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A SENSE OF BELONGING: AN EXAMINATION OF THE IMPACT OF
LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS ON TEACHER MORALE IN RURAL MIDDLE
SCHOOLS

By
Taquilla L. Barksdale

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University College of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University
2022

Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Taquilla L. Barksdale under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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Abstract

A SENSE OF BELONGING: AN EXAMINATION OF THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS ON TEACHER MORALE IN RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOLS. Barksdale, Taquilla L., 2022: Dissertation, Gardner Webb University.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to shed light on the importance of addressing low teacher morale and provide methods for improving teacher morale through leadership behaviors. This study was designed to determine the leadership behaviors that will best heighten morale as perceived by middle school teachers. Thirty-nine teachers who teach middle-level grades (Grades 6-8) in rural areas completed a survey. The survey had 18 leadership behaviors. The teachers ranked the leadership behaviors within five leadership responsibilities based on the behavior's importance to them. The five leadership responsibilities categories were based on the Wallace Foundation's (2013) research. Instructional leaders, distributive leadership, school climate, data analysis, and building teacher capacity were those five leadership responsibilities. A focus group followed the survey. The theoretical framework chosen for this study is Abraham Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. This theory is used to examine the relationship between teachers and school leaders. I identified seven leadership behaviors as the most important for leaders to exhibit. The data collection developed five themes from the survey and the focus group conversation. The themes indicate what teachers in small rural areas who teach middle-level grades need from the school leader.

Keywords: teacher morale, middle school, leadership behaviors, leadership styles

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Teacher morale is a significant factor when creating a positive school climate where student achievement is paramount. According to Steele and Whitaker (2019), “a happy teacher is a more effective teacher” (para. 1). Without teachers, there would be no school. School leaders would not have the human capital needed to impact student achievement. Educational leaders must care for their professional staff by providing a favorable climate to teach and grow. The best leaders spend time learning what motivates their followers and partner that data with the school needs to create an environment conducive to success (Gyang, 2018).

While student achievement is a focal point for school leadership, leaders would be remiss not to realize the effect teacher needs have on student achievement. Schools that perform at a high quality have effective leaders who positively impact teachers. It is commonly thought that principals directly influence how satisfied teachers are, and research has concluded that all effective schools have strong leaders. Principals are the tone setters in the building; therefore, they hold great influence on teacher job satisfaction (Shen et al., 2011). Perception is the reality for staff. Professional staff will perceive to which degree they are cared for, and their contributions are valued by leadership. This type of perception is ultimately known as perceived organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Perceived organizational support was related to extrinsic job satisfaction—consideration of work conditions when determining job satisfaction.

A 15-year study was done by Hallinger and Heck (1996) about how principals affect teacher morale and student success; the results showed school leaders hugely contribute to student academic success and teacher morale. Pagano (1989) randomly

selected 116 middle school teachers to survey about various leadership behaviors of principals. The study results described two differing leadership style components; there was either a concern for production or a problem for the people. A study conducted by Senechal et al. (2016) showed that morale is connected to the conditions of the workplace and the feelings connected to their experiences at work. It also revealed that morale is tied to teacher ability to foster self-efficacy.

In this research, I explored leadership behaviors. These leadership behaviors can be found in three types of leaders (transformational, transactional, and situational) and the leadership behaviors connected to each of them. According to Bass and Riggio (2005), transformation leaders “stimulate and inspire followers to both achieve extraordinary outcomes and, in the process, develop their leadership styles” (para. 1). Transformational leaders consider every individual, inspire, are role models, and help followers grow. Figure 1 shows how transformational leadership means the leader provides inspirational motivation, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

Figure 1*Transformational Leadership*

Note. This image was developed to show the different characteristics of a transformational leaders. From “Transformation Leadership: A Closer Look at the Effects of Transformational Leadership,” by K. Cherry, 2020a.

As illustrated in Figure 1, transformational leaders are actively involved in motivating followers for the benefit of the individual and the organization. According to Cherry (2020a), “Transformational leaders are able to inspire followers to change expectations, perceptions, and motivations to work toward a common goal” (para. 3).

The second leadership style behaviors are related to transactional leadership. According to Burns (1978), transactional leaders lead under the idea of exchanging one thing for another. Transactional leaders are not as flexible as other leaders. Leaders must set an expectation and reward followers for reaching expectations. For example, the leader may exchange a stipend for students reaching a growth goal. Exchanging rewards

is short-term as standards may continue to fluctuate. Figure 2 shows the characteristics of transactional leadership.

Figure 2

Characteristics for Transactional Leadership



Note. This figure was developed to show the stages of transactional leadership. From: “Transactional Leadership, Meaning, Importance, and Example,” by MBA Skool Team, 2021 (<https://www.mbaskool.com/business-concepts/human-resources-hr-terms/17820-transactional-leadership.html>)

As displayed in Figure 2, the cycle moves from reward performance to external motivation. Workers are externally motivated through promotions, stipends, recognition, bonuses, and raises. Cherry (2020b), noted, “this theory takes a behavioral approach to leadership by basing it on a system of rewards and punishments” (para. 4). When workers meet expectations, they are awarded; when they do not meet expectations, they are punished or reprimanded (Cherry, 2020b).

Last, I examined behaviors from the situational leadership style. Hershey and Blanchard (1981) suggested no one leadership style is the best style for everyone. Their situational leadership theory is described as a leader's ability to use specific techniques to meet the needs of their followers. Figure 3 illustrates the factors leaders consider before determining the leadership style that is needed for each employee.

Figure 3

Situational Leadership



Note. This image was developed to the various components of situational leadership.

From "The Situational Theory of Leadership," by K. Cherry, 2020b

(<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-situational-theory-of-leadership-2795321>).

Situational leadership requires leaders to get to know their followers. They will need to know what their followers are able to do and what their followers are willing to do. Cherry (2020b) stated,

According to this theory, the most effective leaders are those that are able to adapt

their style to the situation and look at cues such as the type of task, the nature of the group, and other factors that might contribute to getting the job done. (para. 1)

By exploring different facets of leadership behaviors, an opportunity may create awareness for leaders in middle schools. Leaders must take inventory of their leadership behaviors to adequately assess and address the deficiencies in improving working conditions. According to the Wallace Foundation (2013), “The modern principal must be a master of high stakes standardized testing, know how to read data produced from the tests, and implement top yielding strategies to close the achievement gap” (p. 6). The Wallace Foundation found that there are five major responsibilities of school-based leaders:

1. Principals must set high expectations for all students to be academically successful.
2. Principals must create a hospitable climate in the school where students and staff feel safe and learning can take place.
3. Principals must create leaders throughout their building so staff realize their position in upholding the vision.
4. Principals must build teacher capacity to ensure teachers are teaching their best and students are learning from the best.
5. Principals must be able to analyze data to determine improvement needs and create plans (The Wallace Foundation, 2013).

These responsibilities became a focal point for this study.

Statement of the Problem

Teachers are an essential part of the education system. They are responsible for

educating students and motivating them to reach academic success; however, teachers need motivation as well. Harvey (2014) stated, “surveys indicate that teacher satisfaction has declined dramatically in the last five years” (p. 24). Principals are responsible for encouraging teachers. “Leadership plays an integral role in building positive school climate” (Smith, 2016, para. 2). The best leaders of any organization spend time determining what motivates their workers to impact their performance. To continue to attract teachers to the profession and retain them in education, an investigation must be completed to determine which leadership styles may heighten the morale of teachers.

Effects of Low Morale

“Morale can be defined as the professional interest and enthusiasm a person displays towards the achievement of individual and group goals in a given job situation” (Govindarajan, 2012, p. 57). Many contributing factors affect teacher morale negatively. Teacher responsibilities have grown. Teachers are expected to be teachers, nurses, and social workers. Juggling so many responsibilities causes teachers to be stressed, and “stress affects teacher morale” (Govindarajan, 2012, p. 57). In addition to stress, inadequate pay, pressure from testing requirements, lack of respect, and lack of support contribute to low teacher morale (Greene, 2019).

According to Klann and Klann (2004), “When morale, pride, and spirit are present within a team, productivity is high, relationships are strong, and it is fun to go to work” (p. 7). Klann and Klann noted how morale plays a vital role in worker performance, their ability to work well with others, and their desire and willingness to go to work. Klann and Klann also discussed the reverse actions of low morale: “Without morale, pride, and spirit the situation is much different. There will be lethargy,

dissatisfaction, negativism, friction, and lack of cooperation” (p. 7). Low morale in a workplace results in a lackadaisical approach to tasks and a place where productivity is low. Low morale manifests itself in a hostile school environment. Teachers with low confidence negatively affect their students and their school. Leaders need to realize teachers can positively or negatively affect the school climate. Therefore, leaders need to be conscious of the behaviors affecting morale to ensure teachers perform at the highest levels.

Teacher Turnover

According to Brown et al. (2015), 17% of all novice teachers decide to leave the classroom within their first 5 years of teaching. Brown et al. continued by explaining the many factors affecting teacher stability in their positions. He credited teacher lack of preparedness, dissatisfaction with salary, better employment opportunities, and personal reasons for novice teacher turnover rates.

Teaching Middle School

Teaching all grade levels has challenges. Middle school students endure many changes, as middle school presents more challenges than elementary school. Middle schools have been blamed for creating a feeling of isolation and disengagement in students, increasing behavior issues and concerns. Students who transition to middle school are young adolescents. The issues surrounding the middle school level are in part related to the lack of training for dealing with students in that age range and what their minds and bodies are experiencing. Teachers at this level must balance supporting students through insecurities, involvement into young teens, and teaching the content (Augustine et al., 2004).

McKiski (2020) quoted Herman:

Many studies of teachers' stress have used samples from the elementary setting; however, middle school is a crucial time in students' lives as they transition from elementary school and have many different teachers. We must understand how stress impacts middle school teachers so we can find ways to support them. (para. 3)

Purpose of Study

This study was conducted to shed light on the importance of addressing low teacher morale and provide methods for improving teacher morale through leadership behaviors. This study was designed to determine the leadership behaviors that will best heighten morale as perceived by middle school teachers. I investigated how leadership behaviors affect teacher morale positively.

Teachers know good leadership when they encounter it. It is up to leaders to demonstrate behaviors that will positively impact their staff, therefore impacting their school (Wilson, 2012).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the research:

1. Within five categories, what are teacher perceptions of the importance of leadership behaviors exhibited by middle school principals?
2. Based on teacher perceptions, how do leadership behaviors influence morale in rural middle schools?

Significance of the Study

Low teacher morale affects all stakeholders (parents, students, and

administrators). In addition to that, low teacher morale leads teachers to contemplate leaving the education profession. This study was designed to analyze and explore the factors that contribute to low morale in an aggressive attempt to establish higher morale to increase teacher work ethic and improve performance through determining effective leadership behaviors that contribute to the best school climate for teachers. In short, this study provides insight for leaders who desire to increase teacher morale to strengthen work ethic and impact student achievement. The professional staff represents the highest cost and is the human capital resource needed to succeed. It is vital to learn and understand which characteristics from the differing leadership styles energize teachers to perform to their fullest potential (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997).

Assumptions

One assumption was all participants would be sincere in completing the survey. Another assumption was the randomly selected participants would agree to participate in the focus group.

Setting

The samples for this study consisted of teachers from three middle schools. All schools are public schools and are in a rural area of South Carolina. All schools selected for this study are in the same district. There are seven schools in the entire community. Three of those seven schools are middle schools. The district has 3,850 students. The district is quite diverse, with 71% of the student body being represented by minorities: 59% of the students are African American, 28.9% are White, 5.8% are Multi-Racial, 4.8% are Native American, 0.9% are Hispanic, 0.4% are Asian, and 0.2% are Pacific Islanders. Fifty-two percent of students are male students, and 48% are female students.

One hundred percent of students attending this rural district receive free lunch. This district is a Title I district, with every school receiving Title I funds except the high school. The district's report card reads C- (academics), B- (teachers), B- (club and activities), B+ (sports), and B+ (diversity). According to the most recent state assessment data (taken during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic), only 27% of students are proficient in reading, and 25% of students show proficiency in math. The teacher population is made up of 252 teachers.

Role of the Researcher

I am currently serving as an assistant principal in a middle school in South Carolina. I have 14 years of experience in education. I have served as a teacher in both elementary and middle schools. I have experience as a teacher, reading interventionist, reading coach, instructional coach, and administrator. My credentials include Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education, Master's in Curriculum and Instruction with Specialization in Arts Integration, K-12 Literacy Licensure, Reading Coach Certification, Administration Licensure, and EdD in Educational Leadership (in pursuit).

In my current role, I am responsible for building teacher capacity through observations and growth feedback, following the code of conduct to assign consequences for discipline, facilitating professional development and professional learning communities, supervising cafeteria staff, managing attendance, and coordinating textbooks.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design to analyze the perception of how different leadership styles affect teacher morale in a small district in South Carolina.

Farnsworth (2021) described qualitative research as being “primarily used to discover and gain an in-depth understanding of individual experiences, thoughts, opinions, and trends and dig deeper into the problem at hand” (para 1). I used the data from the survey partnered with a focus group consisting of six teachers at middle schools in a rural district to investigate the causes of low teacher morale and possible ways of strengthening leadership to improve confidence and to create a baseline for continuing the assessment of teacher morale in the district.

In this study, I used two data instruments: (a) teacher survey, created to evaluate leadership’s effect on teacher morale; and (b) focus group, conversations about survey results. The information gathered proved essential in determining the current working conditions of teachers teaching middle-level grades in the district and a plan for boosting the morale of teachers. The results from the survey guided the focus group conversation.

Communication with the district office seeking approval for this study, pending IRB approval, was made and approved. IRB approval was granted. I contacted principals before communicating with any teachers at each school. I asked to explain the research to teachers, assured participants that I would protect identities, and distributed the survey instrument. Participants were asked to complete the survey. I asked to be added to an already planned faculty meeting agenda to avoid asking teachers to stay after school on an additional day for an appointment. If a faculty meeting was not planned within the month, I asked principals to permit me to email teachers. All middle school teachers in this rural district were invited to participate by completing the survey. Data were collected from 39 of 62 teachers teaching middle school level (core and elective) classes.

Data Analysis

Data were collected and analyzed to determine the correlation between teacher morale and leadership behaviors. Responses to the survey were coded to discover trends and determine which leadership behaviors teachers view as the most important behaviors. The survey was partnered with a focus group to gain further insight into the survey results and determine leadership preferences.

Definitions

Job Satisfaction

The level of happiness an employee feels when they realize the worth of the work they do (Cambridge University Press, n.d.).

Leadership

“Leadership is a process of social influences, which maximizes the efforts of others toward the achievement of a goal” (Kruse, 2015, para. 1).

Morale

“Morale is a person’s mental state that is exhibited by assurance, control, and motivation to perform a task” (Merriam-Webster, n.d., Definition 2a).

School Climate

“A school’s personality” (Roach & Kratochwill, 2004, p. 13).

Situational Leadership

Situational leaders examine their followers’ tasks and maturity levels to determine what their followers need (Hershey, 1985).

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leaders use rewards to entice followers to produce for the leader

(Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013).

Transformational Leadership

“Leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation” (Burns, 2003, p. 75).

Summary

Literature suggests there is a correlation between leadership and teacher morale. Through this study, I sought to explore how teachers feel about specific leadership behaviors and how those behaviors affect teacher morale. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth literature review for the following topics: teacher morale, job satisfaction, motivating factors, low morale, low morale in middle schools, leadership, and leadership styles. In Chapter 2, transformational, transactional, situational, and other leadership styles are discussed in more detail. The behaviors that were analyzed through the survey and the focus group discussion can be found within those leadership styles. The three leadership styles are compared; the criticisms for all three are also noted. The theoretical framework that supports this study is also discussed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 explains that this study is qualitative. The chapter includes important information about how data were collected and analyzed to discover teacher perceptions on categories that cause low teacher morale and their perceptions on which leadership behaviors best motivate teachers in rural middle schools.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I review literature related to teacher morale and leadership characteristics. The literature review presents insight into teacher morale, motivating factors of teacher morale, and leadership behaviors. The roles of leaders and principals have been studied for many years. According to Bass (1990), “leadership is one of the world’s largest preoccupations” (p. 3). More current research continues to confirm that principals play a major role in the motivation of the teachers they supervise. “The leadership style of public-school leaders, work performance and morale of the staff are interconnected with student achievement and school improvement” (Stewart-Banks et al., 2015, p. 102).

The literature in this chapter addresses the two research questions:

1. Within five categories, what are teacher perceptions of the importance of leadership behaviors exhibited by middle school principals?
2. Based on teacher perceptions, how do leadership behaviors influence morale in rural middle schools?

The literature review begins with a description of the theoretical framework that guided this study. Next, literature related to teacher morale and job satisfaction is presented. It will move into an examination of low teacher morale and those factors affecting middle school educators. Next, there is a review of leadership and leadership in schools. The review ends with literature describing leadership styles and behaviors that I studied in this research.

Theoretical Framework

This research was designed to identify the leadership behaviors that will most

positively affect teacher morale. After this study, the contributing factors for low teacher morale in the middle school setting were identified. The leadership characteristics teachers in the same area prefer were also discovered. The theoretical framework chosen was created by Abraham Maslow and is known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943).

Maslow's (1943) theory focuses on human motivation. Before Maslow, researchers focused on power and biology when determining the energy behind human behaviors. Maslow's approach is based on deficiency needs and growth needs. Within each growth need, the deficiencies must be met to move up the categories. According to Maslow, an individual cannot move higher until every deficiency need has been fulfilled in their current category (Huitt, 2007).

