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Slowing the Burn: Principal Leadership Supports to Reduce Attrition

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PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP SUPPORTS TO REDUCE ATTRITION

Slowing the Burn: Principal Leadership Supports to Reduce Attrition

Growing student populations are placing a strain on schools seeking to hire and retain high-quality teachers (Sutcher, et al., 2016). School reform and accountability policies have negatively impacted teacher recruitment and retention by increasing the level of responsibility placed on classroom teachers for student success (Ingersoll, et al., 2016). In light of a global pandemic, school leaders are now facing new challenges in supporting teacher well-being and retention (Leithwood, et al., 2020). Increased professional isolation due to COVID-19 remote learning is reducing the positive impact of social support on mediating stress (Salas, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Additionally, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) note that fewer new candidates are entering the profession, representing a significant issue for schools, communities, and policymakers.

The purpose of this study is to share the individual stories of how principals perceive and manage the factors that influence teacher stress, burnout, and attrition. The research was guided by the following question: What beliefs, contexts, and experiences shape principals' perceptions of their role in buffering teacher stress, burnout, and attrition? Within this, the researcher sought to narratively describe the factors that principals perceive as having the greatest influence on teacher attrition and how these school leaders approach fostering teacher efficacy and job satisfaction.

Prior studies have shown that principals are able to provide supports that reduce teacher stress and burnout, but few have looked specifically at how campus leaders gauge teacher need and designate interventions to reduce the factors that lead to attrition. Exploring factors that support retention may be complex, as different factors may hold greater importance to each individual (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). In their research on teacher job satisfaction, McCarthy, et al. (2014) shared a need for further research on how principals may best provide differentiated supports based on individual levels of teacher experience and expertise. They note that research into the individual factors that support reductions in stress and burnout could lead to positive changes in the work environment.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping. In this model, stress reactions occur when an individual perceives they are unable to manage the specific demands of a task or situation. In the absence of adequate resources to buffer the response, these demands will develop as stressors. This theory formed the framework for Lambert, et al. (2009) who explored the impact of campus supports on teacher job demands such as administrative duties, access to instructional materials, student behavior management, and diverse learning needs. A related framework was outlined by Demerouti, et al. (2001) in their Job Demands–Resources model where buffering resources counter stress and operate through organizational or social means.

According to Boyd, et al. (2011) teacher perceptions of principal quality is one of the strongest common predictors for individual teacher retention decisions when other school and individual factors are controlled. Principals support retention through systematic means including resource allocation, safe environments, clear organizational goals, and allotting adequate time for professional learning and collegial relationships. Walker and Slear (2011) share that effective principals are able to discern the most appropriate supports based on teacher experience, perceived competence, and expertise.

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Principal Leadership Behaviors

Research on principal leadership behaviors confirms that effective principals can encourage a positive school culture by providing supportive resources that buffer the stressor effect of job demands (Boyd, et al., 2011; Manna, 2015; Price, 2012; Tickle, et al., 2011; Walker & Slear, 2011). Perceived quality of working conditions can play a more significant role in teachers' job satisfaction and decisions to leave than school demographics, student achievement, or salary (Kraft, et al., 2016; McCarthy, et al., 2010; Sutchter, et al., 2016).

Teachers who hold a positive view of leadership quality often feel better resourced, experience higher levels of job satisfaction, and are more suited to meet the requirements of job demands (Lambersky, 2016; Burkhauser, 2017). Similarly, positive perceptions of leadership may also contribute to reduced attrition (Urlick, 2016). Recent research literature confirms the finding that principals can impact teacher perceptions of the work environment through supportive leadership behaviors (Fernet, et al., 2015; Shaw & Newton, 2014; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Supportive leadership behaviors are defined as leadership actions centered on employee's needs, concerns, and wellbeing that provide social-emotional support in the workplace (Cohen & Wills 1985; House, 1981). In the school setting, teachers who feel more ownership and empowerment feel less impacted by job demands and hold greater job satisfaction (Lee & Nie, 2014).

When principals understand the specific job demands that cause stress and burnout, they can provide buffering resources to help shape positive teacher perceptions of the work environment (Burkhauser, 2017). Unfortunately, principals often perceive their leadership behaviors to be more effective than their staff. Goff, et al. (2014) observed significant gaps in perception due to the different ways principals and teachers interpret leadership processes. When alignment in perception is high, Hammonds (2017) noted that principals are better able to assess teacher needs and buffer job demands by improving working conditions. Similarly, Jacobsen and Andersen (2015) shared the importance of principal self-awareness and alignment as teacher perceptions of leadership had a greater impact on school performance than principal perceptions. Research by Urlick and Bowers (2014) supported this claim, as principals were found to shape their leadership approach primarily by school context rather than individual teacher need.

