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Relationship Between Teacher Morale and School Climate

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to obtain information from teachers and administrators on the understanding or lack of understanding of how teacher morale and school climate have a connection at Springdale Elementary School in Macon, Georgia. Questionnaires were administered to certified classroom teachers employed at Springdale Elementary School. In addition, interviews were conducted with the administration.

THE CONTEXT

I am currently teaching fifth grade at Springdale Elementary School in Macon, Georgia. This is my seventh year at this school and my seventeenth year in Bibb County. I currently hold a certificate in middle grades (4-8). I have taught second, fourth, fifth and sixth grades. I taught for ten years at Bernd Elementary School in a self-contained classroom, and then requested a transfer to Springdale Elementary School to a departmentalization setting teaching science. After three years, the sixth grade left and then I taught fifth grade English, then moved to fourth grade for two years and currently teach in a fifth grade classroom. I really felt drained and burned out teaching in a self-contained classroom and felt a change would revive me as a teacher and boost my morale to be in the teamwork climate of a departmentalization setting. I was extremely rejuvenated and felt very good about being a teacher at Springdale Elementary School because its reputation preceded itself. As several years passed, the sixth grade moved to the middle school and new administration entered the building, I could sense a change in the school climate but couldn't put my finger on just what it was. Then our school underwent a complete school renovation and new administration on top of that, so I really felt that the school climate would begin to change because of the physical environment improvements. After being accepted into the specialist degree program at Georgia College and State University and beginning research, I realized that teacher morale seemed to be low at Springdale Elementary School. Teachers seemed gloomy, frustrated, over worked, and little interaction with one another was at a minimum mainly

because of the lack of time to spend with one another. It was not until the school year began that I started asking teachers questions about how the teachers felt about the school climate, teacher morale, and if there was a connection between the two. This mattered to me because this is my work environment and I wanted to be cheerful and content in my setting. I wanted coworkers that were pleased and satisfied, as well as in their job setting.

Springdale Elementary School is a public school located in northern Bibb County. It is one of 33 elementary schools in the county. Springdale's student population is 601 with grades pre-kindergarten through fifth. The population of Springdale varies little. Of the 601 students served, 55% are Caucasian, 36% are African-American, 5% are Asian, 2% are Hispanic, and 2% are multiracial. About 36% of our students are served through the free and reduced lunch program. Approximately 10% of the student population has a disability and 3% are English Language Learners. Springdale is employed with one principal, one assistant principal, one counselor, one music teacher, one PE teacher, one media specialist, one half-time media clerk, and twenty-nine certified classroom teachers, plus six special needs teachers, and eleven para-professionals. All teachers except one have earned their teaching certificates the traditional way. One teacher is currently in the second year of the Georgia Teacher Alternative Preparation Program (GA TAPP).

Springdale Elementary School met AYP in 2007, but Bibb County as a whole county did not. To meet AYP, each school and system must meet the following criteria: 95% Participation, Academic Performance (Annual Measurable Objective), and Second Indicator which was attendance. For spring 2007 CRCT, 99% of the students participated in the test. The scores showed that 93.8% of the students met/exceeded in mathematics and 93.6% of the students met/exceeded in reading/language arts. The second indicator was attendance in which 2.8% of the students missed school over 15 days.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

I have been employed in Bibb County for seventeen years and at Springdale for the past seven years. I have always enjoyed coming to work until the past couple of years. I recently began to feel a change occurring and noticed a serious dilemma among our staff. As I tried to pinpoint what was going on in the atmosphere of our school, I began observing and listening to what was happening. It occurred to me that many staff members were lacking motivation to complete tasks, dreaded coming to weekly staff meeting, and appeared to be dissatisfied with their school culture or the environment in which they were working. As the next few years progressed, the atmosphere never seemed to really change. With new seasons and holidays in the horizon, a new

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administration, and a newly renovated building, I thought I would see a change. There are many areas that seem to be lacking in the school culture. One is the spirit between the staff members. Teachers need time to develop relationships throughout the year. Staff members need time to enjoy each other and develop trust so that goals for student achievement can be met without obstacles in the way. Teacher recognition is also lacking. Teachers need to be respected and appreciated for “doing a job well done.” I was very hopeful that the school climate would “cheer up” and teachers would become more satisfied, but this has not happened. I also saw clerical work that was time consuming. This is an area that desperately affects the mood of the school culture. I was bothered by this dilemma and did not know what to do or how to possibly solve the phenomenon that was taking place at my school. The decisive moment came when I was asked what my passion was in education. This is when I knew I would step out onto a limb and risk asking these tough questions.