Maslow (1943) described the categories of the five needs of all humans. These needs are arranged in a specific order (Kremer & Hammond, 2013). Table 1 describes each type and the requirements humans should meet at each.

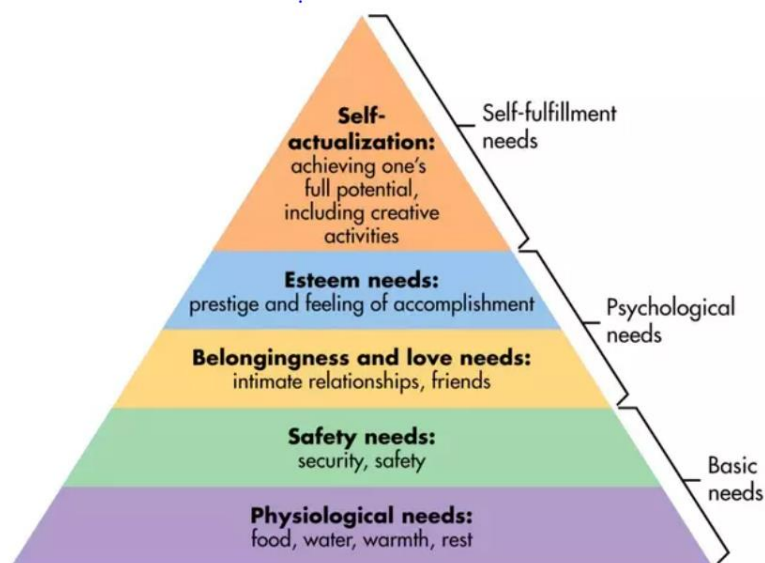
Table 1

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Human needs	Deficiency needs
Self-actualization	Ability to be the best and do the best that can be done
Esteem needs	Appreciation and respect
Social needs	Family, friends, social gatherings, churches
Safety needs	Financial security, health, safety against accidents
Physiological needs	Food, water, breathing, homeostasis

Note. This table was developed to summarize each of the needs categories. From "Abraham Maslow and the Pyramid that Beguiled Business, by W. Kremer and C. Hammond, 2013 (<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine>).

Physiological needs are at the bottom of the hierarchy. There is a need for food, water, and shelter. If these needs are not met, humans will not grow into higher categories. The next category is the safety category. In this category, humans seek to fulfill all their safety needs. A desire to have a job, health insurance, and moving into safe neighborhoods is essential. The third category describes the human need to be and feel loved. The lack of love causes humans to become isolated and depressed. In the fourth category, the human need is self-esteem. In this category, humans need to feel motivated and have a sense of accomplishment. If the needs are not met in the esteem category, humans begin to feel inferior to others. The last category is self-actualization. This category is at the top of the hierarchy. When describing this category, Maslow said, “What a man can be, he must be” (Cherry, 2021, para 1). Humans realize their gifts and talents and use them to become what they were meant to become. Figure 4 shows how the needs are arranged.

Figure 4*Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*

Note. This figure was created to provide an image for the pyramid associated with the Hierarchy of Needs. From “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs,” by S. McLeod, 2020 (<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html#gsc.tab=0>).

Figure 4 represents the pyramid that serves as a known image for this theory. This pyramid describes the deficiency needs humans should meet in each growth need category. The picture breaks the human growth needs into three categorical needs: (a) physiological and safety needs are categorized under basic needs; (b) social needs and esteem needs are classified as psychological needs; and (c) self-actualization is categorized as a self-fulfillment need.

This theory is appropriate for this study as it can apply to the relationship between teachers and building leaders. Teachers need to feel a sense of accomplishment and feel their work is valued. There is a desire to feel job security, and there must be a sense of belonging before teachers can reach their full potential and reach self-efficacy.

Principals influence the lives of educators who work in their buildings. In establishing a positive work climate with high teacher morale, school leaders must make teachers feel safe and foster a community where everyone feels they belong. Since Maslow's (1943) theory focuses on what humans need for growth to occur, we will examine the relationship between leadership characteristics and teacher morale through the lens of this theory. Leadership characteristics and their effect on teachers in each category are essential in determining the best leadership style for building low teacher morale.

Teacher Morale

Morale is “the mental and emotional condition [as of enthusiasm, confidence, or loyalty] of an individual or group with regards to the function or tasks at hand” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The word confidence speaks to self-efficacy and the belief in oneself to perform duties to produce results. Self-efficacy and confidence are significant criteria for assessing morale. “Considerable research has shown teachers with high levels of self-efficacy experience higher levels of job satisfaction, lower levels of job-related stress and face fewer difficulties in dealing with students’ misbehaviors” (Barni et al., 2019, para. 1). With self-efficacy contributing to school climate and culture, it would seemingly be mentioned in more literature surrounding teacher morale. Barni et al. (2019) described that the subject “has been completely under-investigated amongst teachers” (para. 1).

Your Dictionary (n.d.) defined morale as “the general mood of a person and whether he is confident, motivated and willing to perform tasks.” The Corporate Finance Institute (2021) described employee morale as,

The overall satisfaction, outlook and feelings, of well-being that an employee holds in the workplace. In other words, employee morale is how satisfied employees feel about their work environment. Employees with higher morale exhibit higher productivity while employees with lower morale show lower productivity. (para. 1)

There are many definitions for morale, but it is undeniable that those who are dissatisfied with the workplace have low morale; those who are satisfied with their workplace exhibit high morale.

There are many stressors affecting teacher satisfaction with their job. According to Noddings (2014),

Teachers are often blamed for low test scores, although it seems obvious that many of the factors affecting student achievement are beyond their control.

Teachers are also threatened with new systems of evaluation, some of which are scientifically questionable- even bizarre- in the inconsistent results they produce.

Some of our brightest, most dedicated teachers are unhappy because policymakers do not trust them to choose curriculum content or instructional methods. It is hard for teachers to maintain high morale when they feel neither respected nor trusted.

(p. 14)

Teacher morale is directly tied to school leadership (Gonzalez, 2017). Effective school leaders are attentive and can recognize that one of the most important tasks of a principal is to provide a positive work climate (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2014). According to Whitaker (2015), “Great principals know that putting others in an upbeat frame of mind comes back to brighten their own day as well” (p. 37). Perumal

(2011) conducted research that revealed “strong leadership, coupled with clear guidelines, rules, consequences, and loving support are key considerations for raising teacher morale and improving school climate” (pp. 3-4).

Leaders must be willing to provide teachers with their needs (Friedman & Reynolds, 2011). Teachers need support, guidance, and to feel valued to maximize their efforts in raising student achievement. “Teacher morale impacts directly the delivery of lessons, teacher effectiveness and leadership, student attitudes, behavior and discipline, as well as student performance” (Perumal, 2011, p. 4). “A teacher with high teacher morale and high school spirit has a more positive atmosphere” (Rebore & Walmsley, 2007, p. 194). Raising teacher morale must be at the forefront of a leader’s agenda, as morale affects school climate and student performance (Noddings, 2014).

Job Satisfaction

According to Evans (1997), “Overall job satisfaction is determined by the difference between those things a person feels he should receive from his job and all those things he does receive” (p. 321). Fairchild et al. (2012) offered there are many factors at play in education when determining job satisfaction. First, Fairchild et al. discovered teachers who teach students who are middle class and above enjoy their jobs more than teachers who teach students in a lower tax bracket. Second, teachers who teach a larger percentage of minority students and teachers teaching higher grade levels express low job satisfaction. Ironically, Fairchild et al.’s research found African American teachers working with African American students were more pleased on the job. White teachers did not express the same type of job satisfaction in teaching their race. Last, teachers seem to be more satisfied with their jobs if their leader was the same gender they

were.

Aside from Fairchild et al.'s (2012) findings, job satisfaction can be linked to other things. It can be related to absenteeism, turnovers, and leader productivity (Gkolia et al., 2014). Educational institutions with students who come from low-income homes indicate that approximately 60% of staff is satisfied (Thibodeaux et al., 2015). A lack of trust in leadership also affects job satisfaction (Minor et al., 2016).

Historical Views on Motivating Factors

Towns (1996) defined motivation as,

Any condition within a person that affects his or her readiness to initiate or continue any activity or sequence of activities, for example, experiencing a need to work to care for one's family may be the motive for obtaining and keeping a job. (p. 73)

Learning a new skill or reaching a new goal is an indication a person may be motivated (Schunk, 1996). Motivation can also be described as a goal-directed position to strive for personal satisfaction (Atkinson, 1957). Berelson and Steiner's (1964) definition of motivation is, "an inner state that energizes, activates, or moves, and that directs or channels behavior toward goals" (p. 240). Cutrona and Russell (1987) stated motivation is the interaction between individual needs and available resources. This definition speaks to both the emotional and social needs of individuals.

Maslow started to speak out about the needs of people in 1943. His Hierarchy of Needs is viewed as motivational theory. Klann and Klann (2004) stated the needs of people are "physiological, safety, and social. The social need usually has two components: the desire to be validated by others and to be a part of something bigger than

oneself” (p. 27). The needs mentioned by Klann and Klann are also the needs discussed in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. The five needs are (a) physiological needs, (b) safety needs, (c) love and belongingness needs, (d) esteem needs, and I self-actualization. See Figure 4 for a description of each need as described by McLeod (2020). In the workplace, there are specific ways leaders should meet these needs. McLeod discovered an employee must feel safe at work to meet Maslow’s highest level of self-actualization. Even if employees do not get along with everyone with whom they work, they must feel love and a sense of belonging at their workplace (McLeod, 2020).

As cited by Sachau (2007), Herzberg offered another motivation theory: hygiene motivation theory. The reason workers work is explored in this theory. In the late 1950s, Herzberg was considered the pioneer of motivation theory. He wanted to understand what employees liked and disliked about their occupations. He conducted an interview, and the interview discovered two factors for job satisfaction: hygiene issues and motivation (Sachau, 2007).

Hygiene topics include company policies, supervision, salary, interpersonal relations, and working conditions. According to the theory, hygiene factors need to be met for the motivators to be effective. On the other hand, motivators create satisfaction by fulfilling individuals’ needs for meaning and personal growth.

They are issues such as achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, and advancement. (Syptak et al., 1999, p. 26)

According to Sorensen and Minahan (2011), in the 1960s, McGregor developed two contrasting views on how employers view motivating factors in the workplace. These theories are called Theory X and Theory Y. In Theory X, workers are viewed as naturally

unmotivated; in Theory Y, workers are viewed as self-motivated and happy to work on initiatives. Leadership styles, in this theory, are based on the leader's view of their employees (Sorensen & Minahan, 2011). Theory X notes the want of employees to be directed by a leader; however, Theory Y notes work is as “natural as play or rest; and commitment to objectives is a function of rewards for achievement; and under proper conditions, people accept and seek responsibility” (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1996, p. 30).

Deming's total quality management model has been present in schools (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1996). Lunenburg and Ornstein (1996) stated that total quality management is “based on the assumption that people want to do their best and that it is management's job to enable them to do so by constantly improving the system in which they work” (p. 38). Total quality management is management that is effective over some time (Avolio & Bass, 2002).

“Participative management is characterized by school-level planning and decision-making linked to professional accountability” (Keith & Girling, 1991, p. 16). Derived from the total quality management model, the participative management model involves employees in all decision-making in the organization. Because it was shown to be effective in businesses, it has been implemented in schools. Lunenburg and Ornstein (1996) offered, “participatory management stresses the importance of motivating employees' needs, which will, in turn, result in higher worker productivity” (p. 30).

Low Teacher Morale

Okafor-Ufondu (2005) stated improving teacher morale and creating a positive working climate for teachers is one of the most critical responsibilities of the school administrator. Increased rigor of standards has caused an increase in workload and

accountability, leading to stress and low morale. “The standards process has led to perceptions of low teacher morale, high stress, and increased workload” (Okafor-Ufondu, 2005, p. i). Hall and Schultz (2003), who also studied the effects of increased workloads, found that “it is essential to identify these tensions and define the intersection between teachers’ professional commitment” (p. 380). Additionally, Hall and Schultz stated, “teachers need to exercise discretionary judgment about where compliance with the professionalization agenda needs to play second string to commitment maintaining and developing professionalism” (p. 380).

There are three stress causes for educators, according to Naylor (2001). Those stressors are “increasing difficulty and complexity of teaching and relating to students, the volume of work during a teacher’s day and the expectations that teachers will address a range of tasks and issues” (Naylor, 2001, p. 1) and “lack of time, resources, support and respect” (Naylor, 2001, p. 1). The effect of these stressors causes teachers to work too much, leave the profession, become mentally and physically ill, and suffer troubles within their families/relationships. Fanning’s (1997) quantitative study found similar stressors for teachers. His study found a relationship between the inability to manage student behaviors and low morale; no correlation could be found between low morale and teacher abilities to work with underperforming students. In this study, no connection was found between teacher dissatisfaction and gender, ethnicity, or class size.

Harris (1999) also researched the stress factors for teachers. He concluded stress in schools is a multifaceted issue where principal leadership styles are a contributing factor. Doyle (2002) offered that the reduction of stress levels could happen through promoting a “customer focus approach with students and parents” (p. 111). Building

positive relationships with students and parents can help reduce some stressors for teachers. In more recent research, it was noted that the stress of the job duties of educators is causing fewer college students to major in the discipline (Passy, 2018). Passy (2018) continued by presenting the idea that as more and more college students avoid majoring in education, the issues facing schools become more problematic.

“The more principals engaged in behaviors that were personally empowering—the more teachers saw that they had choices in completing their work, and the greater impact teachers perceived they were achieving through their efforts” (Davis & Wilson, 2003, p. 352). Principal abilities to provide this type of intrinsic rewards will reduce stressors and increase job satisfaction. Davis and Wilson (2003) also offered, “teachers have a significantly higher preference for moral motivators when compared to intrinsic and extrinsic motivators” (p. ii).

Middle School and Teacher Morale

Conditions

Teachers often must purchase materials to meet the needs of their students due to a lack of resources. It was reported in *Time Magazine* in 2016 that

On average, most [teacher] spent nearly \$500 in 2015, and nearly one out of ten spent \$1,000 or more. All told, a total of \$1.6 billion in school supply costs are shifted from parents—or specifically from cash-strapped districts—onto teachers themselves. (White, 2018, para. 2)

Many middle schools in small rural districts receive Title I funds. Even with those funds, a shortage in funds often presents itself. Teachers usually try to account for this shortage in funds by spending their personal funds, resulting in low teacher morale (Bivona,

2002). Most of the funds from Title I are allocated toward purchases to meet the academic needs of low-income students. Those funds are not used to restore or replace furniture or technological issues. The lack of materials and resources will cause teacher morale to be low, and they will seek employment elsewhere (White, 2018).

Earthman and Lemasters (2009) researched the relationship between working conditions and morale for teachers. “This research was designed to investigate the possible relationship between the attitudes teachers have and the conditions of their classrooms when the classrooms were independently assessed” (Earthman & Lemasters, 2009, p. 323). Earthman and Lemasters surveyed building administrators to determine the satisfaction in conditions. Twenty-two schools were surveyed: 11 indicated satisfactory, and 11 were unsatisfactory.

Teachers volunteered to complete the My Classroom Appraisal Protocol (MCAP), 2003, to offer a perception about working conditions. Categories of the MCAP included room environments, teacher mindsets, and the overall wellbeing of teachers. Findings concluded there is a direct correlation between the physical environment and teacher attitudes and productivity (Earthman & Lemasters, 2009).

In such conditions, where morale is low, anxiety is high, budgets are insufficient, and the life prospects for students in the community are grim, we need much more than individual teachers who are hopeful to change the course of our educational future. (Hyttén, 2011, p. 2)

Stress of Teaching Middle School

Teachers are facing many stress factors, as discussed above. Middle school teachers teach students who are at a significant transition in their lives, heightening stress.

According to Klassen and Chiu (2010), “Teaching is a stressful occupation, and high levels of occupational stress have a strong effect on teachers’ performance, career decisions, physical and mental health, and overall job satisfaction” (p. 342). The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Badass Teachers Association (BTA) first surveyed 30,000 teachers in 2015 about their job satisfaction and work life. When the survey was first created, it was an 80-question survey. The survey was shortened in 2017 to 30 questions and was administered to 830 AFT members and over 4,000 nonmembers. The survey results revealed that teachers felt their working conditions were unhealthy and therefore unhealthy for their students. AFT and BTA (2017) stated, “Districts that fail to recognize the importance of educator well-being may be faced with high turnover, more teacher and staff health issues, and greater burnout” (p. i). AFT and BTA more definitively found that teacher shortages, the lack of planning time, and school facilities issues contribute to teacher stress. Teachers also credit the stressful workload, the inability to relax, and constant change in expectations with affecting teacher health and teacher turnover (AFT & BTA, 2017, p. i).

Teacher salaries can also be a stressor. Pay freezes in pay steps affect teachers when societal prices continue to rise. Insurance premiums continue to increase, affecting teacher salaries. Many teachers must seek other forms of income to be able to provide for their families. Lack of funds and the need for more money can lead to teacher burnout quickly. When burnout happens, teachers leave the profession (Keller et al., 2014).

Administration Support

The leader’s role is vital in motivating teachers and increasing morale. Administrators should support teachers emotionally, instrumentally, and informationally

(Cancio et al., 2013). Leaders must make teachers feel they are a part of the school and empower them. Before teachers buy into the vision or mission of the leader, the teachers will have to be a part of the creating process for the vision and mission (Kurland et al., 2010). Visions and goals must be clear and easy for teachers to follow. If they are not easy to follow, support should be offered. Without clear guidelines and information, teachers perform daily duties without the end goal in mind (Naile & Selesho, 2014). Kouzes and Posner (2007) suggested five exemplary leadership practices: demonstrate expectations, invite followers to help form the vision, avoid settling for mediocrity, employ distributive leadership, and always aim to inspire. These practices explain that administrators must lead by example; they must involve staff in creating the vision, raise other leaders among the staff, and motivate staff to continue the work through frustrations. “The role of the principal is to guide and direct the behavior of teaching staff in the school environment” (Naile & Selesho, 2014, p. 179).

