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Jane McIntosh Cooper
University of Houston - Clear Lake, cooperja@uhcl.edu

Sheila Baker
bakers@uhcl.edu

John Decman
University of Houston - Clear Lake, decman@uhcl.edu

Leslie Gauna
University of Houston - Clear Lake, gauna@uhcl.edu

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Exploring Educators' Experiences within School Ecosystems: A Qualitative Inquiry

To a huge extent, several incidents over the past several years marked significant departures from the norm in society and in public schools, both traditional and charter. Incidents of social unrest, the impact of COVID, and political attacks on public education have increased the demands placed upon teachers and school leaders. To exacerbate this, there are additional notions related to public demand for more transparency with increased utilization of an assortment of technological tools (Luthra et al., 2022). As with any organizational stressor, the increased demands placed upon schools have impacted the environments within those schools. School contextual features such as culture and climate have a dramatic impact on teacher professional learning and development activities (McChesney & Cross, 2023). External factors, unfortunately, have deleterious effects on these school contexts.

In 2023, *Kappan*, along with several other sources, reported that teachers are leaving the profession at higher rates than ever before (Pendola et al., 2023). Among the issues cited for the departure from the profession are unsupportive administration, student discipline, and lack of resources. These "dissatisfiers" bring to light the fact that there are multitudes of reasons why teachers leave the profession. A lack of social relationships, additional pressures from workloads, and anxieties from workplace uncertainties lead to adverse impacts on teachers' sense of personal wellbeing (Johnson & Coleman, 2024). These reasons, however, can be summarized into a common theme: teachers are feeling more isolated in their work environments and the ramifications of these feelings have led to significant staffing issues (Heider, 2005; Schlichte et al., 2005), especially since COVID (Goldhaber & Theobold, 2023).

In 2013, White discussed John Dewey's belief that teachers were to function as independent researchers whose inquiry was essentially isolated by the structure of the system of the public school. In the article, White (2013) posited that then-current society demanded a more collaborative view of teaching. In the decade since, the open-systems dynamic of public schools and their interaction with society, as well as the documented exodus of educational professionals to retirement and other careers, has made this argument more critical.

In this particular study, researchers sought to gain insight into the experiences, thoughts, and beliefs of practicing teachers who remain in the field to develop an understanding of the desires, motivations, and coping mechanisms of those professionals who continue in the profession. Through these understandings, the researchers hope to not only inform the body of literature that speaks to the current conditions of the profession, but to provide data points to inform educational leaders and those who are involved in the preparation and ongoing development of educational leaders.

Literature, Context, and Purpose

While teachers are prepared in a similar fashion to lead a classroom of diverse students with individualized needs, some teachers gain additional preparation to become master teachers, or *specialists*, in areas of interest to them. These areas of expertise may include counseling, leadership, library science, literacy, special education, and technology, to name a few. Much like the single thread of a woven tapestry that carries its own strengths, all of these teachers within their schools serve as individuals who possess their own unique experiences, knowledge, and skill sets. Often, however, teachers work in silos within their own disciplines (Heba et al., 2017) and, as a result, are unaware of the knowledge and expertise other teachers possess and how those teachers can support them in their efforts to teach students. Understanding each other's expertise and the ways in which teachers can support each other is critical to cultivating a supportive, collaborative, and enriching environment conducive to student success.

The authors' initial inquiry was to question the interconnectedness of individual educators to and within their school ecosystems in order to gain insight into teachers' experiences and relational connections within the complex tapestry of school ecosystems. Defined as an *interconnectedness* where *information flows* throughout the systems (Niemi, 2016), the study of educational ecosystems has adapted hierarchical sociological theory language (Habermas, 1987), especially surrounding the connectedness of understanding during times of reform or change (Hargreaves, et al., 2009; LeTender, 2018). Understanding interconnectedness as a dynamic interplay of relationships encompassing each individual's knowledge, skills, experiences, relationships, and understandings, we sought to gain practitioner-grounded deep understandings directly from educators to inform practices, policies, and interventions with an aim to cultivate, nurture, and empower cohesive school ecosystems. Teachers, as single threads in the tapestry of the school ecosystem, navigate innumerable interactions and relationships that profoundly influence their personal and professional decisions, attitudes, and well-being. Collaborations between teachers, and between teachers and other members that make up the larger educational community are essential for information flow, a central concept in flourishing educational ecosystems (Biesta, 2006; Niemi, 2021). Initially our inquiry was driven by a commitment to understand how educators' environments either encouraged or undermined their personal or professional values and goals, thus supporting connection or alienation to the educational ecosystem in which they work (Santoro and Hazel, 2022). Educators carry and learn personal-practical-knowledge (Clandinin, 1985) and classroom developed values that fuel their identity and practice. Yet, the realization of these values often hinges on the supportive scaffolding provided by school ecosystems (Kilag et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2019; Wang & Hall, 2019). Thus, this study sought to elucidate how educators' professional values and goals intersect with the dynamics of their work environments, discerning the factors that either nurture or thwart their aspirations. In order to understand the experiences of the educators in their own words, we broadly used *individual relationships and connection within the ecosystem* as a framework to frame our questions, which allowed the lived experiences expressed by the participants to ground (Charmaz, 2010) the larger methodology.

