

5-4-2023

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Recommended Citation

Burt, Nila J. and Jones, Joseph R. (2023) "Relational Leadership: Reconceptualizing How School Districts Address Teacher Attrition," *Journal of Educational Leadership in Action*: Vol. 8: Iss. 3, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62608/2164-1102.1129>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/ela/vol8/iss3/3>

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Relational Leadership Reconceptualizing How School Districts Address Teacher Attrition

Nilá J. Burt and Joseph R. Jones

New teachers are leaving the profession at steadily increasing rates at a substantial cost to Georgia taxpayers who support local school districts and the state department of education (Pelfrey, 2020). Pelfrey (2020) reiterated the details of those cost burdens by outlining details of recruiting expenditures, hiring efforts, and loss of productivity. During the 2019-2020 school year, 6,233 new teachers were hired in Georgia, which did not keep pace with resignations and retirements (Pelfrey, 2020). Considering these statistics, educational leaders must understand how the attrition of new teachers affects students and communities, why academically prepared new teachers choose to leave the profession, and how to retain these new professionals.

In a study linking teacher stress with attrition, Farmer (2020) detailed several critical factors for teachers leaving the profession: high-stakes testing, material differentiation for multi-level learners, paperwork, lack of parental involvement, and student discipline and violence. While researchers have identified how the above factors contribute to attrition, there is little focus on how leaders who use relational practices can create positive climate conditions to promote teacher retention through leader feedback.

MacBeath (2012) identified five key factors contributing to teachers' dissatisfaction with their jobs. These include the intensification of a lack of autonomy for teachers, the stress of role and work overloads, diminished authority and respect, increased discipline issues, increasing populations of special needs students, and an influx of students with social-emotional needs.

Kraft et al. (2016) noted that individual and organizational factors such as desirable working conditions and learning environments, shaped the productivity of teachers. They presented evidence that school climate and leadership quality strongly influenced a teacher's

decision to remain in education. The Learning Policy Institute (2017) emphasized in their study the significant role quality leadership and administrative support play in teacher retention. These researchers suggested that principals' emotional and instructional support is more prominent than teacher workload in deciding to remain in or leave a school (Learning Policy Institute, 2017).

Relational Effect on Attrition

Sutcher et al. (2016) revealed that 42% of teachers left the profession because of dissatisfaction with the administration due to a lack of support, input, and control over teacher decisions resulting in unhappiness with working conditions. These researchers reported that administrative support was the most consistent factor associated with teacher attrition. Kraft et al. (2016) surveyed teachers and illustrated how school leadership style predicted teacher retention decisions and leaders who supported teachers influenced retention. They analyzed reciprocal relationships between leadership styles, organizational capacity, teacher practices, and student achievement and found multiple correlations. The Learning Policy Institute (2017) concluded teachers' perceptions of administrators were a dominant factor in career decisions; leaders who set clear expectations and supported, encouraged and recognized staff increased teacher retention.

School leadership is critical in retaining teachers, especially considering pedagogical losses with alternate routes to certification. However, there is a lack of focus on new teachers' perceptions of leadership styles and how it influences their decision to stay in the profession. After discussing the current literature related to the study, it is necessary to consider the methodology utilized in this study.

Methodology

A narrative inquiry was the primary qualitative methodological approach used in the

study. “Narrative inquiry,” Smit (2018) explained, “aims at understanding and making meaning of experience through conversations, dialogue, and participants in the ongoing lives of the research participants” (p. 79). Patton (2015) defined narrative inquiry as examining human experiences through a lens that characterizes human life situated within the culture from which it emerged. Similarly, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) characterized narrative inquiry as “the study of how humans experience the world” (p. 2). They suggested that educational research should mainly focus on the participants’ stories. They claimed that life narratives are the context for making meaning in school scenarios. Stories from teachers capture the complexity of the lived experience of teachers (Carter, 1993).

As established, narrative inquiry is a dyad of storytelling, yet Connelly and Clandinin (1990) outlined the importance of the researcher ensuring the participant is the first to tell the story. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggested narrative inquiry involves a relationship between the researcher and the participant and recommended that researchers have shared experiences during field operations and interviews to provide needed constructs. They explained that narrative inquiry consists of personal and shared narratives, and the researcher tells the research story beyond the lived experience. Furthermore, Connelly and Clandinin continued that distinctions between researcher and participant are less valuable during the research process, and trust, relationships, story, and re-story telling are more important during this collaborative process. Smit (2018) explained that in narrative inquiry studies, meaning is co-constructed by the researcher and the participants based upon the experiences and knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation. Smit also emphasized an interpersonal dyadic relationship between the researcher and participants.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) warned researchers to be sensitive to the setting during the narrative inquiry process. They understood the narrative story as an argument of a human life experience in the community context. With this understanding, they insisted that attention must be given to the surroundings and timeframe when writing narratives; researchers should describe the environment(s) of the participants, including classrooms, offices, or school buildings. Setting the scene adds dimension to data collection. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) added that the participants' physical characteristics also add depth to the narrative context. Stories are inherently temporal, so the researcher should know the "plot" or timeline (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Generally, researchers report interviews in the present; however, in analyzing data, the researcher needs to consider significant points in the past tense and express value in the present and future tense to convey intention (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). They cautioned researchers to analyze narratives with a global perspective of explanations discovered from the entire tale rather than as a tale told chronologically to avoid becoming steeped in minutia. After briefly exploring narrative inquiry and its connection to the research methodology, it is necessary to discuss the study's demographics.