Demands, Resources, and Trust

The decision to remain in the classroom represents a complex interaction between job resources and the stressors that come from job demands (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011; McCormick & Barnett, 2011). While contextual factors play a part in an individual's choice to remain in the classroom, it is rarely a single experience that leads to a decision to leave. Persistent levels of stress due to job demands have been shown as a significant predictor of teacher burnout (Fisher, 2011; Sass, et al., 2011). School closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic have created further instability by blurring the lines of teacher responsibility (UNESCO, 2020). In the absence of supportive resources, the stressors job demands hold a greater effect and may ultimately lead to attrition (Fernet, et al., 2012; Ingersoll & May, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

When job resources are plentiful, stress related to job demands may be greatly reduced (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011; Hakanen, et al., 2006). These resources provide a buffering effect on job demands that cause work stressors that lead to burnout and attrition (Alarcon, 2011; Crawford, et al., 2010; Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2016). Recent research has outlined that environmental factors including working conditions, efficacy, autonomy, collegiality,

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accountability, and leadership play an important part in how teachers perceive the job-related stress (Hughes, et al., 2014; O'Brennan, et al., 2017; Rumschlag, 2017; Ryan, et al., 2017; Thibodeaux, et al., 2015). In these studies, principals were noted as playing a significant role in fostering positive working environments that supported retention.

Teachers often look to their principals for encouragement, respect, and resources for professional growth (Boyd, et al., 2011). According to Handford and Leithwood (2013), teachers' perceptions of principal trustworthiness, openness, and competence play an important part in how they view their work and environment. Building trust involves presence, accessibility, support, and recognition. Aligning principal and teacher perceptions of leadership may be important. Urick (2016) noted that attrition is significantly lower in schools where both perceive high levels of involvement and collegiality. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) reported that teachers had high levels of trust in principals they perceived as approachable, collaborative, and present in the instructional program. The researchers also noted that as teachers build trust in the principal, they also perceived their colleagues to be more collegial, committed, and proficient.

Methods

Principals play a significant part in supporting teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom (Boyd, et al., 2011; Hughes, et al., 2014). In the present study, narrative inquiry allowed the researcher to explore and describe principal perceptions of teacher stress and burnout through participant's own stories. Using a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, the researcher acted as the primary instrument in this study. The interview protocol was developed to provide a consistent initial interview structure while allowing ample space for depth in participant experiences.

Sample Selection

For this study, the researcher selected an urban Texas district with a diverse student population. Teacher attrition for this district was higher than both the state and regional averages and close proximity to smaller districts offered insight the urgency of the issue to district principals. A purposive sampling technique was implemented to provide a non-random selection of participants with extensive experience as campus leaders. Potential candidates were required to have a minimum of five years principal experience with at least two at their current campus. To create a representative sample of the district, the researcher included three elementary campuses, one middle school, and one high school campus of 26 possible schools.

Data Gathering and Analysis

Josselson (2013) shares that narrative researchers should use the interview process to invite participants to create meaningful descriptions of their lived experiences. A series of narrative in-depth interviews lasting approximately 45 to 90 minutes provided the primary data for the field texts. During the interview process, the researcher listened to participant statements and created notes of the emergent themes. Further participant data were collected during follow-up sessions following the initial analysis of participant transcripts. Archival school data provided additional context for the participants' narratives. Data sources included state and federal reports, campus websites, and social media pages.

Using the field texts, archival data, and researcher notes, interim research texts were developed for each participant. Participant quotes and narratives were placed into a matrix to delineate longitudinal connections and relationships (Whiffin, et al., 2014). These narrative episodes were then reorganized into a chronological timeline that served as a basis for participant profiles. Once these initial participant narratives were written, the researcher sent a copy to each

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participant and held a follow-up conference to further clarify and edit the narrative. This process continued until both the researcher and participant considered the narrative to appropriately describe the experience.

Results

The individual narratives revealed how each principal's experiences shaped their perspectives on supporting teacher retention. From these stories, a cross-case narrative was developed to identify common themes which included sources of teacher stress, supportive resources, and the personal impact of campus leadership on teachers' career decisions.

