and read clear to their perceptions (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). To maintain ethical precautions, participants were identified by codes throughout the interviews and study. Upon completion of the study, data will be retained for three years. Following the three years, all data will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

The development of open-ended interview questions prepared for focus group consideration articulate what the researcher wants to know about the perspectives of the participants (Wildavsky, 2018). The ongoing process of questioning provides insight and understanding into the perspectives of the participants (Wildavsky, 2018). The questions were developed to produce responses specific to the focus groups' perceptions of character development programs in regard to school culture, student behaviors, student leadership skills, and implementation factors with the greatest impact.

At the completion of the focus group interviews, the data were analyzed to identify patterns within the responses. To begin the process of analysis, a coding process was utilized by organizing the data by participant responses and research questions addressed so similarities and differences could begin to emerge. According to Creswell (2013) this type of response analysis is open coding. Open coding leads the researcher to a further complex analysis where relationships between the responses and codes are recognized and categorized referred to as axial coding (Creswell, 2013). The patterns were then compared to literature reviewed in Chapter Two to determine alignment with previous research.

Summary

Throughout this chapter, the methodology was presented and an overview of the problem and purpose of the study was provided. The process was designed to allow for the identification of the perceptions of southwest Missouri schools' character development implementation teams in regard to school climate, student behaviors, student leadership skills, and impactful factors within the implementation process. Explicit details were provided regarding research design, ethical considerations taken into account, and population and the sample utilized in the study.

Detail was also provided regarding the instrument used to collect data. Chapter Three included detailed information regarding the data collection process including ethical considerations and specifics on the data analysis process. In Chapter Four, the results of the focus group interview are revealed and documented. The data are organized and analyzed to identify themes in perceptions and factors impacting implementation of the character development models.

Chapter Four: Analysis of Data

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of educators about the impact of character development programs on school culture, student behaviors, and student leadership skills. To gather and better understand the perceptions of teachers and implementation teams, four different focus groups were held with implementation teams consisting of teachers, counselors and administrators. The focus group participants, all from southwest Missouri schools, taught in districts where character development models had been implemented and were in the process of evaluating current implementation. The questions for the focus groups were designed to address these four driving questions for research purposes:

1. What are the perceptions of implementation teams of middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs in southwest Missouri in regard to school culture?

2. What are the perceptions of implementation teams of middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs in southwest Missouri in regard to student behavior?

3. What are the perceptions of implementation teams of middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs in southwest Missouri in regard to student leadership?

4. What common factors found in middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs have the greatest impact, both positively and negatively?

Questions for the focus groups were designed to obtain responses from participants to determine if implementation teams shared similar perceptions regarding character development program implementation and to gain insight into their opinions. Each district's focus group spoke specifically about their implementation process and analysis of either PBIS or The Leader in Me character development models. Focus group questions were designed to elicit key program components and factors the focus groups viewed as essential to their success. All of these questions were answered by multiple school implementation team members including teachers, administrators, and school counselors.

The focus groups were completed with school personnel from schools in two southwest Missouri counties. The decision to include these counties stemmed from the fact each implemented the First PLACE! Character development platform prior to implementation of PBIS or The Leader in Me. This provided for common background experiences in terms of character development and similar experiences for students prior to PBIS or The Leader in Me implementation. To retain anonymity, each school was given a letter, and each teacher within that school was given a number. Table 1 depicts each school district and the number of participating school personnel (teachers, administrators, counselors) from each district.

Table 1

Focus Group Participants

Participating Schools	Building	Number of Implementation Team Members	Character Program Implemented
School A	Elementary	6	Leader in Me
School B	Middle School	6	PBIS
School C	Elementary	3	PBIS
School D	Elementary	4	PBIS

Note. Each focus group and the number of participants are included in the table along with the character program they have implemented.

Within each focus group was a building-level administrator who provided input and perceptions. Although this input provided insight from an administrative perspective, many of the responses were consistent with the teacher perspectives. A few differences were noted in the following analysis.

Focus Groups

Four focus groups were completed in various schools in four school districts across southwest Missouri. To protect the identities of the participants, each person was assigned a code. For example, the first participant from School A was referred to as A1, and the second as A2, and this documented pattern continued throughout all focus groups for all 19 participants interviewed. The first analysis of responses highlighted the background of the focus groups to understand where they began as a staff and their goals for implementation. The second analysis focused on the four driving questions of the research study. Following that analysis, the responses were organized to examine the character development models implemented by the focus group teams.

Focus group question one: Background information. What character development program have you implemented in your school? Prior to implementation, what factors led to your decision to implement your chosen character development model?

This question was asked of each focus group to begin the interview process and to gain background information about the building's implementation including goals and implementation mindset. Although each of the models of character development chosen focus on the social, emotional, and behavioral education of students, each model also has driving factors that set it apart from the other models. School-wide PBIS is a systems approach focused on developing a culture of supports for behavioral needs for the entire school population with a goal of achieving both social and academic success (Horner et al., 2015). The community works in a collaborative effort to improve school culture throughout the building by teaching behavioral expectations and monitoring behavioral data (Horner et al., 2015). First PLACE! Character is a localized effort sponsored by a work-study college (College of the Ozarks, 2017). The program focuses on the mission to lead character education partnerships with all schools in two southwest Missouri counties (College of the Ozarks, 2017). The goals of improving school climate, cultivating visible community support, and increasing parent participation and awareness in character development provide the framework for the initiative's efforts in the local schools (College of the Ozarks, 2017). Another school-wide behavior management program many schools have implemented is The Leader in Me framework based upon the concepts and ideas of Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 2013). Each principle developed in The Leader in Me framework is aligned with

practices documented as effective at improving character development in an educational setting (The Leader in Me, 2015a).

All four of the schools participating in the focus group discussions had used the First PLACE! Character framework and character words for years since its beginning in 2005 (College of the Ozarks, 2017). Participant C3 stated, "Although we have fully implemented PBIS at the tier one level, we still use the First PLACE! Character words in our monthly assemblies." Participant A5 added, "First PLACE! provides the structure for the conversations about character development, but that is about it. We use the words adopted by the program, but there is not a system for implementing it or students learning from it."

Another commonality was all schools in the study had implemented PBIS at some level in the past. Schools B, C, and D were continuing to implement PBIS at a school-wide level, while participants C2 and C3 from School C stated they were only implementing the tier one aspects of the model. Focus group participants from School B discussed the implementation of PBIS at "full implementation" through tier three. Focus group member B3 commented regarding the successes experienced due to the tier two and three interventions: "We have been able to reach more students through researching new interventions and tier two and three programs." Participant A1 claimed to be "fully implemented" in the second full year of The Leader in Me model.

Ron Clark (2015) mentioned in his book, *Move Your Bus*, that a positive culture provides the conditions under which students and teachers want to do what needs to be done and will create a supportive atmosphere with a shared sense of purpose. This climate of positive energy is filtered in productive directions with purpose and focus

(Clark, 2015). When examining the factors that led to the teams' implementation of a chosen character development model, nine of the participants mentioned "common language" as an area of focus. Referring to the benefit of common language and expectations, Participant B1 commented:

> I think it gave us a common vocabulary to use and a common thing to think about, a common way to think about what we were doing. This way we weren't all coming at it from different angles. The behavior matrix allowed us all to be on the same page and gave teachers a common vocabulary to use with the children.

Respondent A1 shared, "Common language across the entire school with all staff and all the students is very helpful for somebody like me who sees all students." She then referred to the benefits of common language through experiences where she was able to support other teachers by telling students all staff were implementing the same expectations using common language in the classroom and hallways.

C1 also stated, "We wanted to have vocabulary consistent across all the building. Before, classrooms made their own rules and it wasn't always consistent when kids moved into specials, or another class. We wanted to find something more cohesive for our building." Participant A3 also mentioned common language when discussing the differences between year one and year two of implementation:

> I would say what we focused on this year compared to last year is the common language. Last year they learned a lot of the language but our focus this year on keeping it consistent. This helps the students own their actions when they are understanding the information at a deeper level and hearing the same language in all settings.