Demographics

The study was conducted in a large public school district in the southern United States with 31,899 students. The population of the city is 189,296. The district student ethnicity is approximately 58% Black, 26% White, 5% Multi-Racial, 8% Hispanic, and 3% Hawaiian or American Indian. Males comprise 51% of the student population, and 79% receive free and reduced lunch. Special Education students make up 12.74% of the student population, with 67.98% of that population male. There are approximately 2,245 full-time teachers (Niche, 2020;

U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). There are similar graduation rates between races, and the district has traditionally higher graduation rates than the state averages.

The city has been declining in population in the last decade. It is adjacent to one of the world's largest military bases, contributing to its diversity. The city was once rich in cotton mills, which supported a broad middle-class base. Although there are relatively equal numbers of high school graduates among different ethnicities and races, Caucasians are twice as likely to have a bachelor's degree (Niche, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). According to the Niche (2020) website, there is a 16:1 teacher ratio, and teachers have an average salary of \$54,200, compared to an average household income of \$63,902. The median home value is \$141,700, and rent averages \$877 per month. Poverty is a significant factor in the area, with a poverty rate of 21.15%. The district spends an average of \$11,716 per student, 59% on instruction, 35% on support services, and 6% on other expenses (Niche, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Qualitative research requires an understanding of the demographics involved in a study; in this capacity, the high school (Martinsville) in this study employs 92 teachers, 19 paraprofessionals, and four administrators and is the largest of the eight high schools in the district. Seventeen teachers are within their first five years of teaching. Of the 17 teachers, only two identify with a historically underrepresented group. Eight percent of the teachers at the identified school are African-American, 4% are Hispanic, and 2% are Pacific Islanders. Only 33% of the teachers are males, and the administrative staff is white, with two females and two males. According to the local district website, this school's overall performance is higher than 83% of schools in the state and is the highest in the district (The Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2021). The graduation rate is 96%, and 61.5% of graduates are considered college

and career-ready. We aim to situate the participants within the overall school and district identity by discussing the broader demographic data.

James

James is 26 years old Caucasian male, born and raised in a mid-sized city in the state. He attended a liberal-arts high school and graduated from the local university. James began college majoring in Environmental Science, but he switched his major to secondary education. He has broad-field certification in science, emphasizing earth and space science. After completing his science degree with an alternate math/science certification program, James added his secondary education.

James has a challenging schedule at the high school, with four classroom preparations, including physical science, Physics, AP Physics, and Robotics. James teaches upper-level physics and physical science, robotics, works with theater, and runs the robotics club.

Sam

Sam is 24 years old and in his second year of teaching mathematics. He grew up in the middle of the state, where there were two elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school in Sam's town. He graduated valedictorian of his high school class. Sam attended college at the local university in the same city as the school where he works. Although he and James both went to this college and attained their education degrees through the alternate stem education preparation program, they did not attend at the same time or have the same experience with the program.

After this year, Sam will not return to the profession; instead, he will attend graduate school in a neighboring state, where he received a full academic scholarship and was granted a graduate assistantship.

Holly

Holly is a 24-year-old Caucasian female English teacher who attended the high school where she is currently employed. Holly attended a state university to become a teacher. Holly teaches Honors 9th grade literature and Honors American Literature.

Holly has a new baby, and her husband is in graduate school. She is considering a master's degree after her husband graduates. Holly, the only participant with traditional education training in college, is pleased in her career and has never considered leaving.

Sara

Sara grew up in the suburbs of a large town in the Midwest. She attended a large state university specializing in science and technology in the Midwest. The population was 75% male and focused on engineering. She began her education as an undetermined engineering major, although she initially applied for physics and secondary education. She was worried about the negativity associated with teaching. Sara is a science teacher in her second year, and like James and Sam, she obtained her education degree through an alternate degree program.