Methods

This study is based upon a larger open-ended exploratory mixed methods survey to understand the ecosystems of schools and experience educators have within them. Texas teachers are served by twenty Education Service Centers (regions) throughout the state. Focused on understanding educators' experiences and how well they supported individuals' values and goals, a mixed-method survey was sent via email obtained through the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to teachers in Region 4, which includes both a large metropolitan area and smaller rural communities. This paper analyzes a qualitative portion of this larger survey. We chose a qualitative survey design to gather varied experiences of teachers where they can explain the details in their 'own words' (Jackson & Trochim, 2002 p. 307), and provide the anonymity to elicit more honest responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Contexts/Participants

An exploratory Qualtrics survey was sent in summer 2023 to Texas educators listed in the database for Region 4, provided by the TEA. While the survey remains open, the data for this report was gathered in October 2023. We had 549 respondents complete the mixed methods survey, of which 426 completed at least one of three open-ended response questions:

1) Please tell me a time/experience where you felt your personal and/or professional goals/values have been met on your campus/district.

2) Please tell me about a time/experience where you felt that your personal and/or professional goals/values have not been met (been thwarted) on your campus/district?
3) Describe a scenario that represents your vision of a supportive and productive campus/district network/ecosystem.

Limitations

This is a qualitative study that has several limitations related to scope and methodology. First, the data for the study was collected from survey results that were obtained during a set period of time. Because of this, the study is limited only to those practicing educators who chose to respond to the survey in the designated window of time. Second, the survey was distributed only to educational professionals in Region 4, in Texas, an area that encompasses the greater Houston and its surrounding communities. Researchers did not choose to disaggregate or categorize the open-ended survey responses by gender, tenure, school or district size, urban or rural district, or other method, as these categories were not defined as relevant to a qualitative exploratory study.

There are certainly many opportunities for further investigations. Researchers may look at categorizing responses by a variety of factors, including those mentioned above, to further describe or identify themes in educational ecosystems. Additionally, the scope of participants may be altered to include a larger pool or a more specific pool

Data Analysis and Validity

The qualitative responses were downloaded from Qualtrics and holistically coded, using a grounded theory adaptation (Charmaz, 2006) by three authors independently. Shared developing codes and themes were discussed and determined conjointly; the three broad themes that were developed and agreed upon during level one coding were *professiona*l, *personal,* and *academic* relationships to the larger ecosystems. Each author then independently defined these codes, then met together to determine each theme's definition conjointly. Due to the varied nature and the amount of data we focused on the theme of professionalism for this report, which,

> refers to the level of respect, recognition, and trust accorded to individuals by others and themselves based on their demonstrated skills, knowledge, experience (longevity and contextually), contributions, and influence within and beyond the professional educational community. Expertise that is valued by others is often demonstrated by professional advancement, advice seeking, professional opportunities, freedom (curriculum and pedagogy), and higher compensation. Self-value is when one can demonstrate agency to have a positive impact on students through curriculum, pedagogy, and personal connections. (researcher memo, January, 2024)

This definitional collaboration effort led to categorizing the totality of responses through axial coding (Charmaz, 2006) which, in turn, revealed three additional subthemes: 1) validation and visibility, 2) voice and agency, and 3) career trajectory. Each author then re-engaged the data to look for further discrete qualities of these themes until saturation occurred. Exemplar participant responses are shared below to elucidate our findings using participants' words. Theoretical triangulation (Stake, 1995) with the findings below bolster the transferability of these findings to different contexts.

Emergent Themes and Findings

Examination of the data has unveiled several emergent themes, providing valuable and often unexpected insights from the participants. The identification of patterns has revealed nuanced relationships that educators have within their institutions with leadership and institutional norms as practiced, experienced, and lived. These emergent themes play a critical

role in grounding the research findings and providing direction for analysis and recommendations for educational leaders.

Validation and Visibility

Participants responded to questions of alignment of professional values and goals within their ecosystem by elucidating experiences validating their professional expertise. The responses from participants highlighted times when participants felt validation through *external* measures through *visibility* and also in the ways they *internally validated* themselves.

External Visibility

Educator respondents saw district and administrative use of assessment metrics as a key indicator to describe their experiences as visible and proof of alignment of professional and personal values and goals. Multiple responses indicated that their expertise as professionals was along the lines of this response, "when 63% of my students received a 5 on their AP exam." This attention to passing rates was also described, but with a slightly different tone in the following statement:

> The only time I feel my professional goals have been met are when I receive my STAAR EOC test scores back and 90-99% of my students have passed. (And I only use this metric because at the end of the day, passing the state exam IS the metric, not because I agree with testing).

Here student test scores are an assessment that the respondent sees as having external value, and perhaps implications for their professionalism, but also one that does not align with their personal teaching values. Describing this tension between personal and professional values, another participant stated, "I worked hard for a full year and went from a 75 passing rate on the AP exam to a 98. No one said a word. I felt unsupported." This responds to both the possible visibility of the standardized measure, while simultaneously expressing disappointment at the lack of acknowledgement from those in the immediate sphere - her own colleagues and administration.