Leadership

Burns (2003) stated, “leadership is not only a descriptive term but a prescriptive one, embracing a moral, even a passionate, dimension” (p. 2). There are varied definitions for leadership, and there are many types of leaders. Leadership descriptions often reinvent themselves without considerations of previous theories (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Katz and Kahn’s (1978) definition focused on the paradigm of the organization and leaders’ ability to create compliant employees. Stogdill (1974) offered that “leadership involves a social phenomenon in which a person may exert power, persuade, direct a group of individual behavior, facilitate goal achievement, or influence people” (p. 22). Stogdill’s description of leadership described a leader’s ability to exert power to

elicit certain behaviors to achieve organizational goals. Avolio's (2011) Full Range Leadership Model describes a system for leadership that includes an input (human capital, time, resources), processes (the interaction with people and the resources), and outcomes (motivation and performance). In this model, each of the pieces must be present for them to be a success. Pearce and Conger (2003) stated the power in leadership as the leaders' ability to distribute power among several individuals instead of being held by one individual who acts as a superior. Alkahtani (2015) added that leadership is all about the leaders' responsibility for determining what the organization needs to take the organization on a journey toward success.

School Leaders—Principals

The United States started to notice the issues surrounding schools in the early 1800s. Many concerning issues were declining student academic success and the lack of student motivation (Ulriksen, 2000). In schools, the main duty of administrators is to address the challenges facing students and teachers. The Center for Educational Leadership (2018) at the University of Washington stated, "Teaching quality is the #1 impact on student learning. Principal quality is the #2 impact on student learning" (p. 13).

Principals are expected to do so much more than be a manager at the school. "The modern principal must be a master of high stakes standardized testing, know how to read data produced from the tests, and implement top yielding strategies to close the achievement gap" (The Wallace Foundation, 2013, p. 6). The Wallace Foundation has invested in the study of school principals. Their work reveals five responsibilities of school-based leaders:

1. Principals must set high expectations for all students to be academically

successful.

2. Principals must create a hospitable climate in the school where students and staff feel safe and learning can take place.
3. Principals must create leaders throughout their building so staff realize their position in upholding the vision.
4. Principals must build teacher capacity to ensure teachers are teaching their best and students are learning from the best.
5. Principals must be able to analyze data to determine improvement needs and create plans (The Wallace Foundation, 2013).

The Wallace Foundation (2013) concluded that leaders must be competent in performing all five responsibilities for schools to be successful. Aside from these noted responsibilities by The Wallace Foundation, principals must also juggle the expectations and involvement of all stakeholders. Bednar (2017) compares the juggling of principalship responsibilities to the Chinese acrobats who are known for rotating plates on stick tips. The Chinese acrobats must keep all the plates spinning so none of them drop. They spend their time running from plate to plate as they notice the plate's pace start to slow. Principals must keep several plates spinning: closing achievement gaps, supporting novice teachers with mentoring, veteran teachers and their abilities to stay abreast on new best practices and technological advances, parents, grandparents, government officials, unions, building facilities, and managing human capital. Principals have their hands full (Whitaker, 2015).

Building Morale and Reducing Stress

Research reveals teaching can be a very stressful occupation. Table 2 describes

some of the leading problems facing teachers and what leaders can do to address the problem.

Table 2

Morale Problems and Solutions

School problems	What leaders can do
<u>Compassion fatigue</u> Teachers experience this type of fatigue while mentally battling what students go through in their personal lives.	Create a safe space for staff to talk. Present professional development surrounding self-care and meditation.
<u>Negativity</u> It is a common cliché that all teachers should stay away from the teacher's lounge to avoid all negativity and gossip. No matter the place, negativity can spread like a bad virus and infect the entire staff.	Be watchful for signs of discontent. Have an open-door policy to solve problems and listen to solutions. Be a model for optimism and positivity.
<u>Resistance to change</u> Change is hard. One person's resistance to change can cause a ripple effect.	Meet with those who are resistant to change to try to determine the reasoning behind the resistance. Discuss ways to make staff feel better about the change.
<u>Burnout</u> Anxiety, stress, frustration, and workload cause teacher burnout. Burnout signs include exhaustion, poor memory, sadness, annoyance, sarcasm, and indifference	Watch for symptoms of teacher burnout. Offer to provide strategies for managing workload and develop a system where teachers collaborate to achieve goals.
<u>Educator demoralization</u> Teachers internalize the community's perception of teachers and the profession. Policymakers tell them how to do their job, and salaries do not reflect the worth of teachers' work.	Make teachers feel valued by offering support and the resources needed. Build a foundation of trust, respect, and professionalism.
<u>Feeling unseen</u> Teachers spend a lot of their free time preparing for the work that they do with students. This fact is often overlooked.	Acknowledge the work that teachers do outside the regular school day. Make sure staff knows that leaders are grateful for what they do.
<u>Lack of connectedness with administrators</u> When teachers feel like administrators are not accessible, teachers start to form negative opinions about the administrator. Teachers start to feel like they are doing the work on their own.	Make time to visit classrooms to interact with students instead of only visiting to evaluate. Stay visible for teachers and students.

Note. This table was created to show the correlation between morale issues and what leaders can do to rectify the situation. From "Real Ways School Leaders Can Build Morale and Reduce Stress in Schools, by J. Gunn, 2018

(<https://www.teachingchannel.com/blog/build-morale-reduce-stress-in-schools>).

Gunn (2018) offered seven causes for low teacher morale. Those causes range from teachers feeling undervalued to teachers lacking a positive relationship with leaders. The solutions to low teacher morale cause the leaders to be alert and aware of what is happening in the building and what is happening with staff. Leaders must watch for signs of negativity, resistance, burnout, and fatigue. Leaders must build a trusting relationship with teachers, be visible, offer solutions to lighten loads, and advocate for self-care.

Communication

It is no surprise that efficient communication results in high morale (Kessler & Snodgrass, 2014). A strong principal “establishes strong lines of communication with and between teachers and students” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 46). Principals must lend a listening ear to teachers and students (Fullan, 2014). A weekly memo, written for students and staff, is a great way to communicate with the school population (Whitaker et al., 2009). Hodges (2005) stated, “Developing and distributing staff newsletters is an effective way to acknowledge and show appreciation for the staff” (p. 21). Knuth (2006) also wrote about the importance of a weekly newsletter:

The Monday Memo is an easy way to establish lines of communication in a school to foster professional relationships and morale. Both first level communication—such as announcements—and second level communication—such as messages that motivate a sustained vision—can be accomplished in a short message missive. One hour a week dedicated to written communication can result in great benefits in better relationships and informed staff members. (p. 33)

Collaboration

Teachers need time to work with and learn from each other. Meador (2016) stated,

Teachers should be given time to work together in a collaborative effort. This collaboration will strengthen relationships amongst your faculty, provide new or struggling teachers with an outlet to gain valuable insight and advice and allows teachers to share best practices and share success stories. (para. 4)

Collaboration is an effective way to heighten morale (Behrstock-Sherratt & Rizzolo, 2014). “The first task of leadership is to provide the supports teachers need to engage collaboratively” (Friedman & Reynolds 2011, p. 16).

According to Bieler (2012), “When leaders set aside regular common planning time for faculty members to collaborate, such as through the professional learning community model, teachers often feel much more efficient and autonomous in their use of time” (p. 46). One of the leader’s main roles is to create a space for teachers to be social and work together (Fullan, 2014).

Approach Situations With Empathy

When leaders show empathy, they show that they care about their employees. “Empathy is not just a skill; it is a broad and deep sense of care humanity” (Weissbourd & Jones, 2014, p. 42). Teachers are dealing with varied situations. Being a leader who shows empathy can increase morale. “An empathetic leadership style can make everyone feel like a team and increase productivity, morale, and loyalty” (Pressley, 2012, para. 3). According to Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2014),

It is particularly powerful when leaders express empathy to teachers and staff

members who are frustrated by, discouraged about, and distressed over circumstances they cannot fully control. When school leaders express empathy in this way, they create a positive sense of connection, foster cooperation, and evoke the willingness as well as the courage to try new things. (para. 12)

Support

Teachers want and need support. “As principals, we have a responsibility to support our teachers. Teachers do not just want to be supported, they want to feel supported” (Whitaker, 2012, p. 133). Teachers need to know that their principal cares about them and what they are going through (Meador, 2016).

Support With Discipline

Schools must have a consistent plan for addressing discipline. “A discipline code is necessary for all students and staff so that everyone knows, as they enter school, what is expected regarding behavior and conduct” (Rebore & Walmsley, 2007, p. 194). In most cases, when a teacher requests administrative support in discipline, it is because they have tried all the strategies they could with no results. Administrators must assure teachers that these exhibited behaviors will not be tolerated and will be handled (Whitaker, 2012). “This sound practice should be habit. It is part of making teachers feel supported” (Whitaker, 2012, p. 118).

Support With Instruction

Teachers appreciate the opportunities to have a voice in what they desire to learn more about. Administrators provide opportunities for teachers to be a part of the professional development plan. “In order for staff development to be effective the program must be designed with the needs and desires of the staff members’

considerations” (Friedman & Reynolds, 2011, p. 77). As Friedman and Reynolds (2011) noted, “Mandated professional development activities- in which administrators select the topics, and teachers are a captive audience for a half day or a whole day—are notoriously unproductive” (p. 126). Seyfarth (2007) listed characteristics that indicate a successful professional development plan. Leaders should ask themselves these eight questions when planning for professional development:

1. Is the content relevant to what teachers are facing in their classrooms?
2. Is the learning outcome clearly stated for participants?
3. How can we incentivize teacher participation (intrinsically and extrinsically)?
4. Is the content applicable to participants?
5. What is the plan for follow-up on teacher’s implementation of what is learned?
6. Is the presenter knowledgeable in the area that is being presented?
7. Is there a plan for the professional development to be ongoing to provide teachers an opportunity to implement learning effectively?

Trust Relationship

Trust requires leaders to be transparent, reliable, and honest. “The relationship between a teacher and a principal has to be built on a foundation of trust. This type of relationship takes a lot of time to build” (Meador, 2016, para. 1). Building a trusting relationship is not determined by the words that are used but by the actions the leader exhibits to staff (Fullan, 2014). According to Wong (2020), there are nine steps leaders can take to foster trusting relationships with employees:

1. “Listen more than you speak” (para. 5).

2. “Solicit and act on feedback” (para. 7).
3. “Show appreciation every day” (para. 12).
4. “Empower your team by trusting them first” (para. 15).
5. “Encourage coaching” (para. 17).
6. “Practice consistency” (para. 19).
7. “Focus on nonverbal communication and soft skills” (para. 21).
8. “Create an inclusive culture” (para. 22).
9. “Be honest and transparent” (para. 25).

Respect

Like trust, respect is based on actions. Teachers will not stay at a school where they are not respected. As noted by Wilson (2012), “Great teachers will walk away from a school where leadership does not respect or trust them” (para. 3). Respect is a mutual thing. To receive respect, it has to be given. When respect is both received and given between teacher and principal, morale is boosted (Esquith, 2014).

“Leadership and respect go together. As a leader, it is important to respect those around you. Most people greatly desire the respect of their leaders” (Tamang, 2013, para. 12). Treating employees with respect is not contingent upon the work they do; everyone should be shown respect every day of the week (Whitaker, 2015).

According to Daisyme (2015), most leaders desire to gain respect from their employees but often are unsure of how to achieve this goal. Table 3 explains Daisyme’s 11 ways to obtain respect for leaders.

Table 3*Eleven Ways to Earn Respect in the Workplace*

Strategy	Description
Display self-confidence.	Show your passion for the goals and vision in the workplace.
Strive to complete tasks on time.	This shows others that you are responsible.
Show humility.	Be willing to admit when you are wrong.
Have patience with others.	Realize that everyone learns at different rates.
Respect others even if they do not respect you.	You must show professional respect to everyone no matter the situation.
Do not repeat workplace gossip.	Repeating gossip gives the impression that you cannot be trusted with information.
Be inclusive.	Be transparent. Let employees know what changes may occur and how they will affect them.
Praise employees.	Praising others for their work will boost their confidence and gain their respect.
Share knowledge with coworkers.	This displays your confidence in them to be able to handle new information.
Be neat and organized.	A disorganized workspace indicates your lack of care for the image of the workplace.
Be respectful outside of the workplace.	People will create perceptions about your character whether you are at work or away from work.

Note. This table was created to explain how strategies to build a respectful workplace effect followers. From “Ways to Earn Respect at Work,” by P. Daisyme, 2015, paras. 2-11 (<https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/248415>).

The information in Table 3 provides action steps leaders can take to build mutual respect in the workplace. Being inclusive is a strategy that was offered for both building

trust and building respect. This indicates the importance of transparency and gaining insight from employees before making decisions.

Recognition

All humans desire to be recognized and acknowledged for the work they do. Personalized recognition is best received by employees. This type of recognition makes the staff member feel special and important (White, 2014). According to Whitaker (2015), “The most valuable gift a principal can give teachers is confidence. Helping build their skills, and then encouraging and praising when appropriate can go a long way in cultivating this self-worth” (p. 17).

While praising teachers is a morale booster, principals are cautioned to know the appropriateness between publicly and privately praising teachers. Public praise may cause morale to lower, depending on certain circumstances. If the same teachers are always publicly acknowledged and praised, it can lead to feelings of bitterness between coworkers. This will cause the workplace to become toxic (Whitaker et al., 2009).

Leadership Styles and Behaviors—Transformational, Transactional, Situational

Leadership styles have been studied for many years and are defined as having significant influence. Principals are considered leaders of their schools; therefore, they have considerable influence (either negative or positive) on their staff. “Because the principal is viewed as the leader of her or his school, considerable attention is being directed to ways to overhaul the principal’s role to facilitate the type of leadership needed to transform teaching and learning” (Murphy & Louis, 1994, p. 7). Many theorists have influenced leadership in K12 schools over many years. Table 4 displays theorists and their influence.

Table 4*Contributing Leadership Theories Throughout Years*

Leadership work	Contributors	Year
The Great Man Theory of Leadership	Thomas Carlyle	1841
Trait Theory of Leadership	Francis Galton	1869
	Luther Bernard	1926
Charismatic Leadership	Max Webber	1922
	Robert House	1977
Transactional Leadership	Max Webber	1977
	James MacGregor Burns	1978
Iowa Studies of Leadership	Lewin, Lippit, and White	1939
Group Leadership	Stogdill	1948
University of Michigan Studies	Katz and Kahn	1952
Ohio States University Studies	Haplin and Winer	1957
Managerial Grid	Blake and Mouton	1964
Fiedler Contingency Theory	Fred Fiedler	1964
Situational Leadership Model	Hershey and Blanchard	1969
Servant Leadership	Robert K. Greenleaf	1970
Path-Goal Theory	Robert House	1971
Transformational Leadership	James D. Downton	1973
	James MacGregor Burns	1978
Visionary Leadership	Marsha Sashkin	1988
	Daniel Goleman	2002

Note. This table was created to show the contributions of theorist on the leadership theory over many years. From “An Application of Hershey and Blanchard Situational Model,” by S.A. Raza and A. Sikandar, 2018, p. 76.

Table 4 shows the beliefs of theorists and contributions to leadership styles throughout centuries of leadership studies. Many of these theories still influence leadership styles today. This study examined three leadership styles and the behaviors accompanying these styles: transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and situational leadership.

Transformational Leadership

Sosik and Godshalk (2000) offered that transformational leadership leads to the building of teacher leaders: “Transformational leadership involves forming relationships of mutual stimulation and elevation that convert followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents” (pp. 369-370). Bass and Avolio (1994) stated transformational leadership presents itself through

- Stimulating interest among colleagues and followers to view their work through new perspectives
- Generating awareness of the mission and vision of the team and organization
- Developing colleagues and followers to a higher level of potential
- Motivating colleagues and followers to look beyond their interests toward those that will benefit the entire group. (p. 2)

Transformation leaders tend to support the development of followers and support doing what is best for the entire team. Bass and Avolio (1994) went on to describe four characteristics of transformational leaders:

1. Intellectual Stimulation—The leader provides a safe space for originality, avoids openly humiliating followers, and motivates followers to be innovative in solving problems.

2. Inspirational Leadership–The leader expresses the belief that everyone has a voice in solving problems and all problems have the potential of reaching a solution.
3. Idealized Influence–The leader shows concern for all presented problems and is interested in reaching a solution.
4. Individualized Consideration–The leader listens intently to followers.

Jung and Avolio (2000) conducted a study with 194 undergraduate students and determined that transformational leadership influences followers in ways that other leadership styles do not. Jung and Avolio (2000) stated, “several leadership researchers have argued that developing a shared vision is one of the most integral components of the transformational leadership process” (p. 950). Transformational leaders value follower input in decision-making (Eagly et al., 2001). The “success of a transformational leader is based on both increased performance outcomes and the degree to which followers have developed their leadership potential and skills” (Silins, 1992, p. 318).

Transactional Leaders

Transactional leaders elicit transactions between leaders, colleagues, and followers (Bass & Avolio, 1994). According to Bass and Avolio (1994), transactions are based on leaders’ set expectations for requirements partnered with a reward system when these expectations are met. However, Avolio (2003) noted exchanges focus significantly on the people’s interest to who the rewards will benefit; the rewards will only benefit those who are engaged in the exchanges between work and rewards. Followers enter transactions because of a desire to fulfill the self-interest in a bonus, and leaders must continue to meet expectations with rewards for motivation to be sustained (Bogler, 1999).