Joe

Joe is a twenty-seven-year-old special education teacher in his third year of teaching. Joe graduated from high school in 2013. He attended a small liberal arts college in the state for a year and then transferred to a more prominent religious-based university to complete his undergraduate degree in Business Administration and play baseball. When Joe graduated, he started applying to large local corporations. The head baseball coach at the high school called and made him aware of a coaching position open at the school.

After discussing the study's demographics, we will discuss data collection and analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were utilized to collect data because they allow the interviewer and interviewee more flexibility to follow important angles during the interview process to ensure a more knowledge-producing experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Open-ended interview questions allowed for more individualized, in-depth, and contextually sensitive understanding (Patton, 2015).

Two interviews were conducted with each participant. The participants' life experiences were the object of the analysis, and the interviews were often "slow and painstaking, requiring attention to subtlety; nuances of speech, the organization of a response, relations between the researcher, social and historical contexts" (Paton, 2015; Riessman, 2003, p. 342). Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, giving specific attendance to appropriate pauses, a lack of leading questions, and time considerations. All interviews were conducted through Zoom, and all IRB protocols were followed.

Successful data analysis begins with the first interaction between the participants and the researcher (Patton, 2015). An in-depth examination of data allows the researcher to identify categories and themes and provide detailed descriptions of settings, participants, and interactions (Patton, 2015). Qualitative researchers analyze the data inductively by working back and forth between the categories to establish themes. Patton (2015) stated that data analysis begins at the most individualistic level: interview data, observations, documentary data, impressions from other participants, and contextual information. He also emphasized the difference between capturing a participant's story as data and the narrative as analysis involving interpretation and contextualization. Individuals' information can be very personal and specific. Patton (2015)

highlighted constructing a narrative for the reader that takes them into the situation balancing detail with relevance which included three stages.

Stage 1: Organizing and Familiarizing

Data were reviewed and organized into specific electronic folders as the data were collected.

Stage 2: Coding and Reducing

During data analysis, the primary purpose was to bring order to the voluminous data collected during the research (Maxwell, 2014). First, the data were fractured into open codes. Next, axial coding was utilized to chunk open codes into more extensive codes, which developed into categories and themes.

Stage 3: Interpreting and Representing

After collection, the data were connected with the main themes discovered in the categories. During transcription, special attention was given to protecting identities using pseudonyms and reporting findings from collected data. Participants' narratives were discussed holistically to visually represent appropriate outcomes and rich, descriptive detail and tables to represent findings (Patton, 2015).

Findings

The data analysis revealed several valuable findings; however, for this article, we will focus on the relational theme that emerged from the analysis. For these participants, relational experiences became one of the most important aspects concerning their employment at the high school and their reason for remaining there. An epistemological aspect exists within these participants' beliefs about education. For these participants, relationships played a vital role in their maturation and educational success, which became a framework for conceptualizing their

beliefs concerning their profession.

Specifically, all the participants enjoyed their past school experiences—several described the personal relationships with former teachers contributing to their decision to pursue teaching. James, who teaches physics, recalled a college physics professor with an open-door policy he admired. James said he had “a lot going on.” He was grateful for communicating with her so freely, especially in her role as a professor in the alternate route to the certification program. Sam remembers wanting to emulate a Socratic teaching style based on his high school history and English teachers’ ability to connect with students. He said, “It was like magic for everybody, and we were completely enamored by the stories...and I was like, I want to do that.” Sara attributed her final decision to become an educator to her sister’s kindergarten teacher. Sara remembered spending recesses in her classroom helping her through 5th grade. Holly still maintains a relationship with her middle school English teacher, who coordinated her wedding and works with her father. Holly and Sam graduated from the high school and commented on the positive relationships between students and faculty when they attended high school. The participants had relatively good relationships with educators, setting the foundation of positivity about education.

In addition to positive personal educational experiences between the participants and their teachers, they also reported good social and professional relationships with their peers within the high school. These peer relationships became especially important with decreased administrative contact during the pandemic. James and Sara are in the science department, and although James does not currently socialize due to his father’s health, Sara often socializes with her department peers. James sits with his department at faculty events but explained that the proximity of science classrooms prevents him from more frequent interaction. Sam knew a few

other math teachers from college but did not “hang out with anybody outside of school.” However, he feels comfortable talking to “his neighbors” and knows whom to talk to when he needs something. Holly and Joe are the most outgoing participants. Although Holly does not socialize with her teaching peers outside of work, she eats lunch with them and “sees them daily, all day long, like on the hallway.” She played softball with another teacher at Martinville, and her sister-in-law is a teacher in the science department, so she often socializes outside of school with her peers. Joe, like Holly, is very positive and is friends with his co-teachers and fellow coaches.