In addition, A3 discussed how this focus has led to students using the language in their conversations and to more application of the skills.

Another common goal stated throughout the focus group discussions was the need for consistency from class to class and within the building. When asked about what goals the team had when implementing the chosen character development program, D2 stated, "Consistency. We wanted something consistent throughout the district from building to building. We have a lot of transition between the two buildings, so consistency was important for that to happen." In response to the same question, participant B1 replied, "I think the lack of consistency and understanding across the building [was a key factor]. There wasn't anything really to follow when we were looking for behavior help or school-wide expectations." Similarly, C2 shared, "One of the factors that we recognized in the building was the need for something that was consistent Pre-K through sixth grade. This model needed to able to be implemented for both lower and upper grades." Participant B5 added to the idea consistency was a goal:

> We were looking for more than behavior modification or positive reinforcement. It was a need for consistency and to recognize those students who are doing the right thing. To help develop that culture that we wanted to develop within our students of recognizing the good things that they're doing and in a consistent way.

Both C2 and A6 used the phrase "on the same page" when referring to the teachers throughout the building needing consistency in terms of behaviors and expectations.

Another commonality between School A and School B was the success they had seen at surrounding district schools that implemented The Leader in Me and PBIS models. Focus group member A5, B4, and D4 mentioned experiences they had visiting

other schools and witnessing their character models. Participants from School A shared their administrator had come from a previous district that had already implemented the model and had positive experiences with the process. Participant B4 engaged in dialogue about another school's model that was shared at a conference hosted by the local university where the implementing district presented on the successes experienced.

Focus group question two: Challenges/Successes. Throughout implementation, what were some of the challenges you experienced regarding implementation? What were some of the successes?

Throughout implementation, each school shared both successes and challenges experienced specific to staff, students, and overall implementation. Many of these trials were similar to the experiences shared by the other focus groups. Although much of the information ties together the driving research questions of the study, some of the challenges and successes were unique to the participating focus groups. Participant B4 felt success lies in the people who are "continually attending the meetings, coming up with new ideas, and pulling things off." The quality of the people in the building implementing the model was what B4 felt was the key factor of successful implementation.

Another common thought from focus group participants from School A and School D was the idea the success of the model comes from the flexibility and ability to reassess to determine building needs. Focus group member D2 reported:

> Every year we come back to school and look at our needs a little differently based on the students we have. If we see we need to make some changes, the model is

flexible enough that changes can be made and the structure of the model can still remain intact.

Participant A3 added, “No school is the same, so you choose what best fits your school and your kids and your people. A lot of other programs aren’t that way, so that’s what makes it successful.” Both A3 and A4 reiterated discussion points by reflecting on the progress they have made and how the beginning product looked different from what the model is now. Both agreed this is a success in the progression since implementation, and positive results have been due to continued work.

Although successes were the overwhelming emphasis during the focus group discussions, there were a number of challenges experienced and evident from participant responses. Commonalities among the groups included frustrations due to lack of administrative support, difficulties getting teacher buy-in, and overall expenses associated with implementation and sustainability. Respondent B6 stated there is a constant financial struggle in providing funds for incentives and rewards. Likewise, A2 noted a major financial obligation in implementation for the initial training process, year-one commitments, and overall model support. Although A2 stated the district was able to offset all the expenses of implementation due to receiving a grant, the financial requirement for the model is a deterrent for many districts.

Another obstacle shared among participants from School A, B, and D was the challenge of achieving buy-in or commitment from staff. Participant A3 stated the administration made the decision for the staff of what model they were going to adopt. Teachers were reluctant to place ownership and commitment into the program, since they felt like they did not have a choice in the implementation. Additionally, D2 stated:

> Buy-in! Just what was this really going to result in and look like for us if we follow through with all of these procedures? It is really going to give us what we're looking for in terms of positive behavior? The way everyone perceived the program and the attitude they had going into the implementation was a key factor in the amount [of] support they showed.

Another theme similar to the idea of buy-in was the lack of follow-through from teachers during implementation. Both D4 and B3 shared experiences supporting this challenge. Respondent D4 shared,

> Follow through. I think there are people who would say they were on board, they were ready to try to go through the steps but they were not willing to follow through with those expectations over the course of time.

Participant B3 added, "Just finding things teachers will use in a consistent manner. That's evolved through the year going through different systems, but in the end it must be something that teachers are going to utilize on a consistent basis."

When discussing challenges, implementation teams also referred to additional challenges outside of the character model, something experienced in the education world quite often. Participant D1 referred to the fact many teachers felt like they were trying to take on too much and were going at the implementation too quickly. This challenge was also referred to by D1: "Finding time to teach the lessons and have the discussions with the kids. There is so much packed into a day that this seems like something else added to our plate." Another focus group member, A3, shared School A was welcoming a new administrator the year they went through implementation:

> Teachers were going through a lot of new things, new communications, new expectations, and they added a new character development model. Teachers were overwhelmed with the changes that we had to take a step back in our second year of implementation to ensure we were going through at a reasonable pace.

Finding structures within the model that work was also a challenge noted by several participants. Participant D3 shared the biggest struggle for her implementation team and the entire staff was deciding what method of behavior management was going to be used by all teachers. She noted there were many passionate teachers who had differing ideas of what would work in their own classrooms. For them to decide upon one system and remain consistent in all classrooms was a challenge. Participant C2 also noted, "Another challenge was finding a strategy that would be easy enough for all teachers to promote good behavior. We were struggling to find a systematic way to track positive behaviors in the classroom." Participant B2 also felt the ease of the system was a key for positive implementation.

Focus group question three: School culture. How do you perceive the implementation of your program has impacted school culture?

Culture is something undefined, yet powerful, helping to define the social interactions, prototypical norms, and everyday events that occur in a school (Deal & Peterson, 2014). Clark (2015) also added to the idea of a school-wide focus on culture by stating development of successful school culture must be the focus of the entire school community. As focus groups discussed the reasons for implementation and their perceptions of impact on their school, culture was mentioned quite often. Focus group participants from School A, B, and D mentioned the idea of improving culture or the

overall school climate of their building as a reason for exploring a character model before implementation. Participant B3 expressed an improved culture when discussing the successes experienced throughout implementation:

> I think it creates a different culture… Kids talk to other kids at other schools, telling them what we are doing in our school beyond the classroom. Other students don't experience these things at a middle school level, so I think it creates a culture that this is a good place to be. It's a fun place, and it is a place they look forward to coming to school.

The responses from the implementation teams throughout the study were mostly positive regarding how the character development program influences the cultures of their schools. As referred to by The Leader in Me (2018), when a school creates an environment encouraging participation and growth through empowering students, schools are able to reinforce the commitment and message implemented by teachers and staff. In response to a focus group question, Participant A2 responded:

> I think, too, on the students' side of culture within the school it's given them more of a role in the school other than just coming here to sit down and learn. There are kids who help the custodians in the cafeteria each day, kids who run our assemblies. So, I agree that it's given lots of kids lots of opportunities to take more ownership and feel like a member of the school community outside of their student's role.

Participant C2 commented:

> Knowing the expectations had already been established resulted in a short learning curve for me. It was just how we do business… the culture of students

> knowing how we act as school. This is what we are and this is who we are and it just makes the day to day so much easier.

Participant B5 referred to the students' enjoyment of school when asked about how the character model has impacted school culture and stated students prefer to be at school rather than having a snow day. Specifically, B5 detailed, "We are creating something… that environment where students want to come to school."