Jung and Avolio (1999) observed, “followers may need extra incentives, time, and motivation before they are willing to go beyond the call of duty to engage in extra-role behavior” (p. 959). Listed below are the four types of transactional leadership. These four styles have proven to be the most effective of this leadership style.

1. Transactional Contingent Reward Leadership—Exchanges some form of gift for those who reach their goals (Avolio, 2003).
2. Laissez-Faire Leadership—The leader does nothing. This leadership involves passive and highly ineffective behaviors.
3. Passive Management by Exception—Transactional behavior in which the leader waits until something goes wrong before addressing it.
4. Active Management by Exception—The leader observes work for errors to determine what may have the potential of going wrong. This type of behavior is also seen in micromanagement (Avolio, 2003).

The most effective transactional leadership form is the contingent reward leadership wherein leaders “set goals, clarify desired income, provide both positive and negative feedback, and exchange rewards or recognition for accomplishments when they are observed” (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000, pp. 369-370).

Shared Leadership

As mentioned before, Avolio and Bass (2002) have noted there is not one style appropriate for all situations; each situation needs consideration in determining the leadership style for it. “Each leader has a profile that includes some or all of these transformational, transactional, and non-transactional behaviors. The better leaders practice both styles, and the best leaders are more transformational than transactional”

(Avolio & Bass, 2002, p. viii). Shared leadership is an effective process by which individuals lead each other to reach personal and organizational goals (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Table 5 displays the historical trends for shared leadership as cited in Pearce and Conger (2003).

Table 5*Historical Trends for Shared Leadership*

Theory/research	Key issues	Representative authors (date)
Law of the situation	The situation determines the order instead of an individual	Follet (1924)
Human relations and social systems perspective	Give attention to the social and psychological needs of prospective employees	Turner (1993) Mayo (1993) Barnard (1938)
Role differentiation	Different types of roles are distributed to members of the organization	Benne and Sheats (1948)
Co-leadership	Primarily in a research relationship- Leadership role divided between individuals	Solomon et al. (1953) Hennan and Bennis (1998)
Social exchange theory	There is an exchange of punishment and rewards as motivation	Festinger (1954) Homans (1958)
Management by objectives and participative goal setting	Followers and leaders both set performance goals and expectations	Drucker (1954) Erez and Arad (1986) Locke and Latham (1980)
Emergent leadership	Leaders emerge from the followers	Hollander (1961)
Mutual leadership	Leadership deriving from peers	Bowers and Seashore (1996)
Theory and team member exchange	Models of status are differentiated	Berger et al. (1972) Seers (1989)
Participative decision making	Followers have a voice in organizational decision making	Vroom and Yetton (1973)
Vertical dyad	Examine the relationship between leaders and followers to create groups	Green (1976)
Substitutes for leadership	Some situations may diminish the need for leaders	Kerr and Jermier (1978)

(continued)

Theory/research	Key issues	Representative authors (date)
Self-leadership	Followers are allowed to lead themselves	Manz and Sims (1980)
Self-managing work	Followers take on roles usually assigned to managers	Manz and Sims (1978, 1993)
Followership	Characteristics of good followers are explored	Kelly (1988)
Empowerment	Power-sharing with followers	Conger and Kanungo
Shared cognition	Team members sharing the same thoughts surrounding key internal and external issues	Klimoski and Mohammed (1994)
Connective leadership	Examines how well leaders can make connections to those inside and outside the organization	Liman-Blumen

Note. This table was created to show the evolution of shared leadership. From “Shared Leadership,” by C. L. Pearce and J. A. Conger, 2003.

Table 5 shows how shared leadership has been used in many capacities throughout decades, and it demonstrates shared leadership roles between followers who take on functions of supervision or management. It also shows how leaders delegate leadership roles to meet organizational goals (Pearce & Conger, 2003).

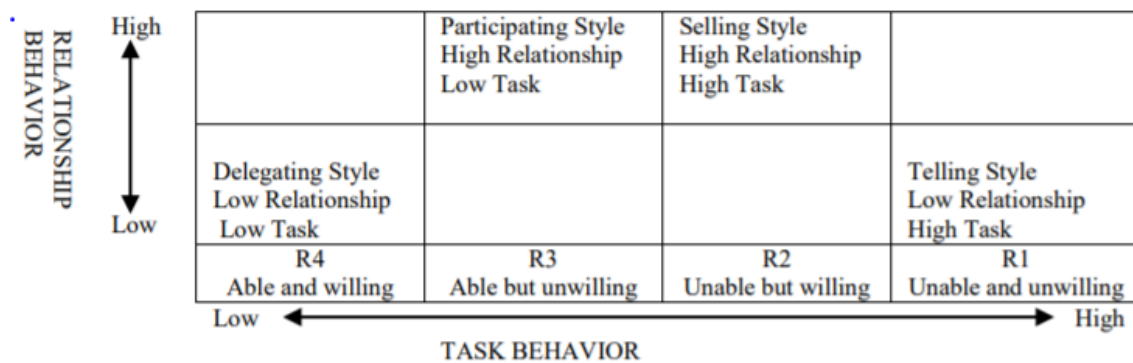
Situational Leadership

The leadership behaviors of Hershey and Blanchard’s (1969) situational leadership model are the final behaviors of examination for this study. Situational leadership has become one of the best-known theories in managerial leadership. According to Meier (2016), in situational leadership, “a leader applies different leadership styles based on the follower’s maturity level” (p. 27). The term maturity level

has been revised throughout the years, first to developmental levels (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009) and then to readiness levels (Hershey et al., 2012). According to Hershey and Blanchard (1981), as the level of readiness increases, the leader's actions and behavior should change to the appropriate behaviors to increase the follower's competence and confidence. Figure 5 displays how the change in readiness affects the change in leadership behavior.

Figure 5

Task Behavior



Note. This image was created by P. Hershey (1985) to show the relationship between task behaviors and relationship behaviors. From “Situational Selling: An Approach for Increasing Sales Effectiveness, p. 32.

Hershey's (1985) chart, displayed in Figure 5, shows the four major relationship styles of situational leadership. Task behavior reflects the readiness of followers. Relationship behaviors represent the leader. The relationship styles are described below (Raza & Sikandar, 2018):

1. Telling Style (Redressing Style)–When the follower is unable and unwilling, the follower is not comfortable performing the task. This calls for the leader to focus more on instructing the follower to complete the task correctly and less

on building a relationship.

2. **Selling Style (Persuasive Style)**—When the follower is unable and willing, the follower does not have the capabilities to perform the task but is willing. This readiness level creates high relationships and high task consideration in completing the tasks.
3. **Participating Style (Participating Style)**—When the follower is able and unwilling, the follower can perform the task but is reluctant. This causes a high relationship, low task consideration from the leader to ensure tasks are completed.
4. **Delegating Style (Empowering Style)**—When the follower is able and willing, it implies they are both able and willing to perform the task. In this situation, the leader does not have to focus on relations or tasks for work to be completed.

Leadership styles vary but influence workplace morale and followers' performance. According to Groves and LaRooca (2011), transformational leaders guide followers through buy-in of the vision and the ability to look past self to determine the best decisions to impact the team positively. Transactional leaders negotiate with followers through a reward system when goals are met (Bryant, 2003). Situational leaders observe their surroundings, their workers' mannerisms, and the task to be completed before deciding on the best strategy for the situation (Bass & Bass, 2008).

Criticisms for the Leadership Styles

Research supports that transformational leadership positively influences followers (Diaz-Saenz, 2011); however, some scholars criticize the leadership style. Yukl (1999,

2011) criticized the lack of definition within the leadership style for making an influential impact. He also stated there had not been enough work done to examine how transformational leadership affects workgroups and organizations. Yukl (1999) noted the similarity between “idealized influence” and “inspirational motivation.” Yukl (1999, 2011) stated the leadership style lacks identification of impact on specific situations and variables.

Burns (1978) stated transactional leadership leads to a temporary exchange between leaders and followers. These exchanges lead to short-term gratifications, which often lead to bitter employees when the gratification is not sustained. Scholars also criticize transactional leadership as a one-size-fits-all approach that inadequately provides solutions for varied situations and variables related to organizational challenges (Beyer, 1999; Yukl, 1999, 2011; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010).

Situational leadership is a popular leadership style, but as leaders practiced Hershey and Blanchard’s (1981) original theory, flaws with the idea started to appear. Nicholls (1985) noted three specific deficiencies with the leadership style. The defects were related to uniformity, endurance, and compliance. Bass and Bass (2008) also noted the lack of reliability within situational leadership. Additional researchers concluded this theory was difficult to follow and implement due to the lack of concrete descriptors (Bass & Bass, 2008; Glynn & DeJordy, 2010).

Key Differences and Similarities

Transactional leadership is a task-oriented leadership approach; it focuses on interactions between worker and leader and the desired outcome or goal (Bass, 1999).

Transformational leadership is “relation-oriented leadership” (Bass & Bass, 2008, p. 3); it

is follower-centered, inspiring, and convincing (Bass & Bass, 2008). Situational leadership and transactional leadership are similar in that they both focus on the end goal instead of on the individual. Transformational leadership differs from those two because this style focuses on building the strengths of the follower. Transactional and transformational leadership styles are similar in the widespread approach to leadership that leaders use in these styles. Transformational leadership can apply to many challenges facing organizations (Rowold & Rohmann, 2009). In contrast, situational leadership theory employs the discovery for the right leadership style for the context and challenges facing organizations (Bass & Bass, 2008).

Summary

The literature review revealed many factors that affect teacher job satisfaction. Low teacher morale caused by stress from workloads and other contributing factors has caused high teacher turnover rates (Gallup, 2018). The literature shows how leaders and leadership styles directly affect teacher morale. AFT and BTA (2017) believed that things can improve in schools if time is set aside to determine factors that cause teacher stress and low morale.

This section provided an in-depth dive into leadership characteristics. I discussed three leadership styles: transformational and transactional leadership, identified by Burns (1978), and situational leadership, identified by Hershey and Blanchard (1981). While no principal uses just one of these styles, leaders tend to use one more than the other when leading. This literature review explained the strengths and weaknesses of each of the leadership style theories.

The critical look into historians and theorists painted the picture of just how

complex and rich this study is. Leadership, leadership styles, morale, and leadership correlation have been studied for decades and are still being studied today; however, low morale is still a significant issue facing schools today.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter introduces the methods I used to conduct this research. It outlines the steps I took to collect and analyze data; shares the research design; and discusses the population, participants, survey, and the phases for data collection.

This qualitative study sought to discover which leadership behaviors best create positive teacher morale and work ethics in a rural middle school setting. A qualitative approach yielded a greater knowledge of leadership behaviors that teachers best respond to positively. I collected data from a survey; participants randomly volunteered from the survey participation to participate in a focus group. Teachers completed the survey during their customarily scheduled faculty meeting or at their convenience through email.

I used questions from the Purdue Teacher Opinionnaire to determine which behaviors should be included in the survey based on The Wallace Foundation's (2013) five leadership responsibilities. I conducted a focus group to determine which leadership behaviors teachers consider to be the most important, and the discussion further explored trends discovered from the survey.

This study was based solely on teacher perspectives of leadership; therefore, the survey questions used for this study focused on leadership behaviors and how those behaviors boost morale. This study does not involve an evaluative tool for teachers to evaluate their current leaders. Since the survey results are based on teacher perspectives, it was imperative for me to conduct a focus group with some of the teachers to understand the background information affecting teacher decisions.

Research Questions

1. Within five categories, what are teacher perceptions of the importance of

leadership behaviors exhibited by middle school principals?

2. Based on teacher perceptions, how do leadership behaviors influence morale in rural middle schools?

Methodology Selected

“Qualitative methods are used to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant” (Hammarberg et al., 2016, p. 498). Usually, qualitative research begins with a question or as an interest in a particular subject (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). “Qualitative researchers seek to understand a phenomenon by focusing on the total picture rather than breaking it down into many variables. The goal is a holistic picture and depth of understanding rather than a numeric analysis of data” (Ary et al., 2014, p. 32). Qualitative researchers strive to gain understanding about situations as they occur in their normal settings.

Yin (2015) suggested that qualitative researchers approach research with three distinct actions. His suggestions were to collect data clearly to allow for transparency and review of others. Second, ensure data collection is precise and accurate. Last, do not deviate from what the findings have revealed through the research. This type of research requires researchers to go into the field to gain the information needed to report accurate findings.

A qualitative approach to data collection was appropriate for this study because this research sought to gather perspectives about leadership behaviors and factors that impact teacher morale. The data were collected through a survey partnered with a focus group. “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning is displayed through

their contribution to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015, p. 6).

Study Participants

I gathered participants from teachers in a small, rural district in South Carolina. The community currently employs approximately 440 teachers. Sixty-two middle school teachers were asked to participate in this study. Thirty-nine teachers participated in the study.

Instrumentation

There were two phases for data collection.

Phase 1: Survey

A modified version of the Purdue Teacher Opinionnaire was used to collect data for teacher morale. The Purdue Teacher Opinionnaire was designed and developed to identify indicators that affect teacher morale. A total score is provided by the instrument after each participant’s completion. An area of improvement is identified by the score indicated for each of the 10 categories; therefore, studying morale within multiple components provides a more accurate outcome.

Morale is “professional interest and enthusiasm that a person displays toward achieving individual and group goals in a given situation” (Bentley & Rempel, 1980, p. 3). The instrument asks participants to identify their own morale as it relates to the 10 categories. The subcategories are as follows.

Category 1: Teacher Rapport With Principal. This category addresses participant feelings about their relationship with their principal. More specifically, this category examines how proficient the participant feels their leader is and their feelings surrounding the way their leader communicates.

Category 2: Satisfaction With Teaching. Teachers with high morale enjoy teaching, and they know how to do their job well. This category allows teachers to indicate their feelings about their job responsibilities.

Category 3: Rapport Among Teachers. This category focuses on the relationship between colleagues. Teachers respond to questions that address teamwork, training, principles, impact, benefits, and proficiency of their peers.

Category 4: Teacher Salary. This category focuses on the emotions surrounding teacher salaries and salary policies. This factor explores salaries based on teacher competency compared to surrounding school districts, policy administration, and teacher input on salary policies.

Category 5: Teacher Load. This category focuses on the workload of teachers. In middle school, this can include lesson planning, maintaining grades, paperwork, parent contact, and supervision during extra-curricular activities.

Category 6: Curriculum Issues. This category examines how teachers feel about the effectiveness of the curriculum in identifying and addressing the needs of students.

Category 7: Teacher Status. This category reveals teacher feelings about the way the community views them. This category examines the benefits of being a teacher and the respect of the position.

Category 8: Community Support of Education. The category deals with teacher feelings about community support and willingness to support teachers and an educationally sound program.

Category 9: School Facilities and Services. This category deals with the adequacy of the buildings where teachers work. This factor also deals with the efficiency

surrounding the availability of needed materials.

Category 10: Community Pressures. This category focuses on community expectations and respect or lack thereof for teachers.

These 10 factors are explored through 100 question items on the Purdue Teacher Opinionnaire. The items are rated on a scale of 1-4. The four choices indicate the following choices: 4 (agree), 3 (probably agree), 2 (probably disagree), 1 (disagree). Each of the answer choices has a maximum factor score of 4 points. Table 6 explains how the Purdue Teacher Opinionnaire is scored.

Table 6

Purdue Teacher Opinionnaire Scoring Guide

Category	Number of items	Category scores
Teacher rapport with principals	20	80
Satisfaction with teaching	20	80
Rapport among teachers	14	56
Teacher salary	7	28
Teacher load	11	44
Curriculum issues	5	20
Teacher status	8	32
Community support of education	5	20
School facilities and services	5	20
Community pressure	5	20
Total: 100 items		Total morale score: 400

Table 6 shows how many questions address each factor. The factor score is created using the maximum score for each factor. The score is determined by multiplying the number of questions by the highest possible score for each question (four).

For this study, I created a survey with Google Forms using only the Purdue Teacher Opinionnaire statements that ask about teacher morale related to leadership behaviors with the five leadership responsibilities. The majority of these questions came

from the teacher rapport with leadership category. This category consists of questions that are explicitly tailored to the effect of leadership on teacher morale. Eighteen statements were used for this study. The category was scored based on the percentage of teachers answering the question at each level. The statements were rewritten so they could be presented as leadership behaviors instead of evaluative statements for school principals. The statements were placed into five categories. The categories stem from The Wallace Foundation (2013) research about school leadership. As mentioned in Chapter 2, principals have five key responsibilities. Those responsibilities became the categories for the survey. The rewritten questions were divided into the categories based on what the behavior addresses. Teachers were asked to rank the statements within each category based on their level of importance to them. The number 1 signified the most important behavior for each category, and the other statements were ranked until they were all placed in order of importance for that teacher. The teacher was only able to see the category and category name on the survey. Teachers were not able to see the description (pulled from The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Table 7 shows how the survey statements were written.

Table 7*Survey Statements*

Please rank the leadership behavior based on its importance to you in each category. Number 1 indicates high importance. Continue rating the behaviors until all have been rated in each category.

Category 1: Instructional Leader: Principals must set high expectations for all students to be academically successful.

1. The school leader recognizes and understands good teaching practices.
2. The school leader understands my teaching assignments and duties and can offer suggestions.
3. The school leader makes me feel comfortable when visiting my class to observe instruction.

Category 2: School Climate: Principals must create a hospitable climate in the school where students and staff feel safe and learning can take place.