The Covid-19 pandemic challenged relationships between principals and their teachers. The lack of professional interpersonal relationships strained the flow of proper teacher evaluation and critical feedback to help them improve teaching and learning. Sam, Holly, and Sara began their teaching careers during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. When the high school went to complete virtual learning in March 2020 and continued with options for students to be virtual students or traditional students simultaneously during the 2020-2021 school year, these teachers had to manage their students with limited evaluation and feedback. The following year, this situation continued when the district asked teachers to teach each class using Zoom for the virtual students while also managing and engaging students within the classroom. Each participant reported the difficulties and strain of teaching during this time. Sara lamented, “I just really struggled. It was too much all at once with online and in-person and simultaneously trying to manage essentially two classrooms at the same time.” The school district administration asked teachers to limit physical socialization and leaders to communicate virtually with teachers. In-person classroom support was limited.

During the 2020-2021 school year, the school district required students and teachers to follow the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) ever-changing quarantine mandates. Many were quarantined for up to 10 days and had to teach from home with paraprofessionals monitoring their classrooms. The district also required teachers to teach students virtually and in person. School-based leaders were burdened with contact tracing, a labor-intensive task taking time from classroom visits and teacher interactions. These cumbersome tasks took time from leaders' ability to support teachers. The administration required seating charts for close-contact tracing, which happened every day. Due to the pandemic, the school district was unprepared to evaluate and provide critical feedback to teachers. Holly remembered details about close-contact protocols:

I mean, the emails are really easy, especially with so-and-so has tested positive please send the names for the past two days. I think [the administrators] carry a lot of the weight of the things that admin passed down to teachers at other schools, and I don't think a lot of teachers. Of course, I realize that for how much [the administrators] do, and how much [the administrators] like keep from us... don't keep from us like hiding, but hold on your shoulder so that we don't have to answer those questions.

The school district mandated and trained teachers to use Canvas, a web-based learning management platform. All students would work on Canvas at home or in the classroom. Holly said it was difficult "having to do in person and Zoom. I was trying to get stuff on Canvas."

Holly got frustrated with managing questions from both sets of students while on Zoom:

They would put questions in the chat that I didn't see until 10 min later when I was past that, and then sometimes I would start teaching, and then they would type in the chat,

“you’re on mute, or you’re muted, we can’t hear you,” and it [simultaneous instruction] just had its own difficulties.

Holly found last year more mentally draining than the current year. Yet, having graduated from here, Holly was familiar with the school, teachers, and administration, an advantage that other participants did not have. She felt comfortable asking for assistance, whereas the others often felt like they were on an island. However, school leaders were also navigating new waters during the pandemic. Often the participants leaned on one another instead of the daily classroom presence of school leaders.

Covid-19 was a “social dampener” for James, forcing him to “infrequently” socialize with the people in the science department. James and Joe are in their fourth year in the profession and were the only participants who experienced traditional teaching before the pandemic. James missed his peers and described the infrequency of interaction as:

not necessarily normal. The first two years where things were, you know, relatively normal as far as social norms were concerned. Before Covid, I definitely would say that we would do something as a department, maybe once, if not, the semester, whether that be a potluck or go to someone’s house and kind of like get together and just, you know to be social and have a commune or, you know, go out to lunch, or something like that. I find I really enjoyed those opportunities, and I have even found that I don’t eat lunch with people around me nearly as much, and that’s just me trying to self-quarantine; my dad is high-risk, and he’s got COPD.

James’ classroom is in another building far from most science teachers. Conversely, Sara, a science teacher, often socialized with her peers during this time. Her peers were young females in the same age range and in the same hallway.

Holly and James taught academically advanced students during the trying pandemic year. Sara taught physical science classes with regular and inclusion (co-teaching with special needs students). Sara and Sam struggled more throughout their first year during the pandemic. Many of Sara's students struggled with learning, and their parents chose for them to attend virtually, which created more learning and behavior gaps. She battled student accountability given the lack of feedback:

I think the hardest part was setting the expectations and trying to figure out how to hold kids accountable. It was just impossible because with them being at home, there were too many battles to fight, and I couldn't fight all of them. So, trying to figure out which ones were worth the stress, which ones were worth the argument, and which ones weren't...I don't know that I picked the right battles necessarily.

The participants also struggled with engagement, and often there was little administrators could do to support them. Sara felt that the experience showed her that the classroom management techniques she observed while preparing for her career were not appropriate or effective for the students she taught. She did not anticipate student apathy:

I get the not doing work, but it's the entitlement. I think it's what really gets me that they think they should not have to do work and how dare I ask them to do that? And then they fail my class. That still boggles my mind how they don't understand that. And then I get a lot of I can get a lot of this, and I don't know why they go, can we have a free day? And I'm like, no, you came to school to learn today. I intend on teaching you. And they're just like, why don't we ever get a break in this class? And I'm like, you get breaks. It's called Saturday and Sunday. I thought this was a school. I thought you came here to learn. Yeah, I get a lot of that, which I find very frustrating.