Another respondent echoes these feelings about the desire for external validation of the work done in classrooms by administrators, "most of the time, we teach our hearts out and rarely, if ever receive any feedback, positive or negative." The importance that classroom practice be seen by administrators and have these be validated by feedback, is thwarted in this response, "Well, in my campus, it was already revealed that no one gets 'Exceeds' in all categories [on the teacher assessment rubric]". Other responses showed participants understood that "When administrative or instructional coaches have entered my classroom to see what I am teaching and how I am teaching… that led to me being offered a teaching position with more leadership roles." Participants' demonstrated that visible presence of classroom practice by administrators connects directly to professional expertise.

Our participants' responses showed standardized and informal measures of teaching success are integral to their professional alignment towards success. While some respondents suggested that their success on these classroom measures gave them professional validation, others responses suggest this external measure held less value for them personally.

Many participants saw external validation to their professional goals when they were selected or elected for campus wide accolades and roles like, "being consistently named department chair" or "given the role of helping a teacher new to the school." Other participants referred to visibility within the larger educational community, i.e., "My professional goals were met when I was chosen to present a lesson to the superintendent of the district." Externally recognized specializations came up often, as when this participant stated, "I was recognized for my efforts to

correct certain processes in the SPED department. By the district." The importance of having impact within the larger educational community was echoed by this quote, "I wanted to start an EMT program on campus and [received] for approval from the administration to start one." These quotes demonstrate educators feel like their professional goals are met when their work is acknowledged by or implemented within their educational ecosystems.

Conversely, tension about who listens, hears, and includes educators' expertise is extant in many participants' responses. When a participant states, "I was the primary teacher for developing course curriculum used in the district. It was recognized by peers and District staff over the curriculum, but it was not recognized by the school's administration," one sees that the lack of recognition by administration frustrates the felt connection to their localized school site.

Participants provided clear statements that their professional goals remained unmet when their professional expertise was overlooked or unseen. A dyslexia specialist stated that she felt unheard when "Not being invited to meetings dealing with data related to dyslexia screeners." Another suggested that her professional goals were unmet when she "...wanted to train new teachers, but managing over 20 teachers while teaching 5 preps was unrealistic." This statement does not directly imply being unheard by the administration but rather points to unseen contextual pressures within her role. The comment suggests that she wanted to expand her professional expertise but she was not externally validated to do so. Many responses echoed this idea about constraints to the development of expertise, like being "turned down repeatedly to have district funds pay for state conferences." Growth, development, and recognition of participants' professional expertise that could both enrich participants personally, impact their movement within the field and, ultimately, improve student learning experiences were highlighted throughout our findings.

Overall, participants wanted administrators to "see you [teachers] as peers that they coach and mentor," with both professional expertise, experience, and value. When asked for their vision of the educational ecosystem that would support their values, another participant stated, "seeing fellow teachers and paraprofessionals being recognized on a regular basis for their efforts and successes," which highlights the emphasis on visibility and recognition. Describing professional expertise as unvalued, a participant wrote that "between unreturned emails, lack of recognition, and [being] understaffed, my department is not looked at as 'real teachers' on campus," while another stated that "we are never consulted."

Participants highlighted small practices that exemplify an ideal environment where professional expertise is valued, including, "as a teacher I would have input that is considered equally with that of administration. I would receive information as to why certain decisions were made. This helps me understand the rules better." This reiterates wanting to be seen as professional and being cognizant of actionable information. While many described the larger aspects of visibility and validation, one participant wrote, "my principal believes in me and writes personal notes of the things I do that she likes," suggesting that the small actions also fulfill this professional value and goal for participants.

Internal Validity

While the majority of participants discussed professional values in terms of institutional validity, standardized measures, and visibility for their work, a minority of respondents shared ways they validated themselves. In these responses, teachers looked towards their students, extra school-based groups, or other individuals for validation of personal and professional goals.

Most of the internal validity responses were centered on engaging with students. A representative quote is reported below:

> The only time I feel my personal goals are being reached is when I am working one-to-one with a single or small group of students and we are actually learning about a real topic because I am not trying to meet some arbitrary "learning target" through mass production of lesson delivery at scale (whole class). This does not happen often.

Clearly, self-defined learning goals on 'real topics' are values that this teacher has, while still holding a concurrent tension with standardized pedagogy. Other responses focused less on curriculum but highlighted relationship building as crucial sources of value:

> During COVID my school district started the year with virtual learning. I met with my students online daily each class period. My students and I built a rapport with one another that created a positive learning environment in spite of our circumstances. At the end of the semester several students told me how much they enjoyed being in my class. One of my main goals has always been to create an environment where my students felt safe to express themselves and learn.

This response indicated that the teacher successfully achieved the clear professional goal of creating a "positive learning environment…in spite of our circumstances." Several responses included finding validity by getting feedback from students like when "graduated students return to report on their success in life." Clearly, a connection to students both intellectually and relationally are key motivators and valuable to teachers.