Participant A2 did refer to the previous culture of staff as a challenge for implementing the new model. Her perception was the staff had not experienced the new model yet to understand the benefits, referring to "buy-in" as an important part of staff culture with an impact on implementation. Staff buy-in refers to commitment and the ideas behind the basis of the intervention, such as direct instruction, inclusion, or the use of effective school discipline practices (Pinkelman et al., 2015). Pinkelman et al. (2015) went on to list barriers to the implementation and sustainability of a school reform model including lack of resources, competing priorities, logistical barriers, and lack of administrator or staff support. Educator A2's reference to "buy-in" was an example of the lack of staff support Pinkelman et al. (2015) referred to in their study. Respondent A2 stated:

> Trainers and people can tell you so many times what to do, but you have to live it first and come around to your beliefs on your own. You can tell somebody to change all you want, but until it is their choice, it is not meaningful.

Although Pinkelman et al. (2015) asserted lack of buy-in and support can be a barrier, it can also be a catalyst for change through support and positive momentum.

Participant B6 referred to the staff having a positive impact on the culture and environment of the school and success of the implementation, stating the staff became involved by participating in dress-up days and other activities they might not have participated in previously. This involvement, B6 went on to say, helped the students strive for better behavior and a more positive implementation. Educator A4 also commented on the "buy-in" from staff and stated,

> I think the reason The Leader in Me is not just another program, but it's the way we do business, is that buy-in and training of the adults first. First the adults got excited, then we got the kids to buy-in.

Pinkelman et al. (2015) also referred to administrative support or lack thereof as a potential enabler or barrier for the implementation of a program. Participant D3 also discussed:

> I think so much of it goes back to the follow-through. The expectations set by the teachers all the way up to the administrators. If the administrators are willing to hold the students to the expectations then they will have a key role in the impact of the program.

Both The Leader in Me and PBIS imbed initial training with opportunities for teacher buy-in and ownership (Kincaid et al., 2007). Through the development of a school-based PBIS representation with teacher leadership and administrative support, implementation of the model creates buy-in and becomes a standard way of doing school business (Horner et al., 2015).

Another concept mentioned when asked about the impact of implementation on the school's culture focused on the community. Participants from both School A and B

spent time discussing how the community has benefited from the model. One participant, B2, discussed the perception based on experiences as a parent with kids previously in the building:

> Our culture used to be very poor. Before this program was implemented, we used to have a really bad reputation at (building name). Parents were known to dread their students coming to this building. I think now if you would ask parents, this would be one of the more preferred buildings in the district. It has really changed the outlook of our building and our culture from the time we started. How different the culture and the positivity in the school is now compared to before implementation is not only a positive for our students but also a positive change for our community.

Similarly, A2 commented:

> I think, too, on the students' side of the culture within the school, I think it's given them more of a role in the school. Other than you just coming to school to sit down and learn, now there are kids who help the custodians in the cafeteria each day, kids who run our assemblies, lots of kids and lots of ownership. Kids feel like more of a member of the school community outside of their student role.

Educator A3 also experienced this same perception based on how the community responded to implementation with support and participation, referring to the community's willingness to support the school's efforts through donations and other supportive acts.

Brown (2004) stated organizations and individuals act and talk in the way they do because it has become the way they do business and the way things are commonly

performed. This idea of teacher habits and student behaviors or expectations played a role in B4's comments:

> I see that it helped us as a building to maintain expectations across the board. Not just in the classroom where many times each classroom has their own specific set of rules but building-wide. So whether it is in the hallway, whether it is at games, just an overall umbrella that allows us to gain this consistency becoming the way we do business.

While B4 commented on the culture becoming the way they do business, A1 mentioned all students having a role in the culture of the building and what the building has become. Participant C3 also shared:

> There wasn't that huge learning curve or anything like that. It was just this is how we do business. I think that was a huge way that school culture was affected by this is how we act at school. This is what we are and this is who we are and it makes that whole perception so much easier.

There was also a consistent feeling the improved culture added to a sense of calmness in the face of change. Participant A1 stated:

> I would say our school has gone through a lot of change over the past five years, and I honestly think without The Leader in Me it would have been a lot more difficult for that change to happen. When you are thinking proactively about everything and you have your staff and your students using that language and actually believing it, you get a calm sense in your building.

Adding to the thought of providing consistency during a time of change, A3 felt the implementation of the program was a positive structure in the midst of change and commented:

> There were a multitude of changes happening at one time. Administration was changing, a new program was being implemented, new means of communication were used, but the consistent communication and expectations allowed for these new processes to transition easily with one another.

Focus group question four: Student behaviors. How do you perceive the implementation of your program has impacted student behavior?

Over the last 20 years, researchers have been focusing on the effects of behavioral interventions, leading to the shift of focus toward models structured in behavioral supports (PBIS, 2017). Although positive behavior is an outcome tied to many factors, specific interventions and efforts implemented through structured models have shown to have a positive effect on classroom behavior management (PBIS, 2017). Throughout the focus groups, participants provided detailed insight into the question posed about the impact of the character model on student behavior. All focus groups noted there was impact perceived. Participant B4 stated the model was "an overall umbrella allowing us to gain this consistency when it comes to student behaviors." Fourteen of the 19 participants mentioned strategies used to improve student behaviors, and all four of the focus groups mentioned improving student behaviors as a goal in exploring the implementation of a character model. Respondent A3 mentioned prior to implementation "there was a lack of consistency and understanding across the board. There really wasn't anything to follow for teachers."

A large number of the participants also mentioned the structure and process followed during implementation as being a positive experience for the staff in developing common language and expectations. Participant B3 added:

> We all came up with the structure for classroom management, starting off with a big flow chart. Everyone was consistent in classroom management because of this process. When this happens in the classroom, this is the result; when this happens, this is the consequence depending on the behavior. It helped with classroom management and everybody being consistent with other teachers and on the same page.

Earlier in the discussion, B3 also commented their efforts created different strategies for students based on behaviors and different tiers of support based on previous behaviors and experiences. Teachers had a say in these processes and strategies and provided input. When discussing how consistent expectations affect student behaviors, B1 stated, "It has helped me be more consistent and not have to keep figuring things out on my own." Furthermore, B1 asserted, "I am better at what I do and maybe that is why the students have responded more."

A comment from B5 provided insight on the impact of teaching behavior skills and lessons specific to behaviors and expectations on student understanding. Participant B4 shared the school's yearly implementation includes training students at the beginning of the year and at the beginning of the second semester about behavioral expectations and procedures. The school refers to this training as "boot camp," or teaching students the expectations to be "respectful, responsible, and safe." The participant felt these days of student training set the stage for success and ensured all students understand the

expectations and are on the same page as the teachers. Participant D1 also referred to a time of year these expectations are taught in the classrooms and within all learning settings. Specifically, D1 included, "The first two weeks students really know the expectations. Then after the semester review session, it is like we have hit the reset button. Students are refreshed and are on the same page."

Focus group participants from Schools B and C mentioned strategies implemented throughout the implementation of the model. Participant B2 commented on focusing on the positives in students and student behaviors, and C2 stated a success in the implementation was the quick impact of the model on positive behaviors. Participant C2 stated it made staff more cognizant of pointing out positives instead of focusing on negative behaviors. Additionally, C2 shared, "I think that was a success that it caused us to change our thinking and point out positive behaviors more often." Similarly, C3 agreed the focus on positive behaviors helped with classroom management and overall student behavior. Respondent C3 commented the implementation of the 4:1 ratio of positive comments to negative comments caused teachers to monitor their behaviors, leading to overall improved student behaviors.

Throughout the study, groups shared comments of implementing specific strategies of Bear Paws, 100 Percent Field Trips, 100 Clubs, and student cash systems in an effort to incentivize the behavior systems. Participant D3 went into great detail about their "Principal 100" club and how this strategy provided incentives for students. The structure recognized students who showed positive behaviors by sending them to the office to fill out a recognition sheet, placing these awards on the "Principal 100" wall. Once 100 students filled out an award of recognition, the school honored and rewarded

these students with a fun celebration. Participant D3 acknowledged these celebrations were easy events set up at school to limit expense and time taken from the classroom. Educator D1 felt like these events had a positive effect on behaviors in the building and stated, "I think the difference the Principal 100 has made is huge. It is a carrot we can hang for students to motivate them to do well."