In addition to being frustrated with the lack of student motivation, Sara described student interactions as often combative when asking them to engage during class. She hated that the students thought “they should be able to get away with not doing anything.” Sara suggested that students “had a couple of weird years and were unable to get past being able to mute their teacher” when bored of class as they did when learning virtually.

During the pandemic, teachers lacked feedback on classroom management and professional duties. Students struggled with this lack of routine as well. Sam also described the Covid years as “weird” and felt it would take a while for students to return to a routine. Sam was more hopeful and upbeat than Sara and felt that “kids fell out of the school routine and now falling back into it. But the culture still around it is a lot of them want to do well.” Sara viewed it a little differently:

I think it’s just that they got away with a lot for two years, and now that they’re being held accountable, they don’t know how to cope with it anymore. And it’s frustrating. It’s like pulling teeth. Now, the dentist didn’t sign up to pull teeth.

Sara described the experience as demoralizing, “I can give zeros left and right, but they didn’t seem to care.”

While most participants struggled with the lack of leader engagement in their daily classroom experience, Sam enjoyed some aspects of teaching during Covid. He had no problem adapting his class to the online format and enjoyed the small class sizes of the students attending in person. He explained:

The best part [of 2020-2021] was small classes. I’m not going to go around that; I’m going to be 100% honest. If my class size were 15, I would be in heaven all day. Every day, all teachers would, obviously, there’s just not enough resources to do what we need

to do with having that number of students in a class, I'm aware. But that's the pipe dream. Small classes were awesome.

Sara also mentioned large class sizes as a detriment to effective teaching but considered it unlikely with the teacher shortages. Sam said he was not in a routine as a new teacher, so he was not worried about the timelines as he "was creating everything from scratch anyways." Unlike Sara, he experienced good student engagement and "loved it. There was no babysitting. All teaching was great."

Although the participants had different experiences during the 2020-2021 school year and the Covid-19 pandemic, each was glad for the return to traditional practices. They battled a lack of student engagement and poor social behaviors and continued to see learning gaps. Sara lamented, "It's not how I wanted my first-year teaching to go. I'm going to throw that year away. I'm going to take a new first year because it was not fair to me." Sara is much happier now that she is "actually teaching and not just putting information out to be swallowed up by the abyss." Holly did not view sitting at a desk as good teaching practice but did not want to be "harping on the negative [because] then [she] wouldn't be a very good teacher." Though they continue to battle the socialization and academic gaps created by working during the Covid-19 pandemic, the difficulties incurred affected the participants' early teaching experiences. Despite traditional relationship leadership styles, the lack of leader feedback during this time did not support the participants as well as in a conventional, non-pandemic school year.

Reitman and Karge (2019) explained the need for strong leadership and solid teacher support from mentors and school leaders. The participants were grateful for the opportunity to develop professional and social relationships with peer teachers. All participants described classroom support during their first years as a function of teaching peers rather than school

leaders. Holly described how the English teachers in her hallway share resources, plan and collaborate, and have served as a mentor to her. She said, “there are so many resources, and everybody’s helpful and friendly and welcoming.” She appreciated the department head’s help but noted that a fellow honors teacher had been constructive with lesson planning to address learning gaps from “the Covid year.” Holly never feels as if she “is on an island” alone. Similar to Holly, Joe enjoyed the interaction with his co-teachers. He described it as informal, but “it’s feedback on a weekly basis, really, whenever we’re talking and chatting and figuring out what works best with each of us, and what we’re doing individually and as a unit in the classroom.”

Sara wished for more frequent collaborative interactions and relationships with peers. She regretted not being able to plan collaboratively and share materials with James and another Honors Physical Science teacher. Although most teachers plan collaboratively without designated times, Sara wished the district would provide specific days each week to send students home early so teachers could plan collaboratively. Sara explained:

So, like me and the other teachers that were teaching physical science at the school, we could share our materials and kind of plan. Like, “this is where I’m at. This is what I’m probably going to be doing this coming week. This is where we’re looking to test and doing,” things like that. And it wouldn’t be that we would necessarily be doing the exact same thing at the exact same time. It’d be amazing. But it would have been nice to have other teachers that we could talk it [lessons] through because they’ve all been teaching longer than me. They would have been able to be like, hey, that’s a dumb order. Don’t do it like that.

Sara was assigned a mentor teacher but had not been given much support from this teacher. She felt her department head was available but did not teach the same subject; therefore

not particularly helpful with content. James remembered drowning the first year of teaching with classroom management, a new work environment, and new procedures and expectations. He also wished for a more effective and active mentor program. There once was a strong mentor program at Martinville. New regulations and certifications reduced the number of formal mentor teachers leaving only one to serve all twelve new teachers at Martinville. Although department heads were encouraged to assist the new teachers, there was little consistency, and administrators did not oversee the process.