Other participants referenced values that were not centered around teaching per se, but connected to student experience, such as, "[developing] national level drill and color guard teams from a school with low expectations, it proved these kids could make it with vision and solid mentoring." Continuing education experiences and their impact was also cited, "in 2017, I completed my masters of autism…I was able to teach both students and teachers many techniques to use both inside and outside the classroom." Quotes like this are focused on providing students strong educational experiences, but the import was not claimed as valuable because of its visibility by administrators. In fact, some respondents cited an antagonism towards administrative visibility:

> As far as professional goals/values are concerned I find these are most easily met when I meet the least amount of resistance from administration and other adults. Many of the more rewarding aspects of my job come from teaching things that have little bearing on my "success" as an educator and most administrators do not care past the novelty of it.

How teachers understand and interpret their relationship with administration and the conflicting values that begin to emerge in often complex ecosystems is evident in this quote. However, it is clear from the above evidence that educators understood their professional values were met, due in large part to the degree of external validity they received, and to a lesser extent, how they internally validated themselves.

Professional Advancement

Respondents often cited professional advancement and improvement as a key value or goal within our survey. Responses aligned with both supports and constraints to professional advancement both within the sphere of job role or title, as well as skill or professional development (PD). The majority of participants who discussed wanting to move jobs and/or roles expressed frustration with constraints to do so. As an example, this teacher stated she was,

> asked to move down from 8th grade (my jam) to 6th when we got a new principal - because my scores were so good and they needed a strong teacher - I should never have been pressured to move - and was also given a literacy elective after I made it very clear that I hated teaching that course.

Pressure to move to a less than desirable position was mirrored by another teacher who said that "I asked to move up a grade level in order to loop with my students (3rd to 4th) and was not allowed to do so". Participants sometimes made connections between job assignments and their success, "Immediately after the 2020-21 school year, I was given all regular classes despite my success with honors/AP." Expanding on this, unique talents and certifications were sometimes seen as an impediment to getting a desired job promotion:

> My current position has been referred to as a unicorn position. Not many people are certified bilingual and Special Education and want to work in a specialized program. Because of this, I feel I cannot move up because filling my position would be extremely difficult.

Navigating teaching as a career was also deemed difficult based on district-based policies. In citing an ideal educational ecosystem, one teacher stated:

> Teachers are given greater opportunity to move to new and or different positions on different campus [sic]. It is ridiculous how we are held hostage if we do not get a transfer during the unrealistic small window. So little opportunities for teachers.

General frustration at lack of job movement was exacerbated in the responses when those filling the positions not deserving, like "watching my district hire specialist/support personnel that have little to no background in the position they have been hired for" and "I wanted to go back into administration -- but the district/campus was looking for younger." In these quotes, lack of respect for teacher knowledge and experience assessed an undercurrent, as echoed in this response:

> I put in for a transfer position that would be less demanding on my after-hours time. I was hoping to return to school and get my doctorate. The school district didn't even interview me, instead they hired just graduated teachers with no experience.

Another participant discussed her preparation for an available job on campus:

> I spent several weeks with campus admin in what I thought was preparation for an admin position that came open. After three rounds of interviews and a lot of positive feedback, the job was given to someone from another campus.

Here the comment sounds more like a more intimate betrayal, lack of respect for her time, and lack of transparency from those on their campus. Overall, respondents felt that moving jobs laterally and hierarchically was a way to fulfill their professional goals, and that many responses discussed impediments embedded within the structure of school systems regarding their ability to see their careers as ones with opportunities to advance. As one teacher summed up "Once you're a teacher in the district, you normally stay a teacher."

While frustration within the educational ecosystem was most often cited as a key frustration to alignment of participants' professional values, many cited administrative support for their career trajectories as important. Within their educational milieu, participants cited support for both formal and informal leadership roles, like this participant who said her goals were met when her ecosystem "Allowed me to leave instructional coaching for a dream PE role." Another claimed her administration offered "a lot of insight and assistance towards accomplishing my service…while in graduate school to become a principal." Individual administrators were often cited as aiding professional growth, for example, "My dean at the time was deeply invested in giving me opportunities on campus," and "I was supported in my attempt to transfer to another campus. My department chair is very supportive," and,

> During my fourth year of teaching, I had a principal who really believed in me and my ability to lead. She afforded me many opportunities to grow and lead my team. Any

> professional development that I asked for, she granted. Any opportunity to be a better teacher, she allowed me to do so.

While individual administrative support was key to many respondents, several cited experiences of generalized support from those around them for career development. "My district goes above and beyond in supporting teachers with training and encouraging them to move up the professional ladder," and this response both highlight larger members than just administration:

> As I have been seeking further leadership opportunities, the administration at my school has been supportive in providing me with opportunities. The teachers on my campus have been supportive of my growth and have allowed me to observe them and utilize those observations in my growth.