Another incentive strategy discussed in-depth was the student cash system discussed by B3, B5, and B6. Participant B5 explained this system as providing "Paw Pounds" to students when positive behavior or expectations are met. The students keep a punch card to accumulate their Paw Pounds throughout the year. Periodically the PBIS committee provides a store where students can purchase items such as candy, school supplies, small toy items, etc. At the end of the semester and year, larger items such as electronics, camping supplies, and gift certificates are given away through drawings based on the Paw Pounds. Participant B5 added, "Finding something that teachers will use in a consistent manner is a key. Making the Paw Pounds worth something for the students is important." Participant B3 felt their efforts work for a good number of students, but some students do not value the system enough to work for the incentive.

Although focus groups interviewed felt these systems have been effective, participants from Schools B and C shared this to be a challenge of the implementation. Participant C2 felt the chosen management system was too elementary for the older grades. Participant B3 described a monetary challenge in providing incentives students would be motivated to work toward. Specifically, B3 shared, "It is always a financial challenge to find cheap incentives that would create the excitement necessary for students to be motivated to meet the expectations." Respondent B2 felt the ease of the system was

important in ensuring the sustainability of implementation. Similarly, B5 shared this belief about finding strategies or incentives teachers will use in a consistent manner. Participant B1 expressed:

> I see that this model lets them understand upfront that there is a good reason for good behavior. I think developing intrinsic values is tough in older ages, so you have to have something extra for them to want. It's very simple to say you are going to miss out on the end of quarter reward putting the responsibility back on them rather than sending a negative message home. I can look at positive ways to motivate them and that helps in the classroom of keeping that positive culture.

The implementation of systematic processes has also provided support for more intensive behaviors. Through the focus group discussions, D4 shared, "We've seen, when we had to go to Tier 2 and Tier 3 efforts for a student, we've seen some definite positive effects." Participant B3 also stated, "It has helped us create different strategies for reaching Tier 2 and Tier 3 level behavior problems… This focus has developed from the trainings and support we have received throughout the process of implementation."

Overall, the common thread of comments and discussion focused on the overall success of the model in providing support or improvement in student behaviors. Participant B2 stated, "What I see from the previous year's data compared to the current year's data, we always seem to improve." In addition, B2 asserted, "Overall the behavior has improved and the referrals have decreased from year to year." Likewise, D2 added:

> I can't even imagine not having something in place… obviously it has impacted our kids. We have some kids who still can't conform to the expectations and follow through with what we are teaching them because of their upbringing at

> home. We are teaching kids to be responsible, safe, and respectful because they don't have that as a role model at home. Eventually, these students get it and it pays off.

Participants consistently used phrases like responsibility, respect, and teaching students to be safe. Participant A5 felt students are now holding themselves accountable for their behaviors and stated, "It's no longer the teacher telling them what they're doing wrong. The students are holding themselves accountable, because they can tell you exactly where they went wrong." Similarly, C2 stated, "I think the kids know what is now expected of them." Along the same line, C3 shared, "You know what the expectation is as a teacher and so do the students." Focusing the impact on student behavior, A3 commented:

> I think the shift we have seen from students this year is that life comes with consequences. As a leader, you still have consequences for poor choices. It doesn't mean you are not leading, it just means you have consequences. It's starting to make sense to students and they're starting to understand that idea, and I think this has had an impact on our discipline shift this year.

Adding to that comment, A3 felt the students currently have an understanding of the purpose of consequences and their effect on behaviors.

Focus group question five: Student leadership skills. How do you perceive the implementation of your program has impacted the development of student leadership skills?

By teaching students to be proactive, set goals, be cooperative, and build positive relationships and emotional capacity, the principles taught in character models provide opportunities for improvement of learning outcomes, enhanced student experiences, and

development of life skills (Covey, 2013). These life skills include the skills associated with leadership opportunities and qualities later in life (Covey, 2013). One model represented in the study was much more inclined to develop leadership skills than the others.

Comments from A2 emphasized the focus on building leadership skills in students: "The big thing for me was the built-in component where we would prepare kids to be good citizens and community members by giving them those leadership opportunities within the school." In addition, A2 shared her experiences prior to implementation helped students develop character skills, but the new focus was more effective at providing leadership opportunities. Specifically, A2 stated, "I didn't realize it was such a need, to allow the kids to take over things responsibilities and have school be more student-driven." Focus group member A2 also added her comments on leadership skills improving with more opportunities when she stated, "Once we started letting the kids have some of these leadership roles, we started seeing some kids really step up. Some kids that you would never expect could step up into a leadership role and do a fantastic job."

There were consistent comments focused on "opportunities" and "responsibilities" throughout the focus group discussions. Both A1 and D3 referred to opportunities to experience leadership responsibilities. Participant D1 also commented, along with C1, on the increased roles and responsibilities students experienced within the model. Respondent A3 elaborated:

> With our demographic, a lot of our kids have no idea about leadership skills. Some of those kids that have stepped up to become leaders are the students that

> would not have known they were leaders without the opportunities. They began to realize other students were looking up to them, and their leadership skills were developed to a point where they could experience success.

The idea of opportunities was evident in A2's comments: "Students have seen what leadership looks like, what that experience is." In addition, A2 shared, "The kids are excited about the experiences and have lots of great ideas now that they see the big picture."

Another key idea mentioned multiple times in reference to student leadership skills was the concept of "student voice" and "student representation." Participant B3 referred to the school's student leadership class as an opportunity for the students' voice to be heard. According to B3, "Our leadership kids help us make decisions based on what they think the students would want. They are the representation of the student body, their voice." Participant B3 went on to say hearing what the students want is a big part in determining focus and getting student buy-in.

Overall, seven participants mentioned specifically the idea student voice or representation acts as "motivation" for the student body. Participant B1 commented on the "motivation" resulting from the student leadership group: "The rest of the students know that there's student leadership making decisions. It is not just coming from teachers. They know this voice will represent them and motivates them, and they recognize decisions are made with student input." Respondent B5 discussed ways the school allows students to have opportunities to show their leadership skills:

> We allow students to have opportunities to lead and teach some of the character lessons or positive behavior we are looking for. Students recognize this as

qualities coming from students not teachers, so it is a big deal for student leadership.

Participant D1 added, “I would say it has impacted student leadership, for sure. Every class has their natural leaders, but it gives them something to focus on even more.” Additionally, D1 shared, “These opportunities allow them to stand out even more as leaders of their classroom.”

Participant D4 went into depth about their school’s efforts to add student voice. The building began a student advisory group meeting twice a month. Students are chosen by their class as representatives and meet with the principal to report back to their class information to be focused upon or improvements that have been noted. Participant D3 included the school recently added a service project to their advisory group, allowing the students to work outside of the school to see the effect they can have on their community.

Participant B2 also referred to a structure in place in their building for the student leadership team to teach character lessons to their peers monthly. This practice not only allows students to research and develop lessons to go along with character words or concepts, but also allows the student body to learn from their peers. Covey (2013) stated by teaching the skills to enable students to be proactive, set goals, be cooperative, and build positive relationships and emotional capacity, students gain principles leading to positive learning outcomes, enhanced student experiences, and development of necessary social skills.

In one focus group discussion, C3 pointed out the lack of organized opportunities to demonstrate leadership skills, but mentioned “positive peer pressure” as an opportunity for students to demonstrate what they know is the right thing to do when other students

are watching. Participant C3 felt like this recognition and praise led to leadership qualities in a different way. Participant C1 would like to develop leadership groups in the building more than they currently have in place. Although not necessarily directly related to leadership skills, School C and D both mentioned their desire to implement a welcoming committee to allow students to show leadership skills through a mentor setting. Participant C3 expressed, "A welcoming committee would provide students an opportunity to take a role as a leader in the building, showing new students around, providing information for them when they first start."