In order to gain a greater understanding or insight about this area of concern, I propose the following research question: Does teacher morale and school climate have a connection at Springdale Elementary School? This problem raises the following questions:

1. Does lack of teacher social culture have a significant effect on the morale among teachers at Springdale Elementary School?
2. Would recognition of teachers (public or otherwise) improve the morale among the teachers?
3. Do unnecessary stressors (busy paper work, extra duty or lack of team planning) keep morale low for teachers at Springdale?

The study will be conducted among teachers at Springdale Elementary School in Bibb County, Georgia. The results of the study may be generalized to educators who face similar problems with teacher morale and school climate.

Teacher morale and school climate go hand in hand. Schools can set goals for their student achievement, but if teacher morale is low then there will be less interest and motivation to incorporate those goals therefore, diminishing the goals set for achievement for the school. As a researcher of this phenomenon, I know that my research will cause awareness and a change among the staff. Strengthening social culture in the school among the teachers would begin to change the mindset of teachers at Springdale Elementary School. I feel this would give teachers an opportunity to develop trust among each other and enjoy being with each other as a school family. Teacher recognition among the staff would provide teachers a greater appreciation of their coworkers and begin working to achieve the goals of the school. Although stressors are related to this profession, relieving unnecessary stress factors would enhance the culture so that all teachers can come together and achieve the goals for the school in unity. Teacher morale gives the school its

culture and examining this phenomenon within a school allows the world a glimpse into this school culture. It provides a possible solution to the problems that exist and this awareness will cause changes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The expectations and advanced social issues are causing the teaching profession to lose many fabulous teachers. Teachers' attitudes toward their profession have been a topic of much discussion. School climate is an area that is often pushed aside as a priority for many schools, but is actually critical to the survival of the teacher morale. Students' achievement is typically higher when teacher morale is high, states Black (2001). I can personally relate to this because in my current setting test scores set the tone of how the teachers' attitudes toward achievement were dictated. Low morale was high among those grade levels that currently have disappointing scores on students' achievement. The first issue with low teacher morale is school environment. As Lumsden (1998) argues, healthy school environment and teacher morale are related. I agree with her thoughts and suggest that other factors play an important part as well. Teacher recognition is the second issue that is often overlooked and needs to be addressed. According to Vail (2005), public recognition of teachers for a "job well done" goes a long way. In my current situation many teachers' efforts go unrecognized, which affects the tone of the school climate. The third issue that has caused much debate throughout the profession is stressors. Protheroe (2006) clearly states that stressors such as "extra duties and paperwork" should be kept to a minimum because this can lead to low teacher morale. I agree with Protheroe because teachers do not need unnecessary stressors to jam up their day and build more discontentment towards their job and their responsibilities.

In the school environment, administration sets the tone of the school. As Black (2001) mentioned in her report, principals "spearhead their school's climate and culture." I agree with Black because as teachers are satisfied in their environment, there will be less tension among teachers. As Black (2001) continues to state, if job satisfaction drops, so does teacher morale. Earlier Lumsden (1998) reported that teacher morale can have a "positive effect on students' achievement." I cannot argue with this because in the past sixteen years of my teaching experience I have seen students' achievement rise and fall because of teacher morale. Singh (1984) conducted a study and came to the conclusion that administrators' leadership was an important factor in the job satisfaction among teachers, therefore developing high teacher morale. Based on my experience, Singh's research is correct.

Although teachers' salaries tend to be below or just below the national

average in many states, this is not typically what lowers teacher morale. The real rewards come from job satisfaction as Black (2001) argues. The intrinsic rewards that teachers have are usually self-respect, responsibility, and a sense of accomplishment. Nichols (2006) argues that teachers go “unrecognized year after year.” She blames this on “preoccupied administrators”; however, most teachers “generally” would not accept this kind of recognition. Teachers want to be appreciated for their hard work but do not need a formal ceremony to be recognized for doing their job well. From my experience as an educator, I noticed these rewards come from the students’ growth and achievement. Protheroe (2006) goes on to say that the lack of satisfaction in the teaching career is due to inadequate support and lack of recognition from school leaders. This statement sums up this idea:

By nurturing an environment in which teachers and students can focus on learning—and by providing the types of organizational support teachers say they need—principals can balance their support for both high levels of students learning and high staff morale. (Protheroe, 2006, p. 47).