Curricular specializations and unique opportunities for career growth were also often forwarded by participants' responses. When discussing professional alignment of values, one teacher stated that she,

> received strong support from my teaching partners and administrators when working to complete a Master Reading Teacher certification…As a result, I was able to provide interventions on my campus, professional learning for my district, and strong support to my fellow teachers.

While formal certifications and specializations were most often attached to professional advancement, equally important, but less often, are informal connections that may lead to opportunities for development, like this respondent states:

> Working at an Early College High School, I was able to join adjunct faculty at the partnering Community College, easily giving me options to venture into a career at that Community College.

Other informal opportunities to take on leadership skills were mentioned by participants. "I was on a campus where a principal believed in growing and fostering teacher leaders. He allowed teachers to create programs and implement them. He also allowed teachers to lead district initiatives." While no formal accolades, or job titles were associated with this, the ability to learn about professional leadership through informal means was often cited as professional growth.

Professional advancement involved mainly the existence of opportunities for formal pathways within the educational hierarchy, while to a lesser extent the more informal opportunities to learn, network, and lead. Constraints to movement caused frustration, while ecosystems that supported professional advancements aligned deeply with professional values of our respondents. This leaves open questions surrounding authentic available career pathways and ways to fulfill this goal for educators.

Voice, Understanding, and Agency

Participants responded to questions regarding the alignment of their professional values and goals within their ecosystem by emphasizing the importance of being trusted as conduits for effective educational practices. Within this theme, one aspect, termed "voice" or understanding, describes experiences of being understood or misunderstood, as well as being listened to or ignored by those around them, especially the administration, concerning these educational practices. The other component, agency, describes participant accounts of experiences that either allows or disallows the conditions of agency in which to fulfill their educational goals. Participants perceived these subthemes as essential for achieving their personal and professional goals.

Voice and Understanding

Respondents to this survey highlighted how their specific personal-practical-knowledge (Clandidnin & Connelly, 1998), or the understanding of teachers as knowing and knowledgeable about their professional educational landscape, was a critical component of feeling their professional values were met or not. The knowledge that teachers alluded to most often included their teaching expertise or their contextual site-based knowledge.

Several educators' responses suggested that being listened to, having voice, while decision-making about their particular teaching subject and classroom were important. As one participant stated, "I need[ed] help with a specific class and my specialist asked if I would benefit from push-ins or pull-outs. This helped with the needs of students and behaviors!" Consulted about a classroom-level decision resonated with broader campus-level decisions as another respondent discussed, as a response to when they felt they were valued, "At the meetings with the principal when something that I say is valued and taken into consideration."

Opportunities to feel heard or listened to was also discussed under the context of "Sharing during lesson planning PLC and attend [sic] workshops" expanding places where having voice matters.

Responses from participants also saw formative feedback aligned with administrative walkthroughs as a form of being heard or understood. "My current administration visits my class weekly and gives positive and helpful feedback. They are the most helpful and supportive people I have ever worked with." While voice here is defined on the passive side of being heard, it is clear that this respondent sees formative feedback on class walkthroughs as a conversation where her craft is being 'heard' or understood. Participants' responses suggested that having a voice in decision making and being understood was positively aligned with their professional values being met.

The vast majority of the responses, however, described instances where participants felt they had no *voice*, their professional expertise was not consulted, their opinions not solicited, or their work was not or mis-understood. When responding to the prompt of describing an experience when their values were misaligned one participant stated, "My opinion and others are not taken into account or in consideration." Another proclaimed, "almost daily as a sped teacher, we aren't listened to when that is our area of expertise," while a third revealed, "recently, [I] had an incident within the classroom that I feel like admin needed to know about. [I] Reached out to the admin [sic] and was dismissed as if my situation was irrelevant." Another veteran teacher wrote:

> In my current district, I have returned to the classroom. My content appraiser doesn't listen to me. It's frustrating that after being in education for so long and learning so much, that a first-year assistant principal constantly disregards my professional expertise.

These responses exemplify situations in which educators' professional expertise, experience, and judgment were disregarded, resulting in participants emphasizing these experiences when describing a misalignment of their values with their teaching contexts.

Lack of understanding or misunderstanding was a subtheme that was also expressed often in the responses. A respondent describes an experience, "when new curriculum from College Board is thrown at us by the leadership who does not clearly understand the timely expectations required to be successful…" It is suggested that decision-makers do not take into consideration or lack understanding of what it might take to complete a particular initiative. Aligning with this concept, another teacher wrote:

> A year when we had suffered an unexpected loss of a teacher in my department meant that I had to prepare my own lessons and the lessons of the missing teacher for the

> substitute teacher and help grade completed work, yet was downgraded on my appraisal that year for not meeting deadlines or having sufficient documentation.

This furthers the notion that the individual position and experience of the teacher are not understood, taken into consideration or overlooked while something as important (to the individual) as appraisal is made. Lack of understanding around pedagogical concerns is highlighted by another respondent. “I faithfully implement district initiatives in the classroom. My evaluator never seems to be up-to-date on current practices and fails to recognize when I'm using new strategies successfully.”