The implementation of the model was a key factor in the impact on leadership skills. Participant C3 stated, "The Leader in Me provides more structure to develop leadership skills than PBIS teaches." Similarly, B3 stated, "PBIS provides structures that improve behavior skills in students and monitoring these behaviors with interventions. They are less focused on the student leadership skills besides their focus on student voice."

Focus group question six: Factors impacting implementation. What factors do you believe had the greatest impact on the implementation of your program? Do you feel your participation and work completed to this point have met the goals you set forth when first beginning implementation?

Many of the responses provided during the focus group sessions focused around the concepts mentioned earlier regarding the teams' goals for implementation and the successes and challenges experienced throughout implementation. These concepts included common language, student expectations, behavior support, and character development. Participant D2 stated, "When we shared the consistent language and

slideshow to teach core lessons at the beginning of the year, that's when I noticed success. We finally had consistency between the classrooms and their expectations."

Participant B1 commented teamwork and collaboration from the staff to develop "common language" and "expectations" provided consistency within the building. She added there was not consistency among the teachers prior to this focus. According to B2:

> The process used to implement the model required teachers to talk about misconceptions and current practices. Teachers were required to be on the same page as these decisions were being made, creating a more consistent environment for students and teachers.

Participant C2 shared similar thoughts about the process the staff was led through during implementation. It began with a book study led by building administrators, and many people began buying into the common language. The language they were hearing was motivating for them and led in a direction they desired to move. They acknowledged the outside group who provided the training really helped lead the thought process toward a deeper level of understanding. Specifically, C2 shared, "The official training from the organization really focused on the teachers developing an understanding through common language and a commitment to the model." Participant B3 also felt like the guidance from an outside organization helped lead staff through the implementation, but the key was the fact that it was teacher-led.

According to T9, "It's really important for a teacher to have buy-in, and the fact that program was developed by teachers helped. The teachers, not administration, did all the construction and alignment of what it was going to look like." Later, T9 added:

> Teachers have buy-in and commitment because they are planning the events, implementing the ideas, and involved in all areas. The building administration is there to support the efforts and provide opportunities for the teachers, but the teachers are the ones that are implementing the process.

Participant C3 acknowledged the teacher engagement seems to be more "positive" in regard to classroom management. Explicitly, C3 stated there is more positive language coming from teachers rather than focusing on the negative behaviors in classrooms and hallways.

Going deeper into the results and meeting goals set forth from the beginning were responses given by A3. Participant A3 felt overall the implementation had met a goal of every character model:

> It's beyond building skills to make students successful at school; it's building a person that's going to be successful anywhere. They are learning how to set a personal goal, or an academic goal to be a learner, or overall to be successful at life. Those are the little pieces that have fallen together for us.

Participant A3 continued by expressing her thoughts on the positive effect of the building's mission on the students' mindset by establishing common language that now allows the students to understand what it means to them.

Common conversations and comments that addressed the factors impacting implementation consisted of the common ideas of staff "mindset," "buy-in," "administrative support," and teacher "participation." Participant B3 commented:

> At the beginning we realized it was not a small process. It was a yearlong process of getting everyone on the same page. It began with a small group going to a conference, then led to staff discussions, and implementing our decisions.

Participant C3 felt the biggest factor that impacted implementation has been their teacher team leading the model in the building:

> I think having a team, being able to have this PBIS team and meeting regularly to be able to talk through some different planning issues and strategies has been helpful. We are also training new staff as they enter the building and continuing our training as a group. I think definitely having a team of staff that meets regularly is really an effective strategy.

Participant B1 added to the idea of training new staff members as they enter the culture of a building: "To be effective you have to have everyone on board, you can't be half and half." Participant B1 continued:

> I think part of this culture is communication and continue education of the program every few years or every year just for review with staff. This helps your new teachers and turnover. In order to be effective you have to keep training the staff.

Along the same idea, A4 believed the opportunity to adapt implementation over the years since beginning the model had a great impact on success:

> It looks different now than it did when we started. There are still some pieces that are there, but there are pieces that are new and pieces that we have made better. I think it is being learners, willing to change, willing to update what we are doing

according to the times, the group of kids or what's going on at that time in our building.

Respondent A2 shared many of the same thoughts and commented, "The beauty of The Leader in Me is that you can mold it to what your school wants and what your kids need."

Focus Group Responses Specific to Implementation Model

As stated earlier in the chapter, all four schools involved in the focus group discussions had previously implemented First PLACE! Character and PBIS to varying levels. Schools B and D were fully implemented in PBIS through tier three, and School C was partially implemented with implementation through tier one. The remaining school, School A, had previously implemented PBIS to a partial level of implementation but had fully implemented The Leader in Me model over the past two years. The data collected specific to the implementation models were consistent throughout with some differences in perceptions based on implementation and the goals of the models.

The schools that implemented PBIS were much more focused on behavior modification when determining a model to implement. Participant B1 acknowledged they were "looking for ways to give kids incentive rather than focusing on the negative behaviors." In addition, B1 commented, "We were needing something to motivate the students to behavior while also rewarding those students who were doing what they were supposed to do." Participant B3 continued with the idea and focused on current practices and what keeps the building moving forward with the model. Specifically, B3 commented, "It's more than just behavior modification or only positive reinforcement.

We want to develop in our students a culture of doing the right thing and in a consistent way."

Continuing with the idea of consistency, C2 shared her thoughts about choosing PBIS: "We needed something that was consistent K-6. We looked at a few examples of PBIS before we ever decided to take it on and like what it had done for other buildings." Educator D2 stated, "Consistency was what the district was looking for when we chose PBIS. We needed something consistent throughout the district." These needs identified by the schools implementing PBIS were consistent with the purpose of the model: working in a collaborative effort to improve school culture through the teaching of behavioral expectations and skills in all settings throughout the school (Horner et al., 2015).

Participants from School A, whose teachers had gone through full implementation of The Leader in Me model, shared experiences and perceptions more in line with character development and leadership skills and opportunities. The implementation team used words like habits, leadership skills, and character, and focused more on the formal training process included in The Leader in Me model. Participant A2 shared, "The kids picked up the habits quickly and the lessons specific to the habits when taught, had a great impact."

According to A2, "The common language associated with the habits that all students heard was very helpful for somebody like me." Educator A6 added teaching the habits was included in all areas of his teaching: "We would read aloud and usually they could find examples of all seven of the habits in the read aloud. Students were thinking about them and noticing examples of the habit around them." Similarly, A1 shared,

"Students would pick up on the language of the habits quickly. A student would say, 'You are not being proactive…' so they started picking up on that and doing it themselves."

The Leader in Me participating school also shared more specific examples and stories of character development than the other buildings. Participant A3 shared a story about a student's conversation with a community member:

> One of our clubs is for young men that struggle in knowing how to be a young man. At a Veteran's Day program, I overheard him telling an older community member, "Well, I am in this club and we've been building our character shield working on our armor. I've been learning how to be courageous and honorable."

The wording used by the student in this example was consistent with the wording and ideas associated with the seven habits discussed by participants.

Summary

Chapter Four included the responses from the four focus group interviews along with specific thoughts and perceptions of the 19 participants from southwest Missouri schools. The perceptions of the implementation teams when considering the impact of character development models on school culture, student behaviors, and student leadership skills were solicited through questions presented to the groups. Additional questions also helped provide background information to aid the data collection process and interpretation of findings. The data produced revealed commonalities among the groups and adequate information to draw conclusions in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five includes a detailed summary of the perceptions of the implementation teams participating in the focus groups. Information pertinent to factors

impacting implementation that schools can keep in mind as they are going through the process of choosing and implementing a character development model are provided. Findings based upon the data are presented, and conclusions to each of the research questions are discussed after evaluating the responses gathered through the focus groups. In addition, Chapter Five includes implications for practice and topics to consider for further research.

Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusions

The perceptions of implementation teams when considering the impact of school-wide character development implementation on school culture, student behaviors, and student leadership skills can inform educators of factors necessary for positive impact to address growing concerns about the diminishing culture of public schools. A school district's main task is to develop an optimal learning environment focused on educating and optimizing the growth of students (Clark, 2015; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2017). To do this, schools must be intentional by developing a strategy to focus on efforts to improve school culture, driving the people and organization towards growth and performance (Gordon, 2017; Hoffman et al., 2014).

Schools must be an environment where structure, order, and ethical standards are expected and maintained while developing a climate and culture focused on students feeling safe, nurtured, and accepted (Clark, 2015; Humphries et al., 2015; MacNeil et al., 2013). As schools recognize the importance of positive culture, their efforts have led to increased focus and attention on school-wide character development programs (Barkley et al., 2014; Lockwood, 2013; Yeung et al., 2016). School-wide character development programs can vary in implementation and definition from school to school, but advocates hope their programs develop positive ethical behaviors throughout the student body and lessen or eliminate destructive behavior (Lockwood, 2013).

Administrators can glean valuable information from the perceptions of teachers, administrators, and implementation leaders on the factors that impact the implementation of systematic models (Kincaid et al., 2007). Schools consistently face decisions impacting their day-to-day operation, and with increased expectations and accountability,

schools must ensure financially obligated systematic programs are implemented effectively and with fidelity to meet organizational obligations and public perceptions (Boody et al., 2014; Diggan, 2013; Yeung et al., 2016). Even when a district follows the program's recommended plan of implementation, there are still barriers present that must be accounted for, so understanding these barriers and the factors that lead to successful implementation is important (Feuerborn et al., 2013; Kincaid et al., 2007; Yeung et al., 2016). Individuals must understand their roles within the program, provide necessary program knowledge, ensure staff understand the goals, and provide an organized and structured implementation process to improve program implementation (Kincaid et al., 2007).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of implementation teams regarding the impact of character development programs on school culture, student behaviors, and leadership skills. Further examination focused on the factors within the school that impact implementation of these school-wide character development models. Chapter Five includes a review of the findings after the researcher identified patterns, differences, and other noted observations from focus group responses. Chapter Five concludes with the implications for practice and suggestions for future research.

Findings

This qualitative study involved examining the perceptions of implementation teams on the impact of school-wide character development programs on school culture, student behaviors, student leadership skills, and factors affecting implementation. The study was designed to answer four guiding research questions. Participants were part of

focus group discussions with questions asked for the purpose of eliciting data to answer the research questions. Following the focus group interviews, responses were transcribed and then analyzed to gain insight as to how implementation teams perceive the impact of systematic character development programs on school culture, student behaviors, and student leadership skills. These data were also reviewed and analyzed to determine what factors impact the implementation of these programs. The results were summarized and then applied to the corresponding research questions. Supporting literature from Chapter Two was included to provide comparisons related to previous studies and research.

Research question one. What are the perceptions of implementation teams of middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs in southwest Missouri in regard to school culture?

The participants of the focus groups shared positive comments when speaking of the impact of their implemented character development models on overall school culture. All four of the groups felt the chosen character development models had direct connection to improved culture in their buildings. Participants described the impact as changing the day-to-day operations, as they discussed consistency within their interactions. These findings were consistent with the research about comprehensive character development structures having a positive impact on school culture through positive reinforcement and consistent student expectations (Sugai & Horner, 2010).

Another participant responded to the impact on culture by stating, “It’s a fun place, and it is a place the students look forward to coming to school.” B2 and A4 described the impact carrying over to the community, referring to a change in the community’s perception of the school. B3 referred to the perceptions of parents who

previously had students in the building and shared the parents' worry about their children attending that school. B3 went on to state the culture has changed in school B and the common perception among parents is their school is now one of the most preferred buildings in the district.

Previous researchers cited schools must be an environment where structure, order, and ethical standards are expected and maintained (Clark, 2015). Two participants, B2 and A3, specifically mentioned the thought that program expectations and other characteristics of the model have become "the way we do business." Brown (2004) stated a similar thought that organizations and individuals act and talk in the way they do because it has become the way they do business and the way things are commonly performed.

While there were some barriers noted within the responses, the overall impression was the implementation of a school-wide character development program has a positive impact on overall school culture within a building.

Research question two. What are the perceptions of implementation teams of middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs in southwest Missouri in regard to student behavior?

Based on the responses given during focus group discussions, implementation teams reported a positive perception of the impact of character development programs on student behaviors. All four of the schools participating in the study shared benefits in regard to student behaviors. The key terms used throughout these discussions focused around consistent behavioral expectations, teachers being on the same page, and students knowing what is expected of them.

Fourteen of the 19 participants mentioned strategies used to improve student behaviors. A number of participants commented on an increase in positive behaviors due to the focus on positive rather than negative behaviors. Three focus group members stated this focus on positive behavior was, in their opinion, due to the incentive-based reward system their schools have in place. Although the groups who have implemented a rewards-based incentive system (Schools B, C, and D) agreed they have been successful for a number of students, participants from Schools B and D shared the belief the system was also a challenging aspect of the implementation.

Along with the implementation, a large number of the participants mentioned the structure and process used during program training as a positive experience for the staff in developing common language and expectations. The fact teachers had a say in these discussions and in developing the expectations helped create teacher buy-in. The groups described this training period as developing teacher clarity and helping lead to consistency in implementation.

Schools B and D focused comments on the success of their implementation in improving their ability to work with severe behavior challenges and in identifying these students to provide behavioral interventions. Although the common thread of comments and discussion focused on the overall success of the character development models in providing support or improvement of student behaviors, the schools implementing PBIS provided more detailed feedback on meeting behavioral goals and experiencing successes from the implementation of the model and goals specific to PBIS.

Research question three. What are the perceptions of the implementation teams of middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs in southwest Missouri in regard to student leadership?

Participating educators in the focus groups responded to a question specifically asking about the impact of their implemented character development model on developing student leadership skills. Throughout the focus group discussions, implementation teams commented about providing students with "opportunities" and "responsibilities" to demonstrate leadership within their buildings. Another key idea mentioned by participants from Schools A, B, and D was opportunity provided for "student voice" and "student representation." A total of seven participants mentioned specifically the idea that student voice or student representation acts as motivation for the student body.

It was evident the specific model of character development implemented has a great impact on student leadership. The schools that have implemented PBIS showed more impact coming from structures and actions specific to the building rather than specific to the PBIS model. The school that implemented The Leader in Me, School A, was very supportive in their comments that the structures and goals established within The Leader in Me training helped build upon student leadership skills. The comments from School A were much more deliberate with their vocabulary, including words more in line with character development and leadership skills. School A participants were also more detailed on the impact of the training on their personal mindset toward the program goals.

Research question four. What common factors found in middle school and elementary school-wide character development programs have the greatest impact, both positively and negatively?

Focus group participants shared common concepts focused around goals the implementation teams had when first implementing their character development models and the successes and challenges experienced throughout implementation. The common concepts shared were common language, student expectations, behavior support, and character development, all established goals of the systematic programs implemented. Three of the four focus groups (School A, B, and D) positively commented numerous times on the process their staff was led through during program implementation. All three groups acknowledged the outside group who provided training offered support and helped lead them through the thought process toward a deeper understanding of the model.

Participants from Schools A and B both focused comments on teacher "buy-in" and the fact the program allows them to personalize it and make it work for their building. This process helped the staff develop consistencies in mindset and establish common language all teachers are committed to using throughout the buildings. Teachers not on-board with the school-wide implementation were also noted by some participants as being a challenge to the implementation process. Another challenge for successful implementation discussed during the focus group interviews was when teachers did not use the common language or did not participate in the incentive system.

Conclusions

Conclusions to this study were based on responses of the participants involved in the focus group interviews and research questions that guided the study. This section includes common perceptions gathered during focus group interviews regarding the impact of character development models on school culture, student behaviors, and student leadership skills.