Sources of Teacher Stress

Common stress factors mirrored prior research and included workload, student discipline, and accountability (Hughes, 2012; Ingersoll, et al, 2016; Sutchter, et al., 2016; Van Droogenbroeck, et al., 2014). Workload stress involved pressure to complete job demands within a limited timeframe. Teachers often felt they had insufficient time to complete non-instructional activities such as documentation for special programs, parent contacts, or other administrative tasks. For others, poor organization or classroom routines reduced time for planning and preparation. Shifting student populations added complexity to the issue as teachers worked to design and document more individualized lessons.

Stress due to student discipline was a commonly noted concern as principals felt they needed to balance supporting their teachers with ensuring consistency in practice. Discipline was viewed as a significant source of stress as student behavior directly impacted instruction and the classroom environment. Student discipline also contributed to teachers' feelings of instructional effectiveness and safety as larger behavior incidents distracted from the learning of every student.

The third common stress factor was accountability. At its most fundamental level, accountability represents a systemic process for school and classroom-level evaluation and comparison using standardized measures of student performance (Loeb & Figlio, 2011). Teachers at two of the schools had already experienced sanctions from the state, while others felt pressure to continually increase student performance. Principals shared that increasingly rigorous academic standards contributed to a sense of professional failure among the faculty. A secondary effect was a reduction in collaboration and cohesiveness among teachers as competition increased. Professional isolation impacted new or struggling teachers the most as they were less able to balance job demands with life outside work.

Supportive Resources

Common teacher supports included collaborative relationships, professional autonomy, and peer mentorship. Relational supports are noted in the literature as contributing to increased organizational ownership (Collie, et al., 2012; Hughes, et al., 2014; Thibodeaux, et al., 2015). Each principal shared the importance of relationships when looking to support teacher retention. In terms of supervisory relationships, principals found time spent being visible and present helped create a bridge to more open and honest conversations. When teachers felt trust in their supervisors, they became more open to sharing their needs and concerns. Collaborative peer relationships were also found to reduce stress by enhancing a sense of belonging and advocacy. Teachers who routinely participated in professional conversations with others exhibited a greater feeling of shared responsibility and peer accountability.

Professional collaboration was strengthened by autonomy. As principals released control, they noted teachers worked more to solve problems together. Teachers also felt they had a greater influence on their personal responsibilities. As teams took more shared responsibility

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for decision-making, newer faculty were woven in and able to learn important problem-solving skills. The principals observed that autonomy fostered positive feelings about the work and encouraged a willingness to seek out assistance to reduce stress.

Connecting struggling teachers with mentors was also shared as a common support. Whether an instructional coach, team lead, or grade-level peer, the principals mentioned layering in multiple mentors depending on individual needs. In addition to directly supporting the teacher, mentors provided valuable feedback to the principal about common supports teachers need. Additionally, empowering faculty to take a mentorship role created a pathway for further professional growth for more veteran staff.

Personal Impact

Losing a teacher due to burnout represents a significant loss of time and resources that could be better spent focusing on growing teachers, fostering collaboration, and improving student outcomes (Hanushek, et al., 2016). Beyond the supportive resources principals provide to reduce teacher stress, they also nurture a larger culture of support and collaboration among their staff (Boyd, et al., 2011; Podolsky, et al., 2016; Walker & Slear, 2011). Each of the principals shared about the importance of modeling positivity to help foster collegial relationships. Some worked through motivational initiatives and shared values, while others worked on a more individual level by being present in each classroom. Celebrating successes and verbally appreciating the challenge of being a teacher were noted as having great impact. Similarly, being transparent when communicating initiatives and involving teachers in decision-making processes worked to build trust and ownership.

One activity principals felt was most effective was the development of systemic processes to streamline communication, provide resources, and manage time. Many of the systems worked to maximize time for instruction and planning by supporting discipline, resource management, and communication. Others focused on teacher collaboration including structures for learning communities, professional development, and shared planning. Principals shared a common belief that when teachers feel supported, they will stay.

Discussion of the Findings

Keeping classrooms staffed with high quality teachers has been shown as one of the most significant school-level predictors for positive student outcomes (Hattie, 2003; Podolsky, et al., 2016). Even in times of crisis, research has shown that strong leadership characteristics still have a positive impact on teacher support (Leithwood, et al., 2020).

Guiding Beliefs

The principals shared a set of guiding beliefs that shaped their perspectives on teacher job demands and resources. The first commonly held belief was that principal leadership plays an important role in promoting teacher efficacy and job satisfaction. Principals can have a notable impact on teacher attrition by providing resources that buffer job demands (Fernet, et al., 2012; Manna, 2015; Podolsky, et al., 2016). As a principal's leadership style becomes more collaborative, teachers gain a more positive perspective of their working environment (Fernet, et al., 2015; Shaw & Newton, 2014). These principals considered it important to act as advocates for their teachers.