1. The school leader avoids showing favoritism in his/her relations with staff.
2. The school leader makes a real effort to maintain close contact with the faculty.
3. The school leader is concerned with the problems that I am facing.
4. The school leader supports me with discipline.
5. The school leader supervises teachers without making us feel micromanaged.

Category 3: Distributive Leadership: Principals must create leaders throughout their building so staff realize their position in upholding the vision of the school.

1. The school leader makes good use of teachers' talents and abilities.
2. The school leader makes me feel like I am a leader in the school.
3. The school leader supports me when I make decisions about students' learning and consequences.

Category 4: Building Teacher Capacity: Principals must build teacher capacity to ensure teachers are teaching their best and students are learning from the best.

1. The school leader's leadership in faculty meetings challenges and facilitates my professional growth.
2. The school leader gives me the opportunity to give input on what I learn.
3. The school leader provides growth feedback after observing my lesson.

Category 5: Data Analysis: Principals must be able to analyze data to determine improvement needs and create plans.

1. Teacher data meetings are meaningful and do not feel like a waste of time.
 2. The school leader helps me understand my data to drive my instruction.
 3. The school leader takes the whole child into account when interpreting data.
 4. The school leader does not make me feel like a failure based on student data.
-

Table 7 shows which survey statements were used to investigate teacher

perceptions of the most important leadership behavior for each category.

The copyright for the Purdue Teacher Opinionnaire is expired. The instrument is open for public use, according to a representative from Purdue University; however, the representative was asked to send an email giving permission for the Purdue Teacher Opinionnaire to be used in this study (see Appendix A). Bentley and Rempel (1980) obtained validity for this instrument by asking principals in Indiana and Oregon schools to take the survey, answering the questions as if they were their staff. A median score was used to compare teacher responses to principal responses. The authors of the instrument noted that scores were not significantly different.

Phase 2: Focus Group

The College of Policing's (2018) "How to Guide: Conducting Focus Groups" explained that focus groups "are best used to explore the attitudes, opinions, self-reported behaviors, or experiences, of a particular group concerning a specific topic" (p. 2). A deeper understanding of perspectives can come from the focus group's conversations.

I invited teachers who participated in the survey to participate in a focus group. I formed a focus group of six teachers. I created open-ended questions based on the survey results to create a dialogue between participants. I compared the data gathered from the focus group to the data collected from the survey to develop and confirm themes.

Data Collection

This study used a leadership behavior survey and a focus group to collect data. The focus group was formed from the survey participants. The focus group discussed why teachers may have ranked the behaviors in a certain way. Teachers were given the opportunity to express whether they agree with the way the behaviors were ranked.

Teachers discussed how exhibiting the number 1 leadership behavior in each category could boost teacher morale.

Procedures Followed

I sought approval from the Institution Review Board from Gardner Webb University. Once consent was given, I drafted an email for principals in the small district chosen for the study (see Appendix B). The email asked for permission to be added to the agenda and to be permitted to attend a scheduled faculty meeting. If a faculty meeting was not planned within the month, I asked for an alternate route to collecting survey data. I asked for permission to email teachers the survey. Once permission was granted from principals, I sent an email to ask for volunteers to complete the survey (see Appendix C). If teachers consented to complete the survey, the survey was shared through a QR Code or a Google link in an email (see Appendix D). All information needed was provided in the email. Teachers were asked at the time of survey completion to volunteer to participate in the focus group. At the end of the survey, teachers were asked to email me their names if they would like to participate in the survey. Six teachers volunteered to participate in the focus group.

Once surveys were completed, I analyzed the data to form a theory about the leadership style that will best heighten teacher morale in rural middle schools.

I concluded the data collecting process with a focus group. I provided two options for meeting to conduct the focus group. The participants could attend the focus group via a Zoom link or face to face. All participants decided to attend the focus group meeting face to face. The focus group was used to gather more information about the ranking results from the survey. Teachers were able to discuss whether they agreed or not with

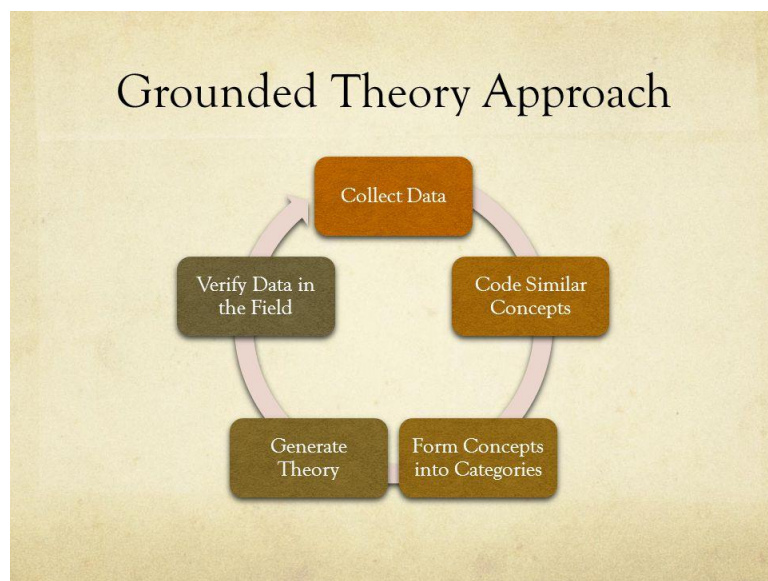
what the survey revealed about the most important behaviors from each category. The focus group provided an opportunity for more data to be gathered at one time from multiple participants, as opposed to interviews.

Data Analysis

My goal was to develop theories for answering the research questions through data collection. I used the grounded theory research design. “Grounded theory research is designed to develop a theory of social phenomena based on the field data collected in a study” (Ary et al., 2014, p. 33). According to Noble and Mitchell (2016),

Grounded theory is a research method concerned with the generation of theory, which is grounded in data that has been systematically collected and analyzed. It is used to uncover such things as social relationships and behaviors of groups, known as social process. (para. 1)

Figure 6 illustrates how data are analyzed in a grounded theory research design.

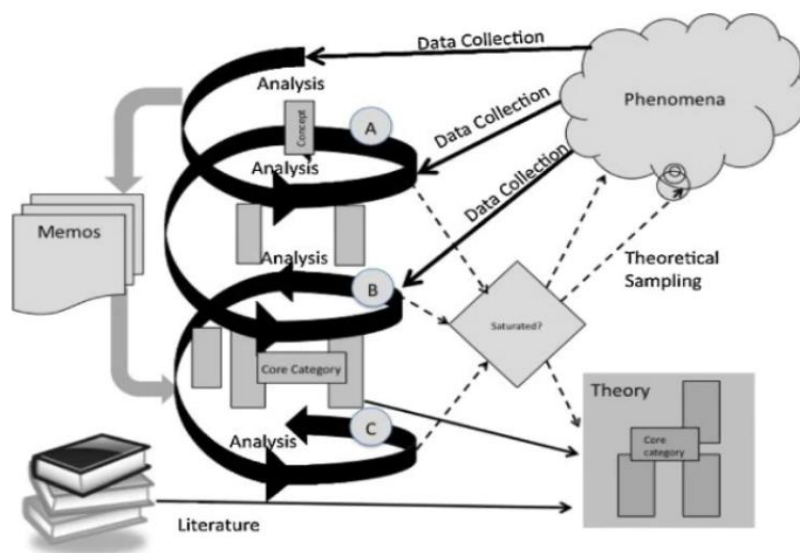
Figure 6*Grounded Theory Approach*

Note. This image was created by Laerd Statistics (2018) to show the process for analyzing data using the Grounded Theory Method. From Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Using SPSS Statistics (<https://statistics.laerd.com/spss-tutorials/pearsons-product-moment-correlation-using-spss-statistics.php>)

Figure 6 illustrates the process for analyzing data for theory development. I followed this outline for data analysis. For this study, data were collected through a survey initially. The survey was analyzed and coded. Coding was used to help me understand the data that would be collected from the survey and focus group. According to Charmaz (2006), "Coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory" (p. 46). I looked for common patterns and themes that derived from the conversation during the focus group to help develop theories. "In a brief explanation, the analysis process in the theory involves concept labeling, categorizing, identifying core categories, finding relations among categories, and generating a theory from such

relationships” (Cho & Lee, 2014, p. 7). I sought to use coding to help identify themes to form theories. “Themes are a level of abstraction beyond categories” (Ary et al., 2014, p. 518).

In traditional research designs, the research starts with a hypothesis and research is used to prove or disprove the hypothesis. Unlike traditional research design, grounded research theory design allows the data to form theories. When researchers use the grounded theory research model, they begin with the problem. They begin to collect data and code the data, sorting the data by common themes. The researcher continues to gather data, updating and adding to the categories identified through coding as needed. Last, the researcher will adopt certain categories as theoretical concepts (Charmaz, 2006). Theories will be delivered from the survey. I verified the data and theories through the focus group. Figure 7 illustrates all the data that are considered when developing a theory from the grounded research theory approach.

Figure 7*The Grounded Theory Method*

Note. This figure was created to show the stages for identifying a theme through the Grounded Theory Method. From “Using Grounded Theory to Study the Experience of Software Development,” by S.Adolph, W. Hall, and P. Kruchten, 2011 (<https://doi.org/10.007/s10664-010-9152-6>)

As shown in Figure 7, researchers using this model consider the analysis of the data, core categories, memos and scripts, and the literature to develop a theory. I did those things to develop a theory for the research questions in this study.

During Phase 2 of this study, I asked open-ended questions that led to a discussion about the survey results. In addition to theory discussion and follow-up questions, we discussed leadership behaviors. During the focus group meeting, we discussed the leadership behaviors teachers prefer and discussed why those leadership behaviors would best create a school climate that would foster job satisfaction.

Ethical Concerns

Ensuring ethics were paramount while gathering and analyzing data in this study, I was very transparent with willing participants. I explained the topic of research, which instrument would be used, and how their identity would be protected. A consent form was read to participants and signed before the focus group began. The risk to human subjects was minimal. All subjects are adults over the age of 18. All participants can function in the teaching profession, which makes them mentally able to participate in this study.

I also considered the participants from the school where I serve as assistant principal. I did not want teachers to feel pressured to participate or feel that their participation could affect their jobs negatively. Teachers who were willing to participate in the study from my school were protected in the following ways:

1. Survey—No identifying measures were added to the survey.
2. Focus Group—Teachers from the school where I am employed could volunteer to participate in the focus group. Focus groups seem to be less threatening than individual interviews.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the research methods I used to answer the research questions. There was a discussion about the researcher, the methodology, study participants, data analysis, the data collection instrument, and ethical concerns. I described the instrument in detail, and I shared the formula for the morale score. I shared how I gathered teacher perceptions on the importance of leadership behaviors in each category. Both the survey and focus group were necessary to answer the research

questions. The goal of Chapter 4 is to demonstrate the work I presented in this chapter.

Chapter 4: Results

The results of this study are presented in this chapter. Important information for this study, the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the research design are reviewed before results are revealed.

Purpose

This qualitative study was conducted to shed light on the importance of addressing low teacher morale and provide methods for improving teacher morale through leadership behaviors. This study was designed to determine the leadership behaviors that will best heighten morale as perceived by middle school teachers. I investigated how leadership behaviors affect teacher morale positively.

Research Questions

Two questions were used to guide this study. The questions set the framework for how the survey was administered and how the focus group operated. The survey addressed Research Question 1, and the focus group was used to answer Research Question 2.

1. Within five categories, what are teacher perceptions of the importance of leadership behaviors exhibited by middle school principals?
2. Based on teacher perceptions, how do leadership behaviors influence morale in rural middle schools?

Research Design

I used two data collection instruments to collect data for this study. The first instrument was the survey. Based on the committee and IRB suggestions, the survey was designed for participants to identify the most critical leadership behavior within five

leadership responsibilities (categories) as specified by The Wallace Foundation (2013): instructional leadership, school climate, distributive leadership, building teacher capacity, and data analysis. Under each leadership responsibility, participants were provided three to five leadership behaviors and asked to rate the behaviors based on their importance as middle school teachers.

The second data collection instrument was the focus group. The focus group met to discuss the results of the survey. The group discussed teacher reasons for choosing the essential behavior within the five responsibilities and how those selected behaviors would heighten morale in rural middle schools.

Overview of Participants

I sent the survey to all 62 middle school teachers in a small rural district. The district is comprised of three Grades 6-8 middle schools and two K-8 schools. Only the teachers who teach Grades 6-8 were invited to participate in this study, and those teachers teach core content classes, elective art classes, or special education classes. Of the 62 teachers asked to complete the survey, 39 teachers completed it. Although I would have liked to receive 100% participation, the 63% participation rate is commendable and representative of the area.

The focus group included participants who volunteered to participate after completing the survey. As noted in Chapter 3, the focus group could be comprised of six to eight members based on volunteers. If more than that number had volunteered to participate, I would have pulled names to determine who would participate in the focus group. That was unnecessary because six teachers expressed interest in participating in the focus group after completing the survey, and those six teachers were invited to attend

and accepted the invitation. Of the six focus group members, four were African American and two were White. Years of experience ranged from 22 years of experience to 9 years of experience, and the members' experiences varied. Table 8 outlines participant demographics and backgrounds.

Table 8

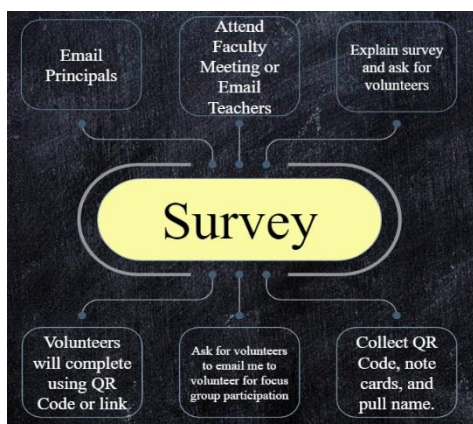
Focus Group Participants

Participant demographics	Years of experience	Teaching experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 African American • 2 White • 5 Females • 1 Male 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 22 years • 22 years • 21 years • 20 years • 12 years • 9 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 years high school, 17 years middle • K-12, SPED, ELA, AA History • SPED • 5 years elementary, 4 years middle • All middle school ELA • Middle and high school elective course

As outlined in Table 8, all focus group members were considered veteran teachers, having more than 5 years of teaching experience. The group participants have worked in various elementary to high school settings, and participants have taught core content courses, elective courses, and SPED methods. The focus group was comprised of a very diverse group with diverse experiences.

Data Analysis

The data collection for this study was categorized into two different phases. The first phase was for data collection through the survey. The second phase was for data collection through the focus group. Figure 8 shows the process of inviting participants to complete the survey.

Figure 8*Phase 1 Process—Survey*

As described in Figure 8, I emailed principals a copy of what I would email to teachers and asked to be added to the agenda of an already planned faculty meeting or for permission to send the survey (which was attached to the consent form) to teachers. All principals permitted me to send the survey to teachers in their building. Teachers had the option of completing the survey via a link or through a QR code. At the end of the survey, teachers were asked to email me if they would like to participate in the focus group.

Phase 2 of data collection was the focus group. Figure 9 illustrates the process for the focus group.

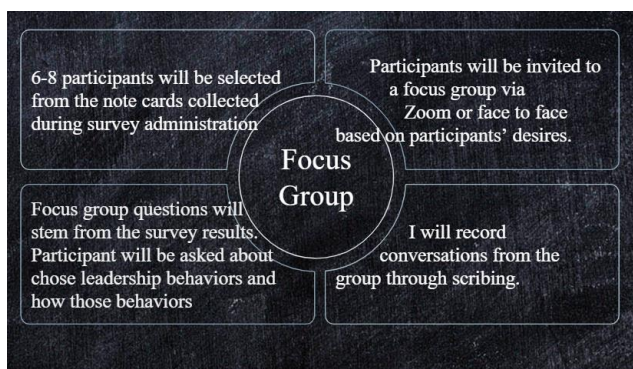
Figure 9*Phase 2 Process—Focus Group*

Figure 9 describes the plan for collecting participants for the focus group. The plan was to select six to eight participants through drawing note cards; however, that implied that more than eight teachers would volunteer to participate in the study through participation in the focus group. Pulling names from note cards was not necessary because only six teachers volunteered to participate. Since this number met my minimum goal, I invited those six teachers, and they all agreed to participate. The focus group decided to meet face to face, and I scripted the conversation.

Survey

The survey was used as the basis for collecting data for this study. The survey was split into five different sections, with each section consisting of three to five items for participants to consider. Altogether, the survey included 18 items. Under each of the categories, teachers were asked to choose leadership behaviors based on their importance to them on a scale of 1-3, 1-4, or 1-5, with one being the essential leadership behavior and the highest number in each of the groups being the least important leadership behavior. Figure 10 shows participant views of the survey.

Figure 10*Leadership Behavior Survey*

Leadership Behaviors Category 1

Description (optional)

Instructional Leadership: Read the three leadership behavior statements. Rank the behaviors based on their importance to you. 1 indicates the most important and 3 indicates the least important. *

	The school leader recog...	The school leader under...	The school leader make...
Choice 1	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Choice 2	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Choice 3	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Leadership Behaviors Category 2

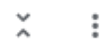
Description (optional)

School Climate: Read the five leadership behavior statements. Rank the behaviors based on their importance to you. 1 indicates the most important and 5 indicates the least important. *

	The school lea...	The school lea...	The school lea...	The school lea...	The school lea...
Choice 1	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Choice 2	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Choice 3	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Choice 4	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Choice 5	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

(continued)

Leadership Behaviors Category 3



Description (optional)

Distributive Leadership: Read the three leadership behavior statements. Rank the behaviors based on their importance to you. 1 indicates the most important and 3 indicates the least important. *

The school leader make... The school leader make... The school leader suppo...