Rationales for the misunderstanding of teachers or their context expertise are alluded to in this veteran teacher’s response, “The constant rotation of administrators has generated 10 principals in 22 years and each come in with a plan to micro-manage instead of learning the strengths and weaknesses of what they have.” This quote, which echoes throughout several other responses, suggests lack of understanding stems from turnover at this campus. This theme of lack of understanding intensified at the district level is represented by this participant:

> A number of us expressed our displeasure with his statement by booing him. He threatened the audience [at a district board meeting] by saying, “If this happens again we will find out who you are and you will be taken out.” The ability to disagree is an important part of education and this ability was denied by the appointed superintendent.

It is evident that a gap between what and whose knowledge and voice should be counted and heard comes into play in these quotes. The following response highlights how teacher knowledge would be valued in an ideal educational ecosystem. A respondent shared that schools should be,

> teacher-driven with administration in support roles. Right now, everything is top-down. However, the teachers are the ones on the front line doing the day-to-day work. They are the ones with the best insight into what needs to be done and how.

In fewer instances, being unheard or misunderstood by campus and district-level personnel expanded into the larger community. A teacher with over 20 years of experience shares what led to her retirement:

> …due to the high stress levels and unreasonable demands of teachers nationwide. I went into teaching and education as a young college student hoping to have an impact on future generations of students/young people. However, since I began teaching in the late 1990s, the teaching profession has been treated [as] worthless by most involved. Lawmakers, school administration (on campus and in admin offices, and most importantly, parents and the students).

The lack of understanding at all levels of the internal and external educational ecosystems caused distress for many respondents. Conversely, believing that their voices are heard and their practices understood by their local and district administration and community stakeholders, supported teachers in feeling connected to their profession.

Agency

The agential ability to make and enact decisions in educational ecosystems was an essential element that survey respondents cited as affecting their professional values. Curriculum development and pedagogy as well as standardized and quickly changing practices were most cited as affecting their values and beliefs.

Most respondents voiced concerns over lack of agency in curricular development and implementation in their classrooms. Conflicts with standardized curriculum were often mentioned in responses like, “District leaders wanted all teachers to do the same thing, and we were told not to do anything except what we were told, limiting autonomy and creative

ambitions, and stifling out-of-the-box ideas when data was not good," and "The ISD has made teachers into robots reading scripts and showing slides to students. We are not allowed to accommodate student learning needs. It's sad," and "Too many principals and administrators don't recognize the many methods good teachers use to connect with and provide instruction to the variety of students we teach. They say they do, but it all too often becomes "one size fits all" in terms of teacher evaluations, instructional practices, etc." All of these responses reflect tension teachers felt with standardized curriculum and pedagogy. The implication that there is an emphasis on standardized curricular practices when test scores are low and "when the data isn't good" had a generalized negative effect on teachers' sense of connection to their professional craft.

Respondents often connected lack of curricular agency to poorer student outcomes, a deeper value. One teacher stated that, "I don't have the freedom to do what is best needed for my students to be successful. I must stick to the script no matter what." Another teacher said that her ideal educational ecosystem would be one where, "just being able to have the flexibility to work with my students how they need to learn. Having my campus trust that I am making the right decision for my students." Another noted that her educational ideal would be where,

> teachers are given the autonomy to teach … using any resources available to them to engage students through their interests, and these skills are tested in the way they were learned, not on a standardized invalid instrument that is designed to maximize profit while barely meeting the metrics required to maintain funding.

Standardized curriculum belied core teaching goals of student learning. Other responses cited administrative demands as the main cause for lack of agency in their practice. One respondent stated:

> My professional values have not been met when asked to complete redundant lesson planning to prove to the district and admin that I am doing my job. I create the lesson plans and upload them to Canvas for parents and students. Now I must fill out another form to prove I have uploaded the plans.

The redundancy cited here suggests that administrative tasks that 'prove' one is working takes away from time doing the work they value, which involves students. This quote also forwards the idea that individual teachers are not trusted and need administrative monitoring is echoed by the response that a district "thwart people often by being controlling and judgmental. They come into our classrooms all the time and instead of believing the best they look for the worst." This strain of professional distrust is furthered by the ideal ecosystem that has "Less micromanagement… especially of veteran teachers with over 20 years of consecutive self-contained classroom teaching experience." In these responses there is a clear perception of being untrusted regardless of experience or expertise.

Distrust of teachers was met in some responses, reciprocally, as a mistrust of administration, especially when not conforming with expectations. These examples of mistrust were always coded negatively. One participant stated that "when being observed, if you deviated from those plans you had a meeting to discuss why," highlighting the accountability to another when enacting agential decisions in a classroom. Another respondent reported heightened but similar implications decision-making regarding grades:

> Anytime you try to record honest grades you're pulled into the office and berated for your failure rate. Then the administrative violence starts. Constant walkthroughs, threats, being set up for failure with problem students so they can make you the scapegoat. These practices are common and the norm.

The results of grading practices like these upon student learning are noted by another respondent, whose insight into their class resulted in lack of respect or agency:

> I identified a student in August who was struggling and got the run around from his counselor, the RIP [Regional Intervention Program] specialist, and then from teachers who gave him a 70 so they didn't have to deal with the potential problems. It came as no surprise to me that although he only failed my class, he failed all his 8th grade STAAR test with minimal correct responses. The boy couldn't read.