Teacher morale is often related to teacher burnout. Burnout happens when a teacher experiences too many stressors. Teacher stress can be considered an occupational stress. Otto (1996) did a study and discovered that “workload pressures” contributed to low teacher morale. Bruno (1983) conducted a study and found that burnout of teachers also contributes to low morale among teachers. I must agree with Otto and Bruno as well. Excessive paper work and extra duties can be contributors to excessive workloads. Lumsden (1998) related stress to morale and stated stress “reduces work motivation, satisfaction and involvement.” From my experience as an educator in the field, stressors are often mistaken as part of the job, but this is not the case. Woodward (2003) agrees that teachers feel “ground down by paper work” and often leave the profession because of this abundance of stress. As many administrators try to reduce stressors in the work force for teachers, Betoret (2006) discovered that providing teachers with “coping resources” diminishes the stress levels, thereby helping raise teacher morale. Most often stress levels can have a negative impact on students’ achievement levels, as Gaziel (1993) stated in his article. I found this to be a reality in my setting when stress compounded the students’ achievement and had a negative impact on the school.

Ultimately administrators control the climate of a school. Although high teacher morale will have a tremendous impact on students’ achievement as well as low teacher morale, school climate, teacher recognition, and the reduction of stressors can make or break students’ achievement. Vail (2005) and Protheroe (2006) have identified these three common denominators in their research of how students’ achievement is affected by teacher morale.

METHOD

The participants in this study were certified teachers and administrators at Springdale Elementary School in Macon, Georgia. Springdale Elementary School employs two administrators, one counselor, one music teacher, one physical education (PE) teacher, one media specialist, twenty-nine teachers, plus six special needs teachers. Twenty-seven of the teachers and all of the administrators employed at Springdale Elementary completed a questionnaire which contained five open-ended questions and ten questions to rate; all pertaining to teacher morale and school climate and their possible connection. Consent forms were obtained from all participants. Answers to the demographic questions on the survey indicated that 10% of the respondents have 0-3 years of teaching experience, 27% of the respondents have 4-9 years of experience; 35% of the respondents have 10-20 experience; 21% of the respondents have 21-30 years of experience; and 7% have 30+ years of experience. One of the demographic questions was used to obtain information about the highest degree of education obtained by the participants. Of the respondents, 37% completed a Bachelor of Science in Education, 52% of the respondents completed a Masters of Arts in Education, and 11% completed an Education Specialist in Education, and two respondents currently pursuing a doctorate.

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire. The demographic data included the number of years of teaching experience and the highest degree earned. The remainder of the questions were open-ended and scale-rated questions which focused on teacher morale and school climate and the possible connection between the two. In addition to the questionnaire, an interview was conducted with each administrator at the school.

Permission was obtained from the Springdale Elementary School principal to conduct research using the questionnaire. Permission to conduct the study was also obtained from the GCSU Institutional Review Board. The investigator placed a copy of the survey and a consent form in the mailbox of each participant on a Thursday morning. The participants were instructed to return the questionnaire and the consent form to the investigator's mailbox by Wednesday. Two manila folders were placed in my box, one marked questionnaires and one marked consent forms. Signatures were not required on the questionnaires. In addition, an interview was conducted with each administrator of Springdale Elementary School.

The questionnaire began with five open-ended questions and ended with 10 scale-rated questions. When teachers were asked to answer the question: What is teacher morale? All responded with at least one similar answer as how a teacher feels about him/her self and abilities, attitude, and enthusiasm of the

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work place. Question two asked: What factors affect teacher morale? Answers varied from support from administration, students' behavior, unnecessary paperwork, micromanaging, parental support, appreciation, fairness, work load, positive feedback, consistency, and staff interaction. The third open-ended question asked: Is teacher morale important? Again various answers appeared like the importance of how it affects school climate, sets the tone, betters attitudes toward school, creates a foundation for learning, affects student and staff motivation, and the amount of effort put forth in the job. Question four asked: What steps teachers can take to preserve or raise their morale? Many responded with staff building activities within a school day, encouragement and support for each other, staying positive, planning time with other grade members, taking time to remember what is important, having their opinion respected, supporting one another, banding together, and communicating concerns without consequences. With the fifth and final open-ended question, I wanted to find out how the administration can influence teacher morale. Some responded with actions speak louder than words, ask for the truth and accept it, be positive, show empathy, continue to recognize good teaching, treat the teachers with respect, and be visible in the building. Others replied with the suggestions that the administration could make positive statements, support and appreciate with incentives, show appreciation, understand pressure being put on teachers and allow independence with teaching styles.