Choice 1	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Choice 2	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Choice 3	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Leadership Behaviors Category 4



Description (optional)

Building Teacher Capacity: Read the three leadership behavior statements. Rank the behaviors based on their importance to you. 1 indicates the most important and 3 indicates the least important. *

The school leader's lead... The school leader gives ... The school leader provid...

Choice 1	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Choice 2	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Choice 3	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

(continued)

Leadership Behaviors Category 5

Description (optional)

Data Analysis: Read the four leadership behavior statements. Rank the behaviors based on their importance to you. 1 indicates the most important and 4 indicates the least important.

	Teacher data meeti...	The school leader ...	The school leader t...	The school leader ...
Choice 1	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Choice 2	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Choice 3	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Choice 4	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 10 shows how participants were asked to complete this survey. It was essential to determine which leadership behaviors were the most important based on teacher perceptions to answer the questions that guide this research study.

The first leadership responsibility in this study is instructional leadership. Of the three behaviors listed for the category, 54% of the participants identified “The teacher recognizes and understands good teaching practices” as the most important behavior for the category. The second leadership responsibility is school climate. Of the five behaviors listed in this category, “The school leader supports me with discipline” was identified as an essential behavior, with most (38%) of the participants choosing the statement. The third leadership responsibility is distributive leadership. Of the three leadership behaviors listed in this category, 69% of the participants identified “The school leader supports me with decisions I make about students’ learning and consequences” as the most important

behavior in this category. The fourth leadership responsibility is building teacher capacity. Of the three leadership behaviors listed in this category, 64% of the participants identified “The school leader provides growth feedback after observing my lesson” as the most important leadership behavior for this category. The final leadership responsibility for this study is data analysis. Participants named two behaviors the most important of the four leadership behaviors listed in this category. Thirty-three percent identified each of the behaviors as necessary: “The school leader takes the whole child into account when determining data” and “The school leader does not make me feel like a failure based on student data.” Table 9 reveals how participants rated the other leadership behaviors in the category. How all the behaviors were rated became an important factor in determining themes and recommendations for this study.

Table 9*Leadership Behaviors Rating*

Category	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
Category 1: Instructional Leader: Principals must set high expectations for all students to be academically successful.		
The school leader recognizes and understands good teaching practices.	21	54%
The school leader understands my teaching assignments and duties and can offer suggestions.	9	23%
The school leader makes me feel comfortable when visiting my class to observe instruction.	9	23%
Category 2: School Climate: Principals must create a hospitable climate in the school where students and staff feel safe, and learning can take place.		
The school leader avoids showing favoritism in his/her relations with staff.	6	15%
The school leader makes a real effort to maintain close contact with the faculty.	2	5%
The school leader is concerned with the problems that I am facing.	4	10%
The school leader supports me with discipline.	15	38%
The school leader supervises teachers without making us feel micromanaged.	12	32%
Category 3: Distributive Leadership: Principals must create leaders throughout their building so that staff realize their position in upholding the vision of the school.		
The school leader makes good use of teachers' talents and abilities.	10	26%

(continued)

Category	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
The school leader makes me feel like I am a leader in the school.	2	5%
The school leader supports me when I make decisions about students' learning and consequences.	27	69%
Category 4: Building Teacher Capacity: Principals must build teacher capacity to ensure teachers are teaching their best and students are learning from the best.		
The school leader's leadership in faculty meetings challenges and facilitates my professional growth.	6	15%
The school leader gives me the opportunity to give input on what I learn.	8	21%
The school leader provides growth feedback after observing my lesson.	25	64%
Category 5: Data Analysis: Principals must be able to analyze data to determine improvement needs and create plans.		
Teacher data meetings are meaningful and do not feel like a waste of time.	7	19%
The school leader helps me understand my data to drive my instruction.	6	15%
The school leader takes the whole child into account when interpreting data.	13	33%
The school leader does not make me feel like a failure based on student data.	13	33%

As outlined in Table 9, the number of participants who identified the most important behavior in some categories heavily outweighs the other behaviors. In contrast, in some categories, the data distribution was much closer. For instance, in Category 2,

teachers identified one leadership behavior as the most important because it received the most responses (38%); however, teachers almost equally identified another leadership behavior as most important, with 32% of the participants choosing that behavior as the most important. This was considered when interpreting these data. It was also important to note the behaviors teachers identified as least important based on their responses. These factors led to the development of themes.

Emerging Themes: Survey

I used the grounded theory method to identify themes that were emerging from these data. “Grounded theory research is designed to develop a theory of social phenomena based on the field data collected in a study” (Ary et al., 2014, p. 33). According to Noble and Mitchell (2016),

Grounded theory is a research method concerned with the generation of theory, which is grounded in data that has been systematically collected and analyzed. It is used to uncover such things as social relationships and behaviors of groups, known as social process. (para. 1)

Two significant themes developed from the disaggregation of this data (support and trust). Teachers want support within two categories: teaching and discipline, and teachers want to feel trusted as a professional. The survey statements that identify a need for teachers to have a relationship directly with the teacher received a lower response than the statements that recognize the need for support. Table 10 shows the rationale used to support selecting the themes based on these data.

Table 10*Data Themes*

Identified theme	Survey response
Support with teaching	The school leader provides growth feedback after an observation (64%). The school leader can identify and understands good teaching practices (54%).
Support with discipline	The school leader supports me with discipline (38%).
Professional trust	The school leader supervises teachers without making us feel micromanaged (32%). The school leader supports me when I make decisions about students' learning and consequences (69%). The school leader takes the whole child into consideration when interpreting data (33%). The school leader does not make me feel like a failure based on students' data (33%).

As Table 10 shows, the response from the survey falls within these three categories. Responses were low in those areas where teacher leadership roles and input were important, and responses were also lacking in the school leader and teacher relationships. The focus group helps provide additional insight into these themes (that were not revealed to participants) and what teachers deem necessary for heightening morale.

Focus Group

At the end of the survey, a statement asked teachers to email me if they would like to be a part of the focus group. Six teachers emailed me, and those teachers were invited to participate in the focus group. A focus group protocol was developed per IRB's

suggestion and was used during the focus group (see Appendix E). I thanked the participants for participating in the survey. I passed out the consent form and asked participants to read it and sign it to continue with participation (see Appendix F). All participants signed the consent form. I reiterated that participants could discontinue participation by simply leaving the focus group. They could ask for statements to be stricken from my notes at any time during the discussion. I also reread the comments to provide another opportunity for ideas to be clarified or removed from my notes. I established the focus group norms, and the focus group discussion began. The results were shown to the participants one category at a time. We discussed teacher perceptions of the most crucial behavior in each category. We also went back through the survey results to discuss why the chosen behaviors would boost teacher morale. We discussed rankings for other behaviors when the data were closely distributed.

I started the focus group conversation by informing participants that we would be looking at the survey results. We looked at all behaviors listed in each category, identified the one chosen as the most important, and discussed why teachers selected that behavior as the most important for the category.

I displayed the results for Category 1: Participant 1, “It is very important for administrators to be able to identify good teaching practices. They can’t tell us what we are doing well if they don’t know”; Participant 2, “Administrators lay out expectation for teaching. They set teaching expectations. They have to know which expectations to set”; Participant 3, “Yes, but teachers have to remember that they can’t let perfect be the enemy of getting better. Administrators need to build on what teachers are already doing well”; Participant 4, “I think it is important to also remember that good teaching practices

may look different from class to class. They have to understand good teaching practices in the different classrooms”; Participant 2, “If the teacher chose the other options in this category, they are probably first-year teachers. Once you become a veteran teacher, the relationship with your principal isn’t as important”; and Participant 5, “Once suggestions are offered, teachers should try to implement them.”

I displayed the results for Category 2: Participant 4, “Discipline is big thing teachers are facing today”; Participant 1, “If we don’t have support with behavior, that undermines everything. We can’t do our job if discipline isn’t handled”; Participant 4, “Discipline is a problem everywhere. More teachers are facing it now than ever before”; Participant 6, “Parents aren’t parenting like they used to. We have to be parent and teacher”; Participant 3, “Parents are working more than one job or working nights and can’t parent their children. They are trying to provide for their family”; Participant 2, “I’m looking at the results, and discipline is not a problem for me. I feel like if you are able to handle discipline, the micromanaged statement is definitely the most important”; Participant 4, “Yes, if you handle discipline, you probably wouldn’t have chosen that one”; Participant 6, “But this shows that some teachers need help with how to handle discipline in their classroom”; Participant 5, “I don’t have an issue with discipline, so the micromanagement statement is the most important to me”; and Participant 2, “I agree, but no one likes to be micromanaged.” All agreed with this statement. Participant 4 shared, “Give me freedom to work.” Participant 5 stated, “Yes, you hired me; let me work.”

I displayed the results for Category 3: Participant 1, “No reversing teacher decisions”; Participant 3, “Not all the time anyway. I mean, there may be times when a decision has to be reversed, but let the teacher know”; Participant 1, “For example, in a

meeting with leadership, teacher and parent, a decision is made. Later the parent calls the administrator, and the decision is changed. Once a decision is made, let's stick with it"; Participant 6, "Teachers have to be supported"; Participant 5, "Administrators should have the teachers back in front of parents, and if anything needs to be discussed, let's do that behind closed doors"; Participant 3, "The other statements were probably lower on the importance scales because I don't think teachers need a principal to make them a leader for them to be a leader"; and Participant 4, "Yes, I agree with that. In this category, all we need is for leaders to be consistent with decision making."

I displayed the results for Category 4: Participant 3, "For me to grow, I personally need Professional Development"; Participant 5, "Well, I think it's all in how the teacher interpreted the statements for this one"; Participant 2, "I personally like getting feedback from my lesson"; Participant 1, "Yes, me too. Especially when it is growth feedback. Growth feedback—what can I do differently?"; Participant 4, "I like to have growth feedback when you sit down and have a face-to-face conversation with me"; Participant 2, "Yes, that provides an opportunity for dialogue. The teacher will have an opportunity to explain in the feedback conversation what was happening in the lesson and understand the feedback"; Participant 4, "Yes, it provides an opportunity for dialogue"; Participant 2, "This gives the teacher an opportunity to explain in the feedback what was happening in the lesson"; Participant 3, "Now that I hear what y'all are saying, I agree personalized feedback is the best feedback. Teachers don't want to know what you did when you were a teacher. They want support with their teaching style"; and Participant 6, "What works for one, doesn't work for all."

I displayed the results for Category 5: Participant 4, "You can't compare our

scores to other states”; Participant 3, “Success in teaching should be based on student growth, not their ability to hit a certain mark”; Participant 6, “Absolutely, that statement needs to be placed around the school”; Participant 4, “Yep, that tells you that teaching is happening in that classroom”; Participant 2, “Yes and look at students’ homelife”; Participant 5, “Consider everything”; Participant 3, “No one wants to feel like a failure”; Participant 4, “The irony in this is that the school leader may take the whole child into account, but the state doesn’t”; Participant 5, “But, the school leader knows the children, so no matter what the states say about the data, the school leader can present it in a different way”; Participant 2, “What looks like a failure may actually be a celebration when the whole child is considered”; Participant 1,

I’ve worked in a school where the principal was all about the numbers. It was my worst year and my last year at that school. Across the board, the scores weren’t good. Students had never had a timed test. None of that was considered;

Participant 4, “The standard for failure and success needs to be redefined. We can’t compare our kids to other districts. We need to look at our own students and monitor their growth to determine success”; Participant 6, “The way we compare students is not important”; and Participant 3, “A test doesn’t assess everything. We can’t control the norms for students.”

Table 11 reveals the focus group statements for each of the behaviors deemed the most important in the survey.

Table 11*Correlation Between Survey and Focus Group Statements*

Most important leadership behavior	Focus group statements
Instructional leadership: The school leader recognizes and understands good teaching practices.	<p>“Administrators are responsible for laying out teaching expectations. They do not need to tell us how to teach, just set the teaching expectations.”</p> <p>“So we don’t teach ineffectively.”</p> <p>“Don’t let perfect be the enemy of getting better. Help teachers become better teachers. Don’t just tell them what they are doing wrong. Help them. Recognize what they are doing good and build on that.”</p> <p>“Administrators have to also realize that good teaching practices may look different based on a classroom, students, subject, etc. I can’t teach my class the same way that the art teacher teaches her class.”</p> <p>“Yes, understand good teaching practices in different types of classrooms.”</p>
School climate: The school leader supports me with discipline. The school leader supervises teachers without making us feel micromanaged.	<p>“If we don’t have support with behavior then that undermines everything. We can’t do our job.”</p> <p>“Discipline is a problem everywhere. More teachers are facing it now than ever.</p> <p>Parents aren’t parenting like they used to. “We have to be parents and teachers.”</p> <p>“Parents are working more than one job and/or working nights. Some of them don’t have time to parent because they have to provide for their family.”</p> <p>“I’m looking at the results, and discipline is not a problem for me. I feel like if you are able to handle discipline, the micromanaged statement is definitely the most important.”</p> <p>“Yes, if you handle discipline, you probably wouldn’t have chosen that one.”</p> <p>“Micromanaging doesn’t work for teachers”</p> <p>“You hired me; let me work.”</p> <p>“Give me freedom to work.”</p>
Distributive leadership: The school leader supports me when I make decisions about students’ learning and consequences.	<p>“No reversing teachers’ decisions.”</p> <p>“Not all the time anyway.”</p> <p>“For example, in a meeting with leadership, teacher and parent a decision is made. Later the parent calls the administrator, and the decision is changed. Once a decision is made, let’s stick with it.”</p> <p>“We need to feel supported.”</p>

(continued)

Most important leadership behavior	Focus group statements
Building teacher capacity: The school leader provides growth feedback after observing my lesson.	“Administrators should have the teacher’s back in front of parents, and if anything needs to be discussed, let’s do that behind closed doors.”
	“Consistency with decision making and allowing teachers to make a decision is important.”
	“...and make teachers feel safe to even make a decision.”
	“I like getting feedback from my lessons. That’s what helps me grow.”
	“Me too. Professional Development is okay, but I grow the most when feedback is tailored to me and my teaching style.”
	“Growth feedback- tell me what I did well and tell me what I can do better.”
	“Sit down face to face with me and have the conversation.”
Data analysis: The school leader takes the whole child into account when interpreting data. The school leader does not make me feel like a failure based on students’ data.	“Yes, that provides an opportunity for dialogue. The teacher will have an opportunity to explain in the feedback conversation what was happening in the lesson and understand the feedback.”
	“Personalized feedback is the best feedback. Teachers don’t want to know what you did when you were a teacher. They want support with their teaching style.”
	“What works for one, doesn’t work for all.
	“You can’t compare our scores to other states.”
	“Success in teaching should be based on student growth, and not students’ ability to hit a certain mark.”
	“Yes, and look at the student’s home life.”
	“Consider everything.”
	“No one wants to feel like a failure”
	“What looks like a failure may actually be a celebration when the whole child is considered.”
	“These two really go together.”
	“I’ve worked in a school where the principal was all about the numbers. It was my worst year and my last year at that school.”
	“The standard for failure and success needs to be redefined. We can’t compare our kids to other districts. We need to look at our own students and monitor their growth to determine success.”
	“A test doesn’t assess everything.”

Table 11 helps to show what conversations were like for each of the categories. The discussions led to an understanding of how teachers feel and provided insight into what teachers need from their school leaders. The conversations in the focus group led to a decision to make two leadership behaviors important within the school climate category.

After discussing each of the survey categories, I asked participants to imagine that the leader does not exhibit any other leadership behaviors in the survey. I asked them to consider that the leader only exhibits the seven leadership behaviors discussed in detail. I then asked if these were the only behaviors the leader demonstrated, how would that boost teacher morale and increase job satisfaction. The focus group revisited each behavior. Participants worked together to summarize a statement for how behaviors would boost morale if the leader exhibited each of these behaviors. Table 12 shows the responses.

Table 12*Leadership Behaviors Boost Morale*

Leadership behavior	How does the behavior boost morale?
Instructional leadership: The school leader recognizes and understands good teaching practices.	"If the leader does this, teachers would feel empowered and would make them want to do their best. If the leader lets us know when we are using good practices, we will feel appreciated."
School climate: The school leader supports me with discipline. The school leader supervises teachers without making us feel micromanaged	"Discipline is half the battle. If we are supported with discipline, we can do our job of teaching students better. We just need someone to back us up."
Distributive leadership: The school leader supports me when I make decisions about students' learning and consequences.	"This will make teachers feel like their leader supports us and trust us to make the right decision for our students." "Trust our ability to make decisions. We are professions."
Building teacher capacity: The school leader provides growth feedback after observing my lesson.	"Teachers would be more confident about observations and even look forward to them. Teachers would know that the administrator only wants us to get better and isn't just looking for what they are doing wrong. The observation is to help them grow."
Data analysis: The school leader takes the whole child into account when interpreting data. The school leader does not make me feel like a failure based on students' data.	
Other statements	"I would love to teach at a school where the leader does these seven things." "Yes, if the leader did just these six things, it would be a great school to work at." "Don't bring me another donut, support me in my teaching." "Fluff (celebrations, giveaways, luncheons) don't matter if the leader isn't supporting teachers."

As noted in Table 12, focus group participants stated how the identified most

essential leadership behaviors would impact teacher morale positively. Participants agreed that leaders who exemplify seven of the 18 leadership behaviors presented in the survey would heighten confidence in their school. By displaying those behaviors, leaders will empower their teachers and make their teachers feel supported, trusted, and like they are a part of a team. The conversation from the focus group contributed to the emerging themes for this study.