Character development models have a positive impact on school culture. The implementation teams interviewed for this study shared consistent perceptions about the positive impact of character development models on school culture. While there were varying examples shared by focus group participants, the responses remained uniform and consistent among focus groups. All participants felt the implementation process improved their school culture and provided examples to support these perceptions. This result corroborates research that states the implementation of a systematic process is the method many schools use to advance positive environment and culture (Clark, 2015). The three models of character development discussed within this study focus a school's efforts toward teaching positive character and social and behavioral skills within the entire student body (MODESE, 2016).

After a review of the responses in comparison to the research, much of the reasoning behind the positive impact is due to the focused implementation process and the idea the initial training was teacher-led. Clark (2015) supported developing successful school climate must be the focus of the entire school community. School-wide PBIS, along with The Leader in Me, share core characteristics focused on teaching life skills, providing ongoing assessment to determine the effectiveness of the program, and

focusing on building positive opportunities for students (Horner et al., 2015). Each of these models also provides support for all program characteristics through a structured model of implementation (Marin & Filce, 2013). Each program leads implementation teams through a process to ensure leaders share the same program goals and values. This formal implementation process was key to the focus groups when discussing the positive impact on school culture.

The impact of character development models on student behaviors and student leadership skills is dependent on the goals of the development model. Although many of the participants referred to positive impact on student behaviors and student leadership skills, upon further review of the responses and the examples shared during the focus group interviews, the program goals and mission were more influential on the perceived impact than the implementation of a model not aligned to the school's goals for implementation. When analyzing the responses, many of the examples given in regard to student behaviors and student leadership skills were more specific to individual strategies and structures implemented at the building level rather than structures ingrained in the program's framework. Schools implementing PBIS (Schools B, C, and D) were much more focused on behavioral successes and structures affecting the culture of their school, while the school implementing The Leader in Me (School A) was strong in the belief student leadership opportunities and life skills shape the current practices and culture.

School-wide PBIS is a systems approach focused on developing a school culture of supports for behavioral needs for the entire student population (Horner et al., 2015). Throughout implementation, schools embed resources into curriculum lessons, positive

approaches to behavior, common language, and a culture focused on behavioral success and education (Sugai et al., 2002). Focus groups implementing the PBIS model were highly impressed with the results of behavioral interventions, incentive-based positive behavior monitoring structures, and interventions specifically focused on students demonstrating more severe behaviors.

These results are consistent with research-based PBIS goals and focused on behavioral expectations and social skills designed to enhance the overall school, home structures, and community through positive reinforcement, behavioral interventions, and evaluating behavior data to determine trends (Sugai et al., 2002). However, the impact the model had on leadership skills, based on responses from the three focus groups implementing PBIS, were mostly due to other structures and practices in place at the building level and not from the implementation team or model guidelines. Focus group participants from Schools C and D stated PBIS does not focus much on student leadership skills, so they would like to find ways to expand those efforts in the future. Participants from School B acknowledged an increased level of student voice due to implementation.

Effective implementation of school initiatives and programs focused on changing school culture or practices requires participation and involvement from all groups involved in the change initiative, including students (Weiss, 2018). Student voice is the students' ability to share opinions and ideas on important school issues, which gives them ownership in the learning culture and affects their day-to-day interactions (Fox et al., 2013). Although student voice was evident through examples stated during the focus

group interviews, these examples were structured within student leadership classes and not implemented through PBIS efforts and leadership teams.

On the other hand, School A, the school implementing The Leader in Me, provided more authentic responses and examples demonstrating positive impact on student leadership skills than schools implementing PBIS. Their focus group responses were specific to leadership opportunities and responsibilities provided for the students throughout implementation. One respondent, A2, felt implementation was more successful once they began handing some of the responsibilities to the students.

This perception supports the research of The Leader in Me model, based on the principles and ideas associated with Stephen Covey's, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 2013). These principles, positive social and emotional skills, have a resulting effect on student behavior due to the skills students are demonstrating due to the structures and practices instilled during implementation (Covey, 2013). The underlying belief of The Leader in Me shifts the mindset from a hierarchical model of leadership to a system focused on the opportunity for both students and teachers to lead (Westgate Research, Inc., 2014). The impact of implementation based on responses from the focus group was consistent with the goals of the program focused on leadership opportunities and teaching life skills.

Factors impacting implementation are consistent with challenges facing change initiatives. When analyzing responses from the implementation teams involved in the focus group interviews, consistent perceptions became evident including staff buy-in, providing adequate time and resources for implementation, planning a well-organized and systematic implementation process, and shifting the mindset of staff through

knowledge and administrative and staff participation. These factors communicated by the focus groups were consistent with the results of a study conducted in Florida in 2007 (Kincaid et al., 2007). The researchers attempted to address the major factors schools encounter that prevent successful implementation of systematic programs in school settings and identified three barriers: lack of program expertise and knowledge, lack of understanding roles in the system, and problems arising due to lack of organization and structure during implementation (Kincaid et al., 2007). With increased expectations and accountability in public education, schools must ensure programs are implemented effectively and with fidelity to meet organizational obligations and public perceptions (Boody et al., 2014).

Implications for Practice

The perceptions of teachers, administrators, and implementation leaders who participated in the focus group discussions suggested a commonality among teachers in southwest Missouri when considering the impact of character development models on school culture, student behaviors, and student leadership skills. Having a grasp of the perceptions of practicing teachers and school leaders can help administrators make decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, and professional development (Kincaid et al., 2007). With an understanding and knowledge of current practices and effective strategies in place and of the perceptions of teachers, school decision makers can prepare training and implementation plans relevant and relatable to teachers to improve school culture and instructional environments (Clark, 2015).

Participants of this study collectively agreed character development programs have a positive effect on school learning environments. Administrators can begin to

understand the value teachers and implementation teams place on positive school culture and the impact of a well-organized and structured character development model on a building's culture (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). This information is valuable for districts who might be exploring implementation to determine the school-wide approach to put in place (Kincaid et al., 2007). When considering the responses of focus group participants about the impact on student behavior and student leadership skills, it is necessary for decision-makers to recognize the goals of their implementation teams and staff for the program. Based on the discussions, the program goals and foundations need to be reviewed and understood when making a decision to implement a school-wide systematic model.

School leaders can also gain valuable insight from the focus group responses into challenges and factors that impact the success of character development models or any school-wide systematic program. Understanding the implementation challenges and barriers that potentially exist provides important information for implementation teams (Kincaid et al., 2007). Recognizing barriers and planning for these challenges can help districts looking to implement systematic programs achieve a more comprehensive plan for sharing information, getting staff and students working toward the same goal, and overcoming barriers to implementation (Kincaid et al., 2007).

Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative study was designed to elicit the perceptions of implementation team members on the impact of character development models on school culture, student behaviors, and student leadership skills. Students are an audience with a key role in determining not only the impact of the model on these three areas but can also offer

different perspectives in assessing each of the areas of school culture, student behaviors, and student leadership skills. By gaining student perceptions through surveys and student focus groups, a researcher could determine if the data are applicable throughout both students and staff or are unique to implementation teams. In addition, a qualitative study including all staff would provide data to verify if the overall perceptions of the building are different than the perceptions of the implementation team, teachers, and leaders who have a vested interest in the model.

Another recommendation for future research would be expanding the population to areas outside of the two counties chosen for this study. The purpose of isolating the regional study was to gather information from districts who had the same character development training through First PLACE! Character. This consistent background knowledge and previous experiences provided a consistency and baseline to start with prior to implementing school-wide programs of PBIS or The Leader in Me. Expanding to school districts throughout the state would provide information from varying geographic regions including rural and urban districts. This broader population would also provide opportunities to examine a relationship between schools facing socio-economic barriers including high free-reduced meal percentages compared to districts with student populations representing families with higher incomes.

An additional qualitative study focusing on schools that have chosen to discontinue use of the character development models researched in this study would provide data focusing on implementation challenges and factors impacting the effects of the program. Each of the schools involved in this study referred to their implementation as successful, so the perceptions from teachers and leaders who have determined the

program is not worth continuing would provide valuable data. This would help schools determine barriers and identify challenges prior to implementation.