Clifton (2017) described the role of a leader as having the attributes and style of a coach and concluded relational leaders were effective in engaging workers and knowing an employee's strengths. As Clifton (2017) concluded, the participants who coached engaged their athletes academically, socially, and in sports through relationships. The participants reflected on the importance of relationships between students and coaches. For example, Joe coaches girls' volleyball and baseball. He shared about coaching:

I feel like I have already made an impact on certain kids as far as just constantly being there for them. They see me more sometimes, especially if I have them in class and stuff, sometimes more than they see people at home. So just constantly being a positive voice in their life and pushing them just to really be better people, not even worrying about what comes on the playing side of it.

Joe, Holly, Sara, and Sam were all athletes in school, and each mentioned the importance of the relationships and skills learned from participating in school athletics. Sam sponsored an e-sports team and described why he believes having this relatively new genre of team sports is critical for student growth.

Team sports teach you more about life than anything in your formative years. Your parents talk to you and teach you all day, but you learn how to be a teammate. You live through what it means to be accountable for your friends and yourself and to be competitive and to want more from yourself, and to have an edge. A lot of life lessons are learned on the field, and a lot of kids don't ever go on a field. I know these kids don't play sports, but these kids work together on a daily basis, and they're learning how to communicate. They're learning how to talk to each other. They're learning how to work together. They're learning how to set goals and be competitive and expect a lot of themselves.

James, who is not athletic, also discussed the importance of coaching and athletics:

I did not realize how much sway coaches could have. But it is true, and to see that interconnectedness, where, if you know the student well enough, you could say, "well, this coach needs to hear about this," and that changes everything, and it's like a new door has opened. It shows a high level of respect from the students toward their coaching staff and a high level of excellence on the coaches to have earned that respect.

Similar to coaching, relationships between teachers and leaders are equally valuable. Sam felt comfortable with all of the administrators. He said, "I think that they would listen to me, and even if they don't know what the heck I'm talking about, would probably give me some kind of advice or tell me who to go to for potentially better advice." He thinks that leaders make an effort to not add to the teachers' already full plates and give deadlines with appropriate notice. Holly does not feel "friendship close" with administrators at Martinville but is "comfortable enough to go to them in school." She was close to the principal's wife, who worked with her dad, but generally felt close to all four administrators and found them helpful. Joe is closest to the

principal as they are both Auburn fans and played college baseball. He said they talk sports almost every day. He mentioned the benefits of having “personal side conversations that have nothing to do with work and being able to connect on a different level” as a barrier cutter between teachers and leaders.

Several participants mentioned how the actions and expectations of administrators set up the school’s culture. “this high school has a feeling of family,” James said, “and I think administrations help with that message. So, it starts from the top down there; modeling anything starts from the top down.” Holly relied on her department head and commented, “I feel like her leadership on our hallway streams down from your [the administration] leadership across the school.” When talking about the administrative team at Martinville, Joe described it as a ‘positive administrative unit’ that reaches the “pinnacle of culture and climate.” James elaborated:

A bar of excellence is set [by the administration], and then you hold your upper echelon to that, and everybody falls in line toward that goal. And I really felt that from the beginning. It’s the same way in a family. There’s a comfortability with that; it’s not just like we’re in this together, but like you’re you can be comfortable here.

Jones (2020) found that successful relational leaders conceptualized teachers’ emotional and psychological states as showing empathy, balanced school climate, rigor needs, and recognized transparency and communication obligations. The principal of the school was hired in Holly’s junior year. She remembered how he added a sense of community and faith “without, you know, stepping over the legal limits.” Sara appreciated the autonomy in her classroom despite her struggles with pacing. She felt supported by the assistant principal, who is over discipline and thinks, “the administration as a whole is very supportive, and I probably don’t

utilize him as much as I could.” Another assistant principal, the previous science department head, often checks on Sara and provides her course standards, helping with Canvas and unit plans. “She comes in all the time. She’s wonderful. They [the students] behave so much better when she’s in there. Most days, it’s sheer chaos,” Sara explained. Holly described administrative relationships as “not necessarily like friendship close, but I’ve definitely felt . . . , comfortable enough to go to them in school.” Holly, like Sara, appreciated support from assistant principals when communicating with parents about conflicts. James also mentioned communication as a relational aspect of leadership. James and Joe appreciated the helpfulness given by the administrative staff, being timely and unassuming. James likes that administrators are willing to find answers even if the question is not “in their zone.” Joe also mentioned administrators, “help me out whenever, if there is ever anything, you all work with me and get it taken care of ASAP.”