A second commonly held belief was found in the general factors that principals considered as having the greatest impact on teacher stress. Job demands related to student discipline, workload, and accountability were noted to have the most significant influence. Principals shared that establishing systems for discipline played a direct role in how teachers viewed the work environment. Improved perceptions of school culture often coincide with

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reduced levels of attrition (Boyd, et al., 2011; Ingersoll & May, 2012; Kraft, et al., 2016). Principals observed that teachers routinely felt they had insufficient time to meet the individual learning needs of every student. Levels of teacher stress often grow in line with feelings of inadequacy and fear of sanctions (Ryan, et al., 2017; Thibodeaux, et al., 2015). The principals also felt that accountability pressures impacted autonomy and collaboration (Ingersoll, et al., 2016; Van Droogenbroeck, et al., 2014).

The final commonly held belief was in the resources principals found most effective at buffering stress. Although teacher needs varied greatly based on proficiency, the principals found a layered approach worked best. Prior research has suggested that when ample supportive resources are available, the stressor effect of job demands is significantly reduced (Alarcon, 2011; Demerouti & Bakker, 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2016). The principals focused on resources such as mentors or instructional partnerships that nurtured professional mastery, autonomy, and collegiality to enhance feelings of ownership and belonging. When principals foster these processes, teachers experience reduced levels of burnout and increase feelings of job satisfaction (McCarthy, et al., 2014).

Relational Experiences

Relationships stood at the center of the principals' perspectives. Positive peer relationships can improve job satisfaction and reduce stress by reducing the emotional drain of job demands (Van Droogenbroeck, et al., 2014). Beyond forming personal relationships with their staff, the principals developed systems by which teachers could collaborate and interact in meaningful ways. Whether through formal team meetings or more informal campus culture, the principals understood the importance of developing an internal network of support where peers were able mitigate stress by sharing emotional or physical workload burden.

Research by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) suggested that when administrators pay attention to teachers' sense of belonging, they can mediate leaving decisions. These relationships allow teachers and administrators to learn from each other, gain interdependence, and hold each other mutually accountable for shared decisions (Beltman, et al., 2011; Johnson, et al., 2012). In this way, the principals were creating a circle of care where developing relationships became a shared responsibility.

Implications for Practice

The principals in the present study had systems in place for identifying both individual and school-level teacher stress factors. Using relationships as a foundation, these principals developed formal and informal feedback loops to enhance communication and better understand the needs of their campus. An important implication for principals and practitioners is the need for self-reflection and possible changes in practice related to teacher support. Prior research has shared the positive impact principals can have on teacher stress and burnout when implementing intentional supports (Boyd, et al., 2011; Walker & Slear, 2011). In addition, studies have explored the factors that have the greatest buffering effect on job demands (Fernet, et al., 2012; Hughes, 2012; Sass, et al., 2011). Even with this knowledge, teacher attrition remains a significant issue. This would suggest that leadership practices are inconsistent.

The principals shared their reflective practices for gaining feedback from their staff using multiple channels to gain a fuller picture of specific resource needs. Without intentional feedback loops in place, principals may hold a less accurate view of how their leadership affects their staff (Jacobsen & Andersen, 2015; Urick & Bowers, 2014). Positive change on teacher attrition should begin on the campus level with principals making an intentional effort to provide adequate and appropriate resources to reduce the stressor effect of job demands specific to their

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schools. It may be of benefit to consider the adaptation of principal preparation and certification programs to include a greater emphasis on the relational aspect of teacher recruiting and retention. The perspectives shared by principals in this study were learned in the field rather than through a course of study. While this learning process provided a positive outcome for these principals, average rates of attrition across the country suggest not all campus leaders have had similar opportunities or experiences.

Conclusions

The findings of this study built upon prior research that examined how campus principals impact teacher attrition through supportive resources that buffer the stressor effect of job demands. As Leithwood, et al., (2020) note effective school leaders foster a positive work environment focused on professional growth and support. Future research may consider both teacher and administrator perspectives to provide a richer view of how principals provide buffering resources to reduce teacher stress. One benefit of a combined approach may be to identify areas where principal and teacher perspectives do not align to examine where this breakdown occurs. As each participant shared their experiences, challenges, beliefs, and celebrations, a common story was revealed that echoed similar findings in the literature: teachers stay when they feel their principal listens, allows them professional freedom, and provides needed support.

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