Summary

Creating a positive, more engaging school culture is a goal of most districts and school leaders (Clark, 2015). Many educators believe instilling a positive school culture includes school-wide systems of implementation (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). This qualitative study was designed to obtain the perceptions of implementation team members on the impact of character development models on school culture, student behaviors, and student leadership skills. A portion of this study was also designed to gather data on what factors were perceived to have impact on implementation of the chosen models. Nineteen teachers and implementation leaders from four school buildings were included in focus group interviews for this study. The focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to provide data for this study.

Chapter One contained a background of the study, the theoretical framework, and a statement of the problem. Also included in Chapter One were the purpose of the study and the research questions. Chapter One provided the reader with the significance of the study and with definitions of key terms. Closing Chapter One were the limitations of the study and a description of the instrument used to gather data.

Chapter Two began with a review of the theoretical framework of a systems theory approach focusing on the importance of the intricacies of a situation to recognize its most effective implementation and potential impact on school culture (Lockwood, 2013). Chapter Two continued with an extensive review of the literature and previous research information pertaining to school culture, student leadership and student voice,

culture's effect on student success, and information on each of the three systematic character development models. The programs detailed within Chapter Two—PBIS, The Leader in Me, and First PLACE! Character—focus a school's efforts toward teaching positive character and social and behavioral skills within the entire student body (MODESE, 2016). To provide background information on factors impacting implementation, research was provided identifying barriers to implementing systematic models and pertaining to overcoming those barriers.

Chapter Three provided the reader with the methodology for the study including how data were gathered. An overview of the problem and purpose was provided, and the research questions were restated. A qualitative research design was utilized. Ethical considerations and identification of the population and sample used for data collection were provided.

The researcher utilized the method of purposive sampling, resulting in 19 participants from implementation teams found in four districts in southwest Missouri. This sample of implementation team members agreed to participate in focus group discussions using semi-structured interviews to gather their perceptions concerning the impact of character development models on school culture, student behaviors, and student leadership skills. Data collected from the focus groups were then analyzed to determine commonalities between the focus group perceptions and literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

Chapter Four included an overview of the data collection process including specifics of the groups who participated in the study. The collected data obtained through the interviews were organized by question to answer the research questions

guiding the study. Finally, Chapter Five included the conclusions from the data following analysis and review. Character development models have a positive impact on school culture. Additionally, the impact of character development models on student behaviors and student leadership skills is dependent on the goals of the development model. Another conclusion gained from the study was that factors impacting implementation are consistent with challenges facing change initiatives. Each of these conclusions aligned to the research questions posed throughout the study. The chapter concluded with implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Appendix A

Letter of Introduction

<Date>
<Name>
<District/Title>

Dear _____,

I am writing to request permission to conduct a short focus group interview with an elementary school team or middle school team involved in the implementation of your character development program (PBIS, The Leader in Me, or First PLACE! Character). I am currently enrolled at Lindenwood University in St. Charles, MO and am in the process of writing my dissertation for a doctoral degree in educational administration. The study is titled, *The Perceptions of School Leaders and Implementation Teams of the Impact of Character Development Programs on School Culture, Student Behaviors, and Student Leadership Skills.*

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of school leaders and staff involved in the implementation of character development programs in regard to the program's impact on school culture, student behaviors, and student leadership skills. With your permission, a one-time focus group will be held to discuss teacher and building leadership perceptions.

If approval is given, I would ask that you provide me with the opportunity to meet with the chosen elementary school or middle school implementation team and building administrators at a time that will not disrupt their school responsibilities. Participation in the study is completely voluntary, and the participants will be given a copy of the interview questions in advance and will be asked to sign an agreement of participation prior to the focus group. Upon completion of the focus group, the participants will be sent a copy of the transcript for their approval. All transcripts and audio recordings of the focus group will be kept confidential and stored on my password-protected computer.

Approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns about participation at [redacted] or [redacted]. You may also contact Dr. Shelly Fransen at [redacted] or [redacted]. You should retain a copy of this letter and your written consent for future reference.

Thank you for your consideration,
Travis Kite, Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B

IRB Approval

LINDENWOOD

LINDENWOOD UNIVERSITY ST. CHARLES, MISSOURI

DATE:	July 19, 2017
TO:	Travis Kite
FROM:	Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board
STUDY TITLE:	[1090631-1] The Perceptions of Implementation Teams and School Staff on the Influence Character Development Programs Have on School Culture, Student Behaviors, and Student Leadership Skills
IRB REFERENCE #:	
SUBMISSION TYPE:	New Project
ACTION:	APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE:	July 19, 2017
EXPIRATION DATE:	July 18, 2018
REVIEW TYPE:	Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research project. Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review (Cat 7) based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the IRB.

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the completion/amendment form for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of July 18, 2018.

Appendix C

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

The Perceptions of School Leaders and Implementation Teams of the Impact of Character Development Programs on School Culture, Student Behaviors, and Student Leadership Skills

Principal Investigator: Travis Kite
Telephone: [redacted] Email: [redacted]

Participant _____ Contact info _____

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Travis Kite under the guidance of Dr. Shelly Fransen. The purpose of this research is to study the perceptions of school leaders and implementation teams concerning character development programs and the impact of these programs on school culture, student behaviors, and student leadership skills. The study will focus on schools within the [redacted] area implementing PBIS, The Leader in Me, or First PLACE! Character.

2. a) Your participation will involve:
   - Participating in a one-time focus group consisting of members of the school-wide character implementation team to discuss perceptions of school culture, student behaviors, and student leadership skills.
   - Review of the transcripts from the focus group interview.
   - This will be one-time participation, unless a return call is needed for clarification.

   b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be less than one hour. Approximately 20-30 individuals will be involved in this research.

3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.

4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to the knowledge about character development programs and the factors that impact implementation.

5. Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication or presentation that may result from this study and the information collected will remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location.

7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Travis Kite, at [redacted] or the Supervising Faculty, Dr. Shelly Fransen, at [redacted]. You may also ask questions of or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) through contacting Dr. Marilyn Abbott, Provost, at mabbott@lindenwood.edu or 636-949-4912.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

_____		_____
Participant's Signature	Date	Participant's Printed Name
_____		_____
Signature of Principal Investigator	Date	Investigator Printed Name

Appendix D

Focus Group Questions

1. What character development program have you implemented in your school (PBIS, The Leader in Me, First PLACE! Character)?

1a. Prior to implementation, what factors led to your decision to implement your chosen character development model?

2. Throughout implementation, what were some of the challenges you experienced regarding implementation? What were some of the successes?

3. How do you perceive the implementation of your program has impacted overall school culture?

4. How do you perceive the implementation of your program has impacted student behavior?

5. How do you perceive the implementation of your program has impacted student leadership skills?

6. What factors do you believe had the greatest impact on the implementation of your program?

6a. Do you feel your participation and work completed to this point have met the goals you set forth when first beginning implementation?

7. Is there anything else you would like to add with regard to school culture, student behaviors, or student leadership skills in relation to implementation of your school's character development program?

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Vita

Travis G. Kite completed his undergraduate studies at Southwest Missouri State University in 2002 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education. He furthered his education by earning a Master of Arts in Educational Administration from Lindenwood University in 2006, followed by a Specialist Degree in 2012, also from Lindenwood University.

Travis began his teaching career in public education as a third-grade classroom teacher at Logan-Rogersville School District in 2002. Following his five-year tenure at Logan-Rogersville, he accepted his first administrative job in 2007 as an assistant principal serving the middle school and elementary school in the Reeds Spring School District. Travis took his first building-level administrative job within the district in 2009 as the primary school principal. After developing a positive culture within the primary school, he transitioned his leadership to the middle school in 2013 to serve as building principal.

Travis is an active member of the Missouri Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. He continues his studies in education leadership as he prepares for future opportunities to serve teachers, students, and his community.