Emerging Themes–Focus Group

Support and trust are the two themes that emerged from the survey. I did not reveal previously identified themes during the focus group, and I was looking for new themes and how these themes are reinforced. New themes derived from the focus group, and the conversations reinforced the themes I had already identified. The new themes of the focus group were teacher empowerment and a sense of belonging. These two themes presented themselves through many statements made by the focus group participants. The other ideas reinforced the previously identified themes: support (teaching and discipline) and trust.

Addressing Research Questions

Research Question 1. Within five categories, what are teacher perceptions of the importance of leadership behaviors exhibited by middle school principals? I addressed this research question in both the survey and focus group. I created this question to determine which leadership behaviors teachers deem the most important for their leaders to exhibit. In the survey, teachers identified seven of 18 leadership behaviors as the most important. The 18 leadership behaviors were divided into five different categories. The seven most important leadership behaviors for leaders to exhibit are

1. The school leader recognizes and understands good teaching practices.
2. The school leader supports me with discipline.
3. The school leader supervises teachers without making us feel micromanaged.
4. The school leader helps me when I make decisions about student learning and consequences.
5. The school leader provides growth feedback after observing my lesson.
6. The school leader takes the whole child into account when interpreting data.
7. The school leader does not make me feel like a failure based on student data.

Participants provided insight into why each leadership behavior is vital to teachers during the focus group. Table 11 outlines the statements for each leadership behavior.

Research Question 2: Based on teacher perceptions, how do leadership behaviors influence morale in rural middle schools? I addressed this question during the focus group. Participants discussed the seven leadership behaviors identified in the survey. Table 12 displays the participants' thoughts on how teacher morale can be heightened if the leader exhibits the identified behaviors. According to the participants, if school leaders exhibit the seven leadership behaviors, teachers will feel empowered and more confident and have a sense of belonging.

I think it is helpful to see all the information together. Table 13 shows all the data related to the research question and how it all correlates with the emerging themes.

Table 13*Research Questions and Data Correlation*

Research questions	Survey results	Focus group contributions	Emerging themes
1. Within five categories, what are teacher perceptions of the importance of leadership behaviors exhibited by middle school principals?	1. The school leader recognizes and understands good teaching practices.	“Don’t let perfect be the enemy of getting better. Help teachers become better teachers. Don’t just tell them what they are doing wrong. Help them. Recognize what they are doing good and build on that.”	Support with teaching–Teachers desire growth feedback but also desire to be told when they are doing something well.
	2. The school leader supports me with discipline.		
	3. The school leader supervises teachers without making us feel micromanaged.	“If we don’t have support with behavior then that undermines everything. We can’t do our job.”	Support with discipline–Teachers desire support from their school leader with discipline. Teachers feel that they are dealing with behavioral issues that haven’t been present before.
	4. The school leader supports me when I make decisions about students’ learning and consequences.	“Micromanaging doesn’t work for teachers.”	
	5. The school leader provides growth feedback after observing my lesson.	“Consistency with decision making and allowing teachers to make a decision is important.”	Professional trust–Teachers do not want to be micromanaged.
	6. The school leader takes the whole child into account when interpreting data.	“Growth feedback- tell me what I did well and tell me what I can do better.”	Teachers want to be trusted to make decisions and to do their job.
	7. The school leader does not make me feel like a failure based on student data.	“What looks like a failure may actually be a celebration when the whole child is considered.”	

(continued)

Research questions	Survey results	Focus group contributions	Emerging themes
2. Based on teacher perceptions, how do leadership behaviors influence morale in rural middle schools?	1. The school leader recognizes and understands good teaching practices.	“If the leader does this, teachers would feel empowered and would make them want to do their best. If the leader lets us know when we are using good practices, we will feel appreciated.”	Teacher Empowerment—teachers want to feel empowered to make decisions about their teaching practices, student learning, and student consequences.
	2. The school leader supports me with discipline.		
	3. The school leader supervises teachers without making us feel micromanaged.	“Discipline is half the battle. If we are supported with discipline, we can do our job of teaching students better. We just need someone to back us up.”	Sense of belonging—Teachers want to feel as if they are a part of a team or group. Teachers want to feel that they are working with their administrator to help them grow.
	4. The school leader supports me when I make decisions about students’ learning and consequences.	“This will make teachers feel like their leader supports us and trust us to make the right decision for our students.”	Support with discipline—Teachers desire support from their school leader with discipline. Teachers feel that they are dealing with behavioral issues that haven’t been present before.
	5. The school leader provides growth feedback after observing my lesson.	“Teachers would feel more confident about observations. Teachers would know that the administrator only wants to help us grow.”	
	6. The school leader takes the whole child into account when interpreting data.		
	7. The school leader does not make me feel like a failure based on student data.	“This would make teachers feel like they are a part of a team, and the leader knows what they are dealing with. They know that their leader knows they are doing their best for students and don’t let a score determine that.”	Support with teaching—Teachers desire growth feedback but also desire to be told when they are doing something well.
			Professional trust—Teachers do not want to be micromanaged. Teachers want to be trusted to make decisions and to do their job.

Table 13 shows all the data and the interpretations together in one table. Each question was addressed through the survey and focus group. Based on responses from those two data collections, themes emerged. I added the emerging themes to Table 13 to show the correlation between the research question, the collected data, and the emerging themes.

Trustworthiness

I obtained the credibility of the research findings with multiple data collection instruments; I used a survey and a focus group to collect data for this research study. The conclusions of this research study may not be transferred to other districts. It would be necessary for districts to survey their teachers to determine if the teachers in the district desire the same behaviors from their school leaders. Decisions made about the findings in this study were based solely on participant responses. Enough information has been provided for this study to be replicated to determine which leadership behaviors are the most important to teachers in their district.

Summary

In this chapter, I revealed the findings from the research study. I captured teacher perceptions of vital leadership behaviors through an 18-item survey divided into five different leadership responsibility categories. I sent the survey to 62 middle school teachers in a small rural area; 39 middle school teachers completed the survey. I captured more data and insight through a focus group. The focus group was comprised of six teachers who participated after completing the survey. I asked questions in the focus group that targeted responses for why teachers identified certain leadership behaviors as the most important and how those leadership behaviors heighten morale. A total of five

themes were developed from the survey and focus group.

In Chapter 5, I make recommendations based on these data and suggest further implications.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to discover which leadership behaviors teachers perceived to be the most important for leaders in rural middle schools to exhibit. The theoretical framework chosen for this study was created by Abraham Maslow and is known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943). Maslow's (1943) theory focuses on human motivation, and Maslow's approach is based on deficiency needs and growth needs. Individuals must meet the deficiencies within each growth need to move up the categories. According to Maslow, an individual cannot move higher until every deficiency need has been fulfilled in their current category (Huitt, 2007). In 1943, Maslow published a paper, "A Theory of Human Motivation," and in the article, he described the five needs categories for all humans. These needs are arranged in a specific order (Kremer & Hammond, 2013).

Thirty-nine teachers who work in a rural middle school completed an 18-item survey. The survey asked teachers to rank leadership behaviors within five leadership responsibility categories based on their importance. Six middle school teachers participated in a focus group to discuss the survey results and to discuss how those leadership behaviors would heighten morale in rural middle schools. This study revealed seven critical leadership behaviors for the school leader to exhibit. This study also revealed how those seven behaviors would boost the morale of teachers teaching in rural middle schools.

Two research questions guided this study.

1. Within five categories, what are teacher perceptions of the importance of leadership behaviors exhibited by middle school principals?

2. Based on teacher perceptions, how do leadership behaviors influence morale in rural middle schools?

This chapter summarizes the results, discusses the implications, offers suggestions, highlights the delimitations and limitations of this study, provides recommendations for furthering the research, and finally, provides closing remarks and reflections.

Summary of Findings

The study sought to reveal leadership behaviors that would positively impact morale based on teacher perceptions. The leadership behaviors were ranked based on five leadership responsibilities. The Wallace Foundation (2013) has invested in the study of school principals, and their work reveals five responsibilities of school-based leaders:

1. Principals must set high expectations for all students to be academically successful.
2. Principals must create a hospitable climate in the school where students and staff feel safe and learning can take place.
3. Principals must create leaders throughout their building so staff realize their position in upholding the vision.
4. Principals must build teacher capacity to ensure teachers are teaching their best and students learn from the best.
5. Principals must analyze data to determine improvement needs and create plans (The Wallace Foundation, 2013).

The Wallace Foundation concluded that leaders must be competent in performing all five responsibilities for schools to succeed. Table 14 shows the way the five Wallace

Foundation responsibilities were titled for teachers.

Table 14

Wallace Foundation Responsibility and Title

Wallace Foundation responsibility	Title for survey
Principals must set high expectations for all students to be academically successful.	Instructional leader
Principals must create a hospitable climate in the school where students and staff feel safe and learning can take place.	School climate
Principals must create leaders throughout their building so staff realize their position in upholding the vision.	Distributive leadership
Principals must build teacher capacity to ensure teachers are teaching their best and students are learning from the best.	Build teacher capacity
Principals must be able to analyze data to determine improvement needs and create plans.	Data analysis

Once the categories were determined, as shown in Table 14, I chose questions from the Purdue Teacher Opinionnaire that were appropriate within each section. I used 18 leadership behaviors, and each leadership responsibility category had three to five leadership behaviors to rank.

The leadership behaviors chosen for this study can be found within three major leadership styles as introduced at the beginning of this study: transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and situational leadership. Bass and Avolio (1994) described four characteristics of transformational leaders:

1. Intellectual Stimulation—The leader provides a safe space for originality, avoids openly humiliating followers, and motivates followers to be innovative in solving problems.

2. Inspirational Leadership—The leader expresses the belief that everyone has a voice in solving problems and all problems have the potential of reaching a solution.
3. Idealized Influence—The leader shows concern for all presented problems and is interested in reaching a solution.
4. Individualized Consideration—The leader listens intently to followers.

The most effective transactional leadership form is the contingent reward leadership wherein leaders “set goals, clarify desired income, provide both positive and negative feedback, and exchange rewards or recognition for accomplishments when they are observed” (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000, pp. 369-370). According to Meier (2016), in situational leadership, the leader’s leadership behaviors are determined by the follower’s needs. Situational leaders use one of the four leadership behaviors based on their followers’ readiness (retelling, selling, participating, and delegating).

Based on the data from the survey and focus group, seven leadership behaviors were identified as the most critical behaviors for middle school principals to exhibit:

1. The school leader recognizes and understands good teaching practices.
2. The school leader supports me with discipline.
3. The school leader supervises teachers without making us feel micromanaged.
4. The school leader supports me when I make decisions about student learning and consequences.
5. The school leader provides growth feedback after observing my lesson.
6. The school leader considers the whole child when interpreting data.
7. The school leader does not make me feel like a failure based on student data.

Based on the seven most important leadership behaviors, a focus group of six teachers developed statements to justify how each of those leadership behaviors will boost teacher morale:

1. "If the leader does this, teachers would feel empowered and would make them want to do their best. If the leader lets us know when we are using good practices, we will feel appreciated."
2. "Discipline is half the battle. If we are supported with discipline, we can do our job of teaching students better. We just need someone to back us up."
3. "This will make teachers feel like their leader supports us and trust us to make the right decision for our students."
4. "This will make teachers feel like their leader supports us and trust us to make the right decision for our students."
5. "Trust our ability to make decisions. We are professions."
6. "Teachers would be more confident about observations and even look forward to them. Teachers would know that the administrator only wants us to get better and isn't just looking for what they are doing wrong. The observation is to help them grow."
7. "Teachers would be more confident about observations and even look forward to them. Teachers would know that the administrator only wants us to get better and isn't just looking for what they are doing wrong. The observation is to help them grow."

Five themes emerged from the study, and those themes will become the basis for the implications and suggestions for this study:

1. Support with Teaching—Teachers desire growth feedback and desire to be told when they are doing something well.
2. Support with Discipline—Teachers desire support from their school leader with discipline. Teachers feel that they are dealing with behavioral issues that haven't been present before.
3. Professional Trust—Teachers do not want to be micromanaged. Teachers want to be trusted to make decisions and to do their job.
4. Teacher Empowerment—Teachers want to feel empowered to make decisions about their teaching practices, student learning, and student consequences.
5. Sense of Belonging—Teachers want to feel like they are a part of a team or group. Teachers want to feel that they are working with their administrators to help them grow.

Implications for Practice

This study revealed which behaviors teachers perceive to be the most important for the middle school leader to exhibit. As outlined by The Wallace Foundation (2013), principals have five primary responsibilities in which they must be competent if their school will be successful. Principals must be instructional leaders, be distributive leaders, create a positive school climate, analyze student data successfully, and build teacher capacity. Teachers have identified the behaviors to meet those responsibilities while heightening teacher morale. The data revealed that teachers want to be supported with discipline and their teaching; they want to be trusted as a professional to make decisions and do their job. Teachers want to be empowered to make decisions about their teaching

and students, and they want to feel like they are a part of a team. I examined each of these factors related to the literature presented in Chapter 2.

Support With Discipline

Schools must have a consistent plan for addressing discipline. Teachers and students should know what is expected regarding the discipline code of conduct. Everyone in the school needs to be on the same page (Rebore & Walmsley, 2007). In most cases, when a teacher requests administrative support in discipline, they have tried all the strategies they could with no results. Administrators must assure teachers that these exhibited behaviors will not be tolerated and will be handled (Whitaker, 2012). Assuring teachers that challenging behaviors will be addressed should be a routine practice (Whitaker, 2012).

In addition to this literature, according to the conversation in the focus group, the type of support teachers may need is classroom management. Participant 2 stated, “I’m looking at the results, and discipline is not a problem for me. I feel like if you are able to handle discipline, the micromanaged statement is definitely the most important.” Participant 4 shared, “Yes, if you handle discipline, you probably wouldn’t have chosen that one.” Participant 6 stated, “But this shows that some teachers need help with how to handle discipline in their classroom.” According to Terada (2019), the teacher’s classroom can be managed with six behaviors:

1. Plan your environment—Make your classroom warm and inviting for students.
Avoid too many decorations. They can be overstimulating. Create a seating plan; students are more likely to misbehave when choosing their seats.
2. Co-create norms—A common mistake is creating rules, posting them on the

board, and expecting compliance. A co-consensus on how the classroom will be governed works better. Have a conversation with students and create rules together.

3. It's not one-size-fit-all–Tier consequences to avoid jumping to the extreme when a student misbehaves. Students should be aware of the consequences and how the consequences increase in intensity if behaviors continue. The teacher should go through the tier.
4. Consider what's unspoken–Often, teachers can manage behaviors by using eye contact or placing themselves near the undesired behavior. Presence is imperative in maintaining classroom behaviors.
5. Relationship, relationship, relationship–A strong relationship is the foundation of classroom management. Greet students as they leave your classroom and wish them well on the rest of their day as they go. Place yourself at the door when students enter and when they are leaving. Take time to learn about your students' home lives and their interests.
6. Pick your battles (but battle when you have to)–Do not address every misbehavior in the classroom. If a student speaks out of turn but quickly refocuses, teachers should not address the behavior. Avoid escalating situations by not embarrassing students. The best way to discipline is private.

Support With Teaching

According to the survey and the focus group, teachers want support with instruction. Teachers want to feel that they have the autonomy to make decisions about teaching practices. They want their school leader to recognize the good teaching practices

and, after observations, use those practices to help them grow. According to the literature, teachers appreciate the opportunities to have a voice in what they desire to learn more about. Administrators provide opportunities for teachers to be a part of the professional development plan. Professional development should always be planned according to staff member needs (Friedman & Reynolds, 2011). As Friedman and Reynolds (2011) noted, “Mandated professional development activities- in which administrators select the topics, and teachers are a captive audience for a half-day or a whole day- are notoriously unproductive” (p. 126). Seyfarth (2007) listed characteristics that indicate a successful professional development plan. Leaders should ask themselves these seven questions when planning for professional development:

1. Is the content relevant to what teachers face in their classrooms?
2. Is the learning outcome clearly stated for participants?
3. How can we incentivize teacher participation (intrinsically and extrinsically)?
4. Is the content applicable to participants?
5. What is the plan for follow-up on the teacher’s implementation of what is learned?
6. Is the presenter knowledgeable in the area that is being presented?
7. Is there a plan for professional development to provide teachers an opportunity to implement learning effectively?

According to the focus group, teachers learn more when the feedback or professional development is personalized and tailored to teacher needs. If school leaders regularly observe and meet with teachers to offer feedback and answer these seven questions, professional development will become more personalized and tailored to teacher needs.

Trusting Relationships

Based on the results from the survey and focus group, teachers want to feel like their principal trusts them to be professionals and make decisions about teaching and student consequences. The literature offers that trust requires leaders to be transparent, reliable, and honest. Trust is essential in building a professional relationship between teachers and the principal. The process for gaining trust may seem long, but it is necessary (Meador, 2016). Building a trusting relationship is not determined by the words used but by the actions the leader exhibits to staff (Fullan, 2014). According to Wong (2020), there are nine steps leaders can take to foster trusting relationships with employees:

1. Be a good listener.
2. Offer opportunities for feedback to be provided.
3. Offer gratitude to staff daily.
4. Build trusting relationships.
5. Promote a growth mindset.
6. Be consistent.
7. Practice the use of tactfulness approaches.
8. Make everyone feel included.
9. Be truthful and upfront.