Discussion

Uhl-Bien (2006) defined relational leadership as a dialogue between members of an organization to construct knowledge systems and principles and saw relationship leadership as a shared, nurtured, and supported decision-making process. She regarded relational leadership as emergent as the behaviors, approaches, or values are constructed based on the ongoing relational dynamics between people in an organization. These individuals, leaders, and followers are in relationships to attain a mutual goal (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Balkar (2015) explained that teachers’ empowerment perceptions depended on the principal’s leadership style and relationship with the administration. She commented that empowerment was both the result and characteristic of organizational culture and concluded strong relationships between teachers and principals resulted in the empowerment of teachers.

Relational leadership is contextual, growing from the sincerity of interchanges within a circumstance (Branson & Marra, 2019). Relational dyads are also contextual, and Uhl-Bien (2004) described the complexity of relational practices as an interaction between leaders and followers in terms of situational context variables, which can have different values in different environments. They maintained relational leaders influence the ultimate acceptance of a leader's vision, and "deeply effective leadership is founded on the reciprocal and dynamic relational processes formed between the appointed leader and those to be led" (p. 101). Employees who willingly follow leaders and become involved allow enacting leadership practices; leadership roles are negotiated through human interactions and relationships (Branson & Marra, 2019).

Smit (2018) described effective school leaders as prioritizing teacher empowerment, acknowledging accomplishments, and maintaining harmony. While describing attributes of relational leadership, she wrote:

Relational leadership also involves relational integrity and responsibility. This sense of responsibility, to be responsive, responsible, and accountable to others in the everyday interactions proposes a moral stance of caring relationships and moral responsibility, which is embedded within relational integrity. This is evident in how principals treat their staff, learners, and the community recognizing their responsibility to act and relate in ethical ways (p. 77).

Moreover, Branson and Marra (2019) suggested a leader's power to influence is strictly based on the dynamics of interpersonal relationships.

Clifton (2017) described a leader's role as having a coach's attributes and style. He suggested that leaders provide basic needs such as benefits and job safety, have collaborative environments, and recognize and reward excellence. He argued that if employees feel valued and

genuinely engaged in their work as stakeholders, productivity will increase, and adverse actions, such as absenteeism and attrition, will decrease. Employees need to believe in a company's mission, vision, and future viability or place of employment (Clifton, 2017). Clifton (2017) recommended leaders give a clear direction of expectations, provide ongoing, focused feedback on performance with goals for the future, and use equitable evaluation practices focusing on achievement and development. He concluded relational leaders were far more effective in engaging workers and knowing an employee's strengths. These leaders provided growth opportunities and recognized achievement, retaining productive employees.

As the literature reveals, administrative support improves retention rates; however, it is necessary to examine how relational leadership, a specific leadership philosophy, impacts teacher attrition and retention. In his study of Georgia schools, Owens (2015) noted that school administrators and district leaders influenced teacher support perceptions, positively affecting teachers' decisions to stay in the classroom. Lasater (2016), Reitman and Karge (2019), and Wigford and Higgins (2019) agreed that relational leadership styles adopted by school administrators, professional development in relational leadership, and a focus on public school educators' well-being were crucial components in the ongoing pursuit of teacher retention. Likewise, Dekawati et al. (2020), in their study on leadership roles in school quality through climate, supported the idea that effective school leaders indirectly improved teacher retention rates through leadership by creating an inviting, positive school climate.

Evidence supports relational leadership as exceptionally effective in reducing teacher attrition. Lasater (2016), an assistant professor at the University of Arkansas in Educational Leadership, described relationships as the cornerstone of educational leadership. In writing about organizational sustainability, Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) styled relational leadership in

morality and ethics in a culture of care. They concluded that relational leaders who establish and maintain caring relationships contribute to thriving organizations. Owens (2015) specifically observed that principals who practiced relational leadership impacted attrition and were critical in reducing other stresses' roles in that decision. Likewise, Farmer (2020), whose study focused on teacher stress, concluded that supportive school leadership and positive relationships were the two most critical variables when predicting teacher retention.

Webb (2018) felt teachers are working in survival mode due to unrealistic demands and advocated for changes to our society's social and political devaluation of relational skills. When teachers can collaborate and connect, transferring or leaving for another career is less likely (Webb, 2018). Ford et al. (2019) also found that teacher relationships with school administrators increased commitment to schools and the profession by analyzing the relationships between teachers' psychological needs and burn-out rates. Spinella (2003) defined the relationship between school leaders and teachers as having mutual respect, providing time to receive peer support, and intervening in bureaucratic tasks. She pointed out that principals who intentionally foster new teachers provide environments that deter attrition. Ingersoll (2004) noted that teacher attrition or turnover is less prominent in schools where teachers have input in organizational factors. Ingersoll (2004) suggested greater administrative support is needed based on data from his research.