Ten questions from the questionnaire requested that each written statement be rated with a scale; one equaling strongly disagrees to five which equals strongly agrees. Statement number one stated: School culture is affected by teacher morale and 52% rated the statement with strongly agrees, where 41% rated it with agrees and 7% were neutral. The second statement was Student achievement improves with high teacher morale. 60% rated it with a strongly agrees, 33% rated it with agrees, and 7% were neutral. The next statement was Teacher morale would improve if teachers had more time to interact with one another. 37% rated it with strongly agrees, 44% rated it with agree, 12% were neutral; and 7% disagree. The fourth statement stated: Teacher recognition (informal) for a "job well done" would increase morale. 52% of the respondents rated it with strongly agrees, 41% rated it with agrees, and 7% were neutral. The fifth statement: Making teachers feel respected through recognition would improve students' achievement was rated with 26% strongly agree, 53% agree and 21% were neutral. The next statement: Unnecessary paper work makes teachers feel overwhelmed received 78% responding with strongly agree, 15% rated it with agree, and 7% were neutral. The questionnaire continued with four more statements. The statement: Teachers feeling overwhelmed with unnecessary stressors creates low teacher morale was rated by 74% of the respondents with strongly agree, 22% agree,

and 4% were neutral. The next question stated: Stressed teachers affect student achievement was rated by 52% as strongly agree, with 44% agree, and 4% were neutral. In turn the statement: Student achievement affects teacher morale received ratings of 41% with strongly agree, 44% agree, 11% were neutral and 4% disagree. The last question of the questionnaire stated: Teacher morale affects school climate. This statement was rated by 81% as strongly agree, 15% agree, and 4% was neutral.

In the interview with administration, several questions were asked. The questions were very similar to what I asked the teachers. I first asked: What is teacher morale? They responded with teacher morale is self-worth and value one has about him/her self and job satisfaction. I asked: What factors create a school culture that would improve teacher morale? The administrators replied with administrators listening to teachers' concerns, being responsive to issues, confront issues head on, supporting teachers or attempting to help, and handling behavior issues. Another questions asked of the administration was: What steps can teachers take to preserve or raise their morale? Both responded with teachers should build each other up and support one another, collaborate and share the load to prevent from being overwhelmed, release the responsibilities to others, and shift from a negative solutions to a positive solutions. The last question I asked: How do you think teacher morale and school climate connect? The responses were that there is a strong correlation between the two. If teachers are not happy, the school climate will be affected. The ultimate downfall will be student achievement. The administration did feel it would be important to have informal staff recognition or teacher spotlight in the parent newsletter pertaining to small classroom accomplishments and professional growth as well.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the questionnaire conducted with teachers and administrators, it appeared that most of the teachers, if not all, felt that teacher morale contributed to the school climate. Many felt that in order for teacher morale to be high, the administration of the environment plays an important part of the school climate and how teachers feel about their environment. It appeared that most teachers felt that each teacher is also responsible for how his or her attitude affects the environment, which can contribute to a healthy work place, and learning environment for students' learning. Because elementary schools are limited in extra-curricular activities, it is difficult to arrange common grade level planning. Many creative avenues have been invented to accomplish this, but it is rare. However, teachers feel that this would be very beneficial to increase teacher morale by providing

common grade level planning on a regular base and not just at the beginning or end of the school year. Paper work and documentation are areas that appeared to bother teachers the most. The teachers felt that they are acting like secretaries instead of being teachers and educating minds. Management of materials because of the need for documentation has frustrated teachers and overwhelmed them to a point where it is procrastinated until the very last minute before a deadline.

An overwhelming amount of respondents to the survey felt that teachers needed to take good care of themselves by exercising, eating healthy and finding time for family and realizing that without healthy teachers, teaching would not be possible. Although it may not be the best alternative, a large portion of the respondents said spending time with staff and interacting with one another would help build community among school personnel and provide support and develop relationships that would increase teacher morale and improve school climate. Several mentioned possible incentives like having lunch brought in or have a grade level provide snack once a month for staff meetings to enhance school climate. In the end, all respondents had a strong feeling that teacher morale does have a connection to school climate and its impact on the learning environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As I began to gather the results of this survey, I was not surprised as the results only validated what I was feeling myself. My hope in completing this task was to make others aware of what we can do to improve teacher morale and school climate at Springdale Elementary School. I have no doubt that through my questionnaire, most teachers at my school feel that the school climate needs improvement and understand how teacher morale impacts this climate. From what I learned through this study, I have several recommendations to offer for improving teacher morale and school climate at Springdale Elementary School in Macon, Georgia. First, I feel that at staff meetings the principal should state one good thing she has noticed about each grade level through the past week. The second recommendation I have is to replace one staff meeting a month with an informal staff gathering. The third recommendation I propose would be to provide incentives for teachers to enhance the work environment. Some of the incentives would be ordering out for lunch once a month and allowing dress down days. I have learned through this research experience that teachers do not need a big presentation or lavish sit down. Little incentives, small compliments and appreciation go a long way for the teachers at Springdale Elementary School. The final incentive would be giving teachers common planning time among their grade levels, and allow

this to happen at least once each grading period. This would release some of the pressure of having to meet deadlines and doing much of the work on our own time and not being compensated for it.

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