Teacher Empowerment

This study revealed that the identified leadership behaviors would help empower teachers which will boost teacher morale. According to Spencer (2020), there are seven ways to empower teachers:

1. Honor teacher expertise—Trust teachers to do their job and give them a platform to offer suggestions.
2. Find blueprints and tools—Provide the instructional guidelines for teachers. They do not need a “color by number” guideline, just the expectations.
3. Provide experiences for sharing ideas—Provide opportunities for teachers to lead professional development and allow teachers to ask questions and learn from each other.
4. Give teachers choice in their learning.
5. Engage in action research—Allow teachers to determine which strategies to experiment with to conduct their action research for classroom work.
6. Honor teacher autonomy—The idea of shared leadership. Instead of delegating responsibilities, give teachers the ability to design systems and structures to put into place.
7. Permit teachers to fail—De-emphasize state testing and create a culture where teachers feel free to take chances and be creative.

Sense of Belonging

The data revealed that teachers want to feel like part of a team. They want to feel that they are valued as team members and that test scores do not determine their success as team players. Leaders must make teachers believe that they are a part of the school and empower them. Before teachers buy into the vision or mission of the leader, the teachers will have to be a part of the creating process for the vision and mission (Kurland et al., 2010). Visions and goals must be clear and easy for teachers to follow. If they are not easy to follow, leaders should offer support. Without clear guidelines and information,

teachers perform daily duties without the end goal in mind (Naile & Selesho, 2014).

Kouzes and Posner (2007) suggested five exemplary leadership practices: demonstrate expectations, invite followers to help form the vision, avoid settling for mediocrity, employ distributive leadership, and always aim to inspire. These practices explain that administrators must lead by example; they must involve staff in creating the vision, raise other leaders among the staff, and motivate staff to continue the work through frustrations.

Implications for Practice Summary

The findings of this research contribute to education and the need for school leaders to heighten morale in schools, especially when morale is extremely low due to the added stress of the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings reveal that the study captured the information I targeted from the research and data collection. A summary of the implications for practice is as follows:

1. School leaders should consider supporting teachers with discipline through teacher training and ensuring the proper systems are in place to handle discipline issues outside the teacher's hands. The school leader should also support teachers in decisions about student consequences within the guidelines of the school board policy.
2. School leaders should consider supporting teachers by trusting teachers to make sound decisions about their teaching practices. Leaders should recognize good teaching practices and commend teachers when they use them. School leaders should consider meeting with teachers to discuss observation feedback and use what the teacher does well to offer growth suggestions. Leaders

should personalize professional development based on the leader's observations and conversations with teachers.

3. School leaders should consider building trusting relationships with teachers. School leaders should remain consistent in their decision-making and avoid micromanagement. The school leader should consider using the research practices in this study to build trusting relationships with their staff.
4. School leaders should empower their teachers by implementing the seven identified leadership behaviors. School leaders should consider implementing the research practices in this study to empower teachers.
5. School leaders should consider implementing the researched strategies in this study to make their staff feel like they are a part of the school. Avoid making teachers feel like a failure based on student data but consider the whole child when discussing the data. Redefine success to mean growth and not the ability to hit a particular mark. Create buy-in by allowing teachers to share in creating the mission and vision of the school.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

Throughout this study, there had to be reflections on the delimitations and limitations of this study.

Limitations

The findings of this study were limited in the following ways:

1. Data collected could be generalized because they were compiled from a small rural area in South Carolina.
2. The timeframe for data collection was limited, reflecting teacher satisfaction

during a specific time.

3. These data were collected during a global pandemic which must be considered as a contributing factor to teacher morale.
4. The higher female population in the district skewed data.
5. The sample size was small. I surveyed teachers who teach Grades 6-8 in three middle schools.
6. I work at one of the middle schools used for this study.
7. Survey results were based on how each of the participants interpreted the task.

Delimitations

The delimitation or boundary of this study is that there is an opportunity available to survey all Grade 6-8 teachers in South Carolina. This study and its conclusions are relevant for the sampling area and may not apply to all schools in South Carolina. I sent the survey to 62 middle school teachers; 39 teachers completed the survey. I gathered participants by emailing teachers an invitation to participate. The initial invitation resulted in 23 participants. I sent a follow-up email, and 16 more participants completed the survey. The goal was to have 50 participants complete the survey, which would have been an 81% participation rate; however, I was able to obtain a 63% participation rate. The objective of this study was to gather the perspective of teachers about the importance of leadership behaviors and how those behaviors can heighten morale. With a 63% participation rate, this study successfully reached this objective.

Suggestion for Further Research

The findings of this study produce curiosity about the perceptions of the

elementary and high school staff in rural areas. I suggest the same survey be used to gain the perspective of elementary and high school teachers teaching in rural school districts. By increasing the sample size, the district can better understand what teachers need from their school leaders. It would also be interesting to see if the needs in leadership behaviors differ based on the teachers' levels.

This study focused on middle school teachers and leaders. This study could be used as action research for principals who lead in rural middle schools for further research. According to the University of Central Missouri (as cited by Whitaker, 2015),

Action research involves a systematic process of examining the evidence.

This type of research results are practical, relevant, and can inform theory.

Action research is different from other forms of research as there is less concern for the universality of findings. More value is placed on the relevance of the findings to the researcher and the local collaborators. (p.

1)

Figure 11 is a diagram of how action research should work.

Figure 11*Action Research Diagram*

Note. This image was created to show the process of an action research mode.

From “Action Research in Education: Methods and Examples,” by J. McCallister, 2021 (<https://study.com/academy/lesson/action-research-in-education-examples-methods-quiz.html>)

I identified the problem in this study, and I devised a plan. Leaders can implement this plan, observe the effect of the implemented leadership behaviors on their staff, and reflect on the process.

Leaders can put the implications into action and progress monitor over the school year to determine effectiveness in raising teacher morale. I suggest training be provided to leaders on how to implement the seven strategies before the action research begins. Middle school leaders could determine the validity of the study by implementing the behaviors and practices.

Conclusion

This study aimed to gain teacher perceptions on which leadership behaviors were the most important and how the implementation of those behaviors boosted teacher morale. This study targeted teachers teaching in small, rural districts. This study focused on the middle school level. By establishing the seven identified behaviors that teachers deem the most important, leaders working in small, rural middle schools can focus directly on those behaviors to heighten teacher morale. This study provides insight into what teachers need from their leaders. Behaviors that leaders may feel are the most important for their staff may not be. This study offers an opportunity for leaders to survey their staff to determine which leadership behaviors matter instead of leading blindly.

I formed two research questions to guide this study. I answered both questions through this study. I answered the questions through an 18-item survey where teachers were tasked with ranking leadership behaviors under each of the five leadership responsibility categories. I also answered the research questions through conversation during the focus group. The data led me to create seven leadership behaviors and five ways to heighten morale by implementing those seven behaviors. Five themes emerged from the data. By evaluating the types of behaviors that were being chosen, I was able to identify three themes. Two more themes emerged during the focus group, and the focus group reiterated the other three themes. The five themes are listed below.

1. Support with Teaching—Teachers desire growth feedback and to be told when they are doing something well.
2. Support with Discipline—Teachers desire support from their school leader with discipline. Teachers believe they are dealing with behavioral issues that have

not been present before.

3. Professional Trust—Teachers do not want to be micromanaged. Teachers want to be trusted to make decisions and to do their job.
4. Teacher Empowerment—Teachers want to feel empowered to make decisions about their teaching practices, student learning, and student consequences.
5. Sense of Belonging—Teachers want to feel like they are a part of a team or group. Teachers want to feel that they are working with their administrators to help them grow.

Conducting this research has provided a lot of insight into the importance of determining what teachers need from their leader instead of leading without any direction. In the same way that teachers gather information about their students before teaching them, school leaders need to complete a needs assessment before leading.

As a lifelong practitioner and leader in education, this study has branded a concept that I would want to enforce moving forward in leadership. Leaders need to understand that teachers want to be supported, and the best way to know what that support looks like for teachers is to ask. As Participant 4 stated, “Fluff [celebrations, giveaways, luncheons] don’t matter if the leader isn’t supporting teachers.” It is the school leader’s duty to support teachers. Teachers need to feel this support (Pae et al., 2012). The work of the school cannot be done without teachers. Determining their support needs is time well spent in ensuring job satisfaction and heightened morale.

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Appendix A

Purdue Permission Email

Teacher Opinionnaire



Luzadder, Ashley D <aluzadde@purdue.edu>
to me ▾

Good morning,

I am in charge of the College of Education Teacher Opinionnaire. I give you permission to use it for your studies.

Ashley Luzadder

She/Her/Hers

Receptionist

College of Education

Beering Hall

100 N University Street, 6114

West Lafayette, IN 47907

o: 765-494-2341



Appendix B**Email to Principals**

Dear Principal,

I am a Doctorate student at Gardner Webb University, and I am studying what teachers perceive to be the best leadership behaviors for heightening morale. The title of my study is, "A Sense of Belonging: An Examination of Leadership Behaviors on Teacher Morale in Rural Middle Schools." The purpose of this study is to give a voice to middle school teachers, as I will invite them to share their preference of leadership behaviors within five leadership responsibilities. This study is being conducted to shed light on the importance of addressing low teacher morale. It is also being undertaken to provide methods for improving teacher morale through leadership behaviors. I intend to reveal, through this study, the essential leadership behaviors as determined by middle school teachers.

I would like to invite teachers who teach 6th-8th grades to complete the survey and possibly be a part of a focus group to collect data. The survey asks teachers to rank leadership behaviors within five leadership responsibilities according to how important the leadership behavior is to the teacher. The survey does not ask teachers to identify the characteristics or behaviors of their school leader. This is not an evaluative survey. The survey is completely anonymous. Please click [here](#) to view the survey.

If granted and if possible, I would like to be added to the agenda of an already planned faculty meeting to present the survey to teachers. If that is not possible, I would like to email it to them. Please let me know if either of these options are permissible or if you would rather teachers from your building be excluded from the study.

[Redacted Signature]

Thank you,

Taquilla Barksdale

Doctorate Candidate

Appendix C

Email to Teachers

Dear Teachers,

Would you please click on the link and respond to the survey? It will take no longer than 15 minutes of your time. I am a doctoral student at Gardner Webb University, and I am studying what teachers perceive to be the best leadership behaviors for heightening morale. The title of my study is, "A Sense of Belonging: An Examination of the Impact of Leadership Behaviors on Teacher Morale in Rural Middle Schools." The purpose of this study is to give you a voice as I am inviting you to share your preference of leadership behaviors within five leadership responsibilities. The survey and a focus group are the instruments being used to collect data.

Your name will not be included in this study. It is completely anonymous. Please click [HERE](#) to read the consent form and take the survey. You will be asked to click a link or scan a QR code. Choose one option to take the survey. I appreciate your help in collecting the data.

Furthermore, if you would like to volunteer to be a part of the focus group to discuss the results, please let me know. Again, your identity will be protected.

Thank you,

Taquilla Barksdale

Doctorate Candidate

Appendix D
Informed Consent Form–Survey

Gardner-Webb University IRB
Informed Consent Form for Online Survey
A Sense of Belonging: An Examination of the Impact of Leadership Behaviors on Teacher Morale in
Rural Middle Schools

The purpose of this research is to give you voice as I invite you to share your preference of leadership behaviors within five leadership responsibilities. This study is designed to determine which leadership behaviors will best heighten morale in middle schools. As a participant in the study, you will be asked to complete a survey to rank leadership behaviors within five leadership responsibilities based on their importance to you. You will scan the QR code or click a link to take the survey. It is anticipated that the study will require about 15 minutes of your time. Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your data will be anonymous which means that your name will not be collected or linked to the data. There are no anticipated risks in this study. You will receive no payment for participating in the study. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by exiting the survey. Data from this study will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

If you have questions about the study, contact:

Researcher's name: Taquilla Barksdale

Researcher telephone number: 864-787-0680

Researcher email address: tbarksdale1@gardner-webb.edu

Faculty Advisor name: Dr. Benjamin Williams

Faculty Advisor telephone number: 919-634-0346

Faculty Advisor email address: Bwilliams22@gardner-webb.edu

Dr. Sydney K. Brown

IRB Institutional Administrator

Telephone: 704-406-3019

Email: skbrown@gardner-webb.edu

Clicking the link or scanning the QR Code below to continue to the survey indicates your consent to participate in the study:

Link: <https://forms.gle/XdJhXGu2c1Dq37u5A>

QR Code:



If you are not 18 years of age or older or you do not consent to participate, please close this window.

Appendix E
Focus Group Protocol

Welcome: Welcome, thank you for volunteering to participate in the focus group for this study.

Consent Form: Your participation in the focus group is confidential. I will serve as a note taker, but I will not record your name. *(Hand out the consent form).* Please review the consent form and sign it if you would like to continue participation. *(Participants who do not sign, will be excused from the meeting. Collect all consent forms. Offer participants an unsigned copy of the consent form).*

Purpose: You all have completed the survey. The survey asked teachers to rank leadership behaviors based on their importance to them. Today, we are going to look at the results from the survey. We are going to discuss each of the five leadership responsibilities and the way the behaviors are ranked. The goal of the focus group is to discuss how the highest ranked behavior in each category could improve teachers' job satisfaction and heighten morale.

Meeting Norms:

1. Everyone deserves to be heard. One person will talk at a time.
2. We will stay on topic.
3. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, you are more than welcome to excuse yourself from the meeting or pass on a question.
4. There are no wrong or right answers. All ideas and thoughts are welcome.

Focus Group Discussion:

1. Let's look at the rankings for the first leadership responsibility (Instructional Leadership). *(Hand out survey results for the first question.)* This survey reveals that the most important behavior within in this leadership responsibility is _____. Why do you think teachers found this behavior to be the most important behavior for this category? If leaders exhibited this behavior, how would it improve teachers' job satisfaction?
2. Let's look at the rankings for the second leadership responsibility (School Climate). *(Hand out survey results for the second question.)* This survey reveals that the most important behavior within in this leadership responsibility is _____. Why do you think teachers found this behavior to be the most important behavior for this category? If leaders exhibited this behavior, how would it improve teacher's job satisfaction?
3. Let's look at the rankings for the third leadership responsibility (Distributive Leadership). *((Hand out survey results for the third question.)* This survey reveals that the most important behavior within in this leadership responsibility is _____. Why do you think teachers found this behavior to be the most important behavior? If leaders exhibited this behavior, how

would it improve teacher's job satisfaction?

4. Let's look at the rankings for the fourth leadership responsibility (Building Teacher Capacity). (*Hand out survey results for the fourth question.*) This survey reveals that the most important behavior within in this leadership responsibility is _____. Why do you think teachers found this behavior to be the most important behavior? If leaders exhibited this behavior, how would it improve teacher's job satisfaction?
5. Let's look at the rankings for the fifth leadership responsibility (Data Analysis). (*Hand out survey results for the fifth question.*) This survey reveals that the most important behavior within in this leadership responsibility is _____. Why do you think teachers found this behavior to be the most important behavior? If leaders exhibited this behavior, how would it improve teacher's job satisfaction?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not discussed as it relates to the five leadership responsibilities and leadership behaviors?

Thank you so much for participating. This information has been very helpful.

Appendix F

Informed Consent Form- Focus Group

Gardner-Webb University IRB
Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: A Sense of Belonging: An Examination of the Impact of Leadership Behaviors on Teacher Morale in Rural Middle Schools

Researcher: Taquilla Lashay Barksdale (Doctoral Candidate/Gardner Webb University)

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to give you a voice, as I invite you to share your preference of leadership behaviors within five leadership responsibilities. This study is designed to determine which leadership behaviors will best heighten morale in middle schools. Through this study, I intend to reveal the important leadership behaviors as determined by middle school teachers teaching in a rural school district.

Procedure

You will participate in a focus group. The focus group will discuss the results from the survey. The survey asks teachers to rank leadership behaviors within five categories. The categories are based on leadership responsibilities. In the focus group, you will discuss how the revealed (from the survey) best leadership behaviors impact teacher morale. You will be invited to participate in the focus group via Zoom or a face-to-face meeting. I will scribe the conversation. I will read the scripted notes at the end of the focus group. Participants can decide at that time if anything should be removed. The focus group meeting will not be recorded. Names of the participants will not be recorded in the notes.

Time Required

It is anticipated that the study will require about 20 minutes of your time.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identified state.

Confidentiality

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your data will be anonymous which means that your name will not be collected or linked to the data. Because of the nature of the data, it may be possible to deduce your identity; however, there will be no attempt to do so, and your data will be reported in a way that will not identify you.

Risks

There are no anticipated risks in this study.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits associated with participation in this study. The study may help us to understand teacher's perception of leadership behaviors and how those behaviors heighten teacher morale. The Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

Payment

You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

Right to Withdraw From the Study

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

How to Withdraw From the Study

- If you want to withdraw from the study, you can exit the Zoom meeting at any time. If the focus group meets face to face, you may excuse yourself from the meeting at any time.
- If you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact me (tbarksdale1@gardner-webb.edu). Since data is anonymous, there may not be possible to locate your specific data. There is no penalty for withdrawing.

If you have questions about the study, contact:

Taquilla Lashay Barksdale
EdD Candidate
Gardner-Webb University
8647870680
Tbarksdale1@gardner-webb.edu

Dr. Benjamin Williams
Faculty Research Advisor
Gardner-Webb University
919-634-0346
Bwilliams22@gardner-webb.edu

If the research design of the study necessitates that its full scope is not explained prior to participation, it will be explained to you after completion of the study. If you have concerns about your rights or how you are being treated, or if you have questions, want more information, or have suggestions, please contact the IRB Institutional Administrator listed below.

Dr. Sydney K. Brown
IRB Institutional Administrator
Gardner-Webb University
Telephone: 704-406-3019
Email: skbrown@gardner-webb.edu

Voluntary Consent by Participant

I have read the information in this consent form and fully understand the contents of this document. I have had a chance to ask any questions concerning this study and they have been answered for me. I agree to participate in this study.

_____	Date: _____
Participant Printed Name	
_____	Date: _____
Participant Signature	