Threats to nonconformity are highlighted when teachers report "we are working in fear of being the next target. It is hard to do your job well when you have to watch your back." The majority of responses regarding standardization of curriculum, pedagogy and administrative paperwork are summed up with the following quote responding to an ideal teaching ecosystem:

> Ideally, teachers (professional educators) should be trusted to conduct themselves as such instead of the micromanagement that is so pervasive. We naturally consult other colleagues regarding lesson ideas, strategies for reaching students, and data analysis. Forcing these practices into regulated meetings with precise protocols that require excessive paperwork and countless hours outside of contract time is not natural and needs to stop.

This comment highlighted notions of valuing teacher inquiry and collaboration to reach their students through authentic collaboration, while another suggested that administration could work on "finding ways to cut down on needless meetings and paperwork in order to focus on students and pedagogy."

These ideal scenarios highlight the overwhelming responses of participants who forwarded agency and voice key professional values. The ways that they were heard and understood, and the variety of ways in which they could act as agents within their professional milieus were key indicators of connection to their professional ecosystems.

Discussion and Recommendations

The findings represent the responses from a unique context, both in time and space. Based on the resonances of the reports from our participants with the literature on teacher retention as well as our lived experiences, we feel that recommendations are transferable (Stake, 1995) to other contexts.

Significant research points to the importance of school administration in teacher retention (Boyd, et al., 2011; Doromal & Markowitz, 2023; Tran, et al, 2023; Zhan, et al., 2023). The role of the school principal and the climate and culture that the principal supports have an enormous impact on perceptions and attitudes of teachers and students in the school. Because of this, it is vital that school leaders understand teacher desires, motivations, and experiences, and types of leadership activities that function to enhance school climate and culture.

There are three distinct themes from this study that are particularly salient. The first is related to the concept that teachers expressed a desire or need for reinforcement, validation, and respect. The reinforcement that teachers described, however, is not the objective "atta boy" or "atta girl," but rather the reinforcement that is derived from relational interaction. This interaction, according to Morris and Imms (2021) is dependent on exchanges in which teachers perceive themselves as being viewed by their administrators in multiple dimensions. That is, when teachers see their identities and values as multidimensional and not just tied to their position or function in the school, they are more likely to be invested in the school, its mission, goals and culture. The perceptions of identity are tied to the many interactions that teachers have with their peers, students, and principals. Personal and professional relationships are vital in

helping a teacher feel successful and choose to remain in the teaching profession (Kaufman et al., 2011).

There is a prevalent research-based concept underlying the emergent themes of the relationship between principal behaviors and teachers' willingness to continue to invest in the education profession. Tran et al. (2023) found that principals need to be aware that teachers view principal behavioral indicators of respect through multiple lenses. While positional behaviors such as trusting the professional practice decisions of their teachers and valuing instructional time are listed as important, of additional significance are personal behaviors associated with connecting with teachers as people and having transparent communication.

At the core level, teachers perceive two vital aspects to professional respect: sincere relationships and the attachment of importance to their existence (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2006). The principals' respect for teachers was generally observed in congenial behaviors such as being open to communication, listening to their opinions, tolerating differences, and treating them fairly (Güngör et al., 2013). These behaviors are not only perceived by teachers. In schools, students see teachers and principals, and their behaviors, as the main agents and examples of kindness (Binfet & Passmore, 2019). The concept is mutually beneficial as teachers who place a greater value on relationships with students report higher levels of job satisfaction and lower intentions to quit the profession (Wang & Hall, 2019).

According to Badgett and Decman (2019), it is the responsibility of the school leader to create inclusive cultures and to extend these cultures to address the well-being of both the students and the staff. This inclusivity is tied to a leadership style that is perceived as both democratic and aware of and responsive to emotional behavior (Hoque & Raya, 2023). The attributes tied to being responsive to emotional behavior circle back to the basis of the definition of respect: appraisal of and consideration of others' feelings and thoughts (Güngör et al., 2013).

The active effort of school leaders to engage teachers in such a way that the teachers are invested in school priorities is an effective approach to reducing staff burnout. The important concept for school leaders is to understand that the inclusive culture is not limited to the school environment, but rather there is a give and take between the "closed system" of the school and its interaction with the surrounding community, be it a neighborhood, city, state, nation, etc. In short, school leaders need to understand that schools do not exist in closed systems. The interaction between school environments and outside environments describes open-systems theory. Outside-of-school actors play a role, positive and negative, in school culture. This is known as opens-systems theory. and the establishment and maintenance of relationships with an understanding of the interactions between the school and the larger society allow for a psychological safety that has become much more essential (Fleming et al., 2023). The understanding of the open-system aspect of the school is essential because this understanding necessitates a valuable impetus for collaboration and its positive results. When teachers view principals collaborating with different staff members, principals are seen as more supportive and the school is seen as being less vulnerable to outside influences (Rock et al., 2017).