Although researchers have concluded that relational leadership is an effective element in teacher retention, developing relational leaders can be problematic without targeted professional development. Uhl-Bien (2006) advocated for professional development devoted to the importance of relationships and developing quality relational skills. Based on the data collected during Dahlkamp et al.'s (2017) study of principals' self-efficacy, they also concluded a need for

principals to develop skills to improve relationships with parents and the community resulting in teacher retention. Lasater (2016) determined school leaders struggled to navigate teacher support roles, and school administrators needed professional development to improve relational leadership. Lasater examined the skills necessary for building-level leaders to build rapport, establish trust, and communicate effectively with their teachers and staff. She suggested that leaders needed to develop productive and collaborative relationships with the community and found a need for professional development on specific aspects of fostering supportive relationships despite diversity barriers in school communities. The Learning Policy Institute (2017) suggested principals participate in extensive professional development to hone collaboration skills, collaborate with peers to support collegial problem solving, intern with veteran administrators, and mentor when able. Lasater (2016) argued that developing highly sophisticated relationship skills would affect professional development ideology.

Ford et al. (2019) focused on another aspect of relational leadership. They concluded that well-implemented professional development contributed to teacher self-efficacy and showed how school leaders impacted teachers' psychological well-being on several levels, resulting in the likelihood of retention. Tran and Smith (2020) took aspects of the need for further training and concluded professional development for leaders in providing differentiated support for new teachers would result in teacher retention. They emphasized building teacher self-efficacy and buffering distracting responsibilities as an administrative task, allowing new teachers to focus on mastering their pedagogy. Administrators who met these self-efficacy needs would see reductions in teacher attrition, even in hard-to-staff schools (Tran & Smith, 2020). In their study of relational leadership, Branson and Marra (2019) agreed that leaders should be taught relational leadership. Their four-stage process included a sincere desire to understand group culture and

become an active member, championing employee accomplishments, encouraging employee self-efficacy, and enabling a growth mindset.

Teachers derive their perceptions of school climate from the school community's culture (Jones, 2020). Therefore, if a teacher does not perceive a leader as supportive and caring, teacher retention becomes problematic for the administrator (Jones, 2020). Jones described relational pedagogy as a social construct created by educators for shareholders to understand the purpose of education and knowledge as it transpires in a community. In a study of principal support, Anderson (2019) noted a new teacher's perception of leadership most prominently predicted decisions to remain in education. She concluded principals who valued teachers as individuals and met development needs retained staff. CooperGibson (2018) found that teachers were less likely to leave the profession if they felt valued and respected.

Jones and Watson (2017) also provided insights into how a principal's leadership style impacts teacher perceptions positively or negatively. They suggested leaders consider adjusting leadership styles to include more attention to relationships based on these perceptions. Urick (2020) studied data from the 2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and found that teachers who perceived shared leadership and frequent interaction with their principal were likelier to stay in their current position. Likewise, principals attuned to the perceptual relationships with teachers positively influence teachers' decisions to remain in education. These principals responded to the teachers' needs, guided their teachers, established the school climate, and prioritized student achievement. Urick found that teachers' commitment to leaders who undertook this role increased, making attrition less likely. She indicated that recognizing teachers' perception of administrative support affected their professional choices. In many ways, the teachers' perceptions of the school climate connect directly to their beliefs about remaining

in the profession, just as their perceptions of leadership (Dekawati et al., 2020). As such, it is necessary next to discuss the interrelatedness of school climate and teacher retention.

Implications

Lasater (2016), Reitman and Karge (2019), and Wigford and Higgins (2019) all cite relational leadership as transformational for school climate; however, we are unaware of relational leadership being a guiding principle for school leadership preparation programs. Typically, servant leadership is one of the main leadership philosophies that are explored within Educational Leadership programs.

Educator preparation programs preparing school leaders should consider the importance of including relational leadership in their curriculum. In doing so, we postulate such an action could impact teacher attrition within the profession, especially among younger faculty.

Moreover, school districts should consider the imperativeness that current school administrators receive professional development discussing the attributes of relational leadership and its influence in teacher attrition. This study's findings overwhelmingly suggest a connection between teacher satisfaction and relationships within the building, especially positive relationships with administrators. Thus, if current administrators are aware of the influence of building positive relationships with faculty and staff, it may impact teachers' decisions to remain in the profession.

Conclusion

Teacher attrition is a challenge across the nation. As schools begin to end their academic year, numerous nationwide districts are still seeking hundreds of teachers to fill vacancies. As a result of the vacancies, class sizes have increased dramatically, which further harms the schooling process. As such, we must reconceptualize how we are addressing teacher retention. If

not, the challenge will only continue to spiral out of control, causing more harm to the education of millions of students across our nation.

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