A second emergent theme is related to the idea that teachers have a need to grow professionally. Whether described as job experiences, titles, positional advancement or professional development opportunities, teachers linked the perception of opportunity to a willingness to be professionally invested. In obvious ways, this perception is closely tied to the previous theme, as it relates to respect. The ability to feel respected, both as a professional and as a person is, in part, based on the teacher's perception of unbiased behavior from the principal (Güngör et.al., 2013). When a teacher is passed over for an opportunity, there is the possibility

that the teacher will perceive that decision as unjust or a restrictive behavior from the principal. There is a direct relationship between principal restrictive behaviors and the intentions of teachers to leave the profession (Guo et al., 2024).

On its face, the perception that leads teachers to feel a lack of respect is a classic example of Herzberg's two-factor theory. Because job satisfaction and dissatisfaction exist on two different continua, an otherwise content (motivated) employee may experience an increase in job dissatisfaction due to the failure or lack of a hygiene factor (Miner, 2005). In this case, motivators such as recognition, advancement, and growth are replaced by the hygiene factors (demotivator) related to working conditions and relationships.

With this in mind, it is essential for the building leader to understand the importance of professional growth as a motivation for teachers to be invested in the profession. In many ways, the affective behavior (relationships) discussed in the first emergent theme plays a role, not only in informing the principal about teacher aspirations, but also in creating a personal capital that enhances job security and work conditions. Morris and Imms (2021) found that teachers who identify as educational practitioners have stronger retention aspirations than teachers who identify solely as teachers. Because of this, principals and other school leaders may consider intentional behaviors such as delegation, shared decision making, distributed leadership, and other practices that function to leverage the expertise and perspectives of teachers in the school. These intentional behaviors are aligned with other factors, such as trust, concern for well-being and collaboration, that have a positive impact on teacher engagement (Thoonen et al., 2011). The democratic leadership style that leads to shared or distributed leadership behavior conveys to teachers that principals are not only aware of, but also that principals are responsive to teacher emotional behavior (Hoque & Raya, 2023).

The third emergent theme from the study is that of the importance of voice and agency. This theme expresses a sense of trust in educators as conduits of good education. The term "voice" refers to the expressions that show that the individual's professional experiences are understood by those around them, particularly the administration. Concepts such as trust, understanding, transparency, and autonomy are often utilized to approximate the content of this theme.

These concepts are frequently found in literature that relates to factors in organizational climate. In fact, climate is often mentioned by teachers as a factor that plays a role in job satisfaction. As a concept, climate is assessed through a variety of published tools and surveys. Among these is the Organizational Climate Index (OCI) which assesses trust at multiple levels, but specifically aspects of faculty trust in principals (Hoy et al., 2002). Additional measures of trust found that principal-teacher trust has a significant impact on teacher-teacher trust (Christophersen et al., 2011). This is important because teacher-teacher trust is linked to peer collaboration.

While school leaders have the ability to create infrastructures that allow for tools such as collaboration, this ability must be teamed with intentional administrative behavior that voices and models shared organizational goals. Wang and Hall (2019) warned that initiative and interventions are often insufficient to have a meaningful impact on teacher persistence if the leadership values that accompany those initiatives or interventions are not shared by the teachers. The concept of "value congruence" is important because it provides leaders with a clear direction about the types of behaviors that have the most impact on supporting teacher well-being.

The shared values relate back to the first and second emergent themes when one considers leadership behaviors that formulate positive teacher perceptions. While previously

discussed, shared leadership is an example of democratic leadership in which the school leader behaves with intentionality in giving opportunities for input and feedback. Not only do these activities foster a sense of engagement, but they also are the most significant predictors of principal trust (Kars & Inandi, 2018). Trust in principals and involvement in participatory decision making play a significant role in relationships that are essential to a positive, healthy school climate (Cansoy et al, 2020). Even with leaders who practice transformational leadership (a more leader-centric form of team leadership), trust in the principal and teacher job autonomy are essential to positive teacher work performance (Khan, 2023).

The issue of trust is paramount to the third emergent theme, and is intrinsically tied to the first and second emergent themes. Trust is a necessary, yet fragile, part of human relationships. Cognizance of the fragile nature of trust and the consequences of this fragility for school settings is necessary for school leaders (Walker et al., 2011). Teachers must be in trusting situations for school climates to be considered healthy. Teacher trust has a sizable impact on student learning and school leadership has a large effect on teacher trust. Supportive, collegial types of school leadership have the largest effect on teacher trust (Sun et al, 2023). According to Kars and Inandi (2018), democratic leadership is the only significant and positive predictor of trust in colleagues, students, and parents.

Finally, it is difficult to consider the emergent themes without considering the personal and professional values that a principal must have to effectively manage and lead the many facets of the school environment. Teacher trust and willingness to actively invest in the school are significantly impacted by their perceptions of the principal's morality and benevolence (Cansoy et al., 2020). Moreover, teachers who perceive their administrators as valuing altruism, job security, and autonomy are less likely to quit the teaching profession (Wang & Hall, 2019).

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