

SCHOOL CULTURE, TEACHER EXPERIENCE, AND COMMITMENT:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF
HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS AT A CYBER CHARTER SCHOOL

by

Sarah Cole Brodish

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

James Sigler, PhD, Committee Chair

Sarah Kerins, EdD, Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the influence of school culture and leadership on the experiences and levels of commitment of high school teachers at a cyber charter academy in the northeastern United States. The theoretical framework for this study was based on Dansereau, Graen, and Haga's Leadership-Member Exchange Theory, which examined the impact of leadership relationships on school culture and teacher experience. This study sought to answer the primary research question: How does school culture influence teacher experience? A phenomenological approach was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of these experiences—specifically, a hermeneutic phenomenological design allowed for a more personal connection between the researcher and the study. The participants in this study were high school teachers at a cyber school in the northeastern United States. The sample population consisted of 12 teachers who have worked at the cyber school for two or more years. Data collection methods included a questionnaire, individual interviews, and letter-writing prompts, with data analysis informed by van Manen, Saldaña, and Moustakas's practices.

Keywords: hermeneutic phenomenology, school culture, school climate, leadership qualities, teacher experience, commitment, school improvement

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Dedication

To my husband, Rob, thank you for supporting me throughout this process. It has taken much time away from us. Now that I am done, I am sure I will find something else to keep us busy.

To my sons, Beau and Baker, thank you for your unwavering love. I know you will not remember this time, as you are far too young, but I hope this will inspire you in the future.

To my parents, thank you for being the best role models and always encouraging me to pursue my passions. Rob and I cannot thank you enough for your unconditional love and support for us and the boys.

To my brother, Zachary, thank you for always being the overachieving star child, forcing me to also strive for perfection.

To my friends, thank you for understanding the all-consuming nature of the dissertation writing process. Finally, I can now say “yes” to hangouts.

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I thank Dr. James Sigler and Dr. Sarah Kerins for your encouragement and guidance throughout this dissertation. Your belief in me and my studies sustained me during the most challenging moments.

I want to thank my colleagues and the participants in this study. You have all helped in the effort to enhance school culture to create better teacher experiences. The results of my research can help pave the way to a brighter future for the field of education so that we can support student achievement, teacher experience, and institution success.

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List of Abbreviations

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX)

National Education Association (NEA)

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL) Theory

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

In January 2022, a survey conducted by the National Education Association (Will, 2022) revealed that 55 percent of its members were planning to leave or retire from the education profession earlier than expected (Walker, 2022). This trend is not new, as many teachers have consistently cited issues with school leadership and culture for their decision to depart—with 49 percent attributing their departure to school leadership and 40 percent citing school culture as the main reason (Walker, 2022). It is a common belief that institutional hardships are often rooted in the actions of those in leadership positions, and this sentiment is reflected in the education field as well (García et al., 2022). This research explores the relationship between school leadership, school culture, and teacher experience to address this concern. The study will focus on how teachers' perceived culture and leadership influence their level of commitment. Chapter One lays out the framework for this study by discussing its historical, social, and theoretical context. It also presents the problem statement and purpose statement before concluding with a discussion on the significance of the study, research questions, and relevant definitions.

Background

According to Balu et al. (2009), approximately eight percent of teachers left the profession between 2003 and 2005, followed by a significant increase in this trend in 2019, where 13.8% of educators chose to exit (García & Weiss, 2019). The situation has worsened significantly in recent years, as evidenced by the massive departure of over 300,000 teachers in the United States within two years, from 2020 to 2022 (M. Smith, 2022). Despite education being historically perceived as a prestigious and coveted profession, its appeal among college graduates has significantly declined due to the various challenges teachers face. This issue has

been highlighted in mainstream media and has been extensively discussed in research by Balu et al. (2009), García and Weiss (2019), and M. Smith (2022). Notably, García and Weiss (2019) reported a staggering 15% decrease in college students pursuing education degrees between 2008 and 2016. The severe teacher shortage in American schools is no longer an approaching crisis; it is here.

The United States has faced multiple crises over the past decade, including a global pandemic, heightened levels of violence, and political turmoil (Bethune, 2022). However, one crisis that has significantly impacted the nation is the shortage of teachers (Chernikoff, 2023; Morrison, 2023). While the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the shortage (Pelika, 2022), this issue has been a slow-moving concern for at least 15 years (Bettini et al., 2022). According to the National Education Association, there was an increase in teacher job openings following the 2008 Great Recession (Pelika, 2022). However, by 2017, before the pandemic, the number of educator openings had surpassed the number of teacher hires, resulting in a significant shortage within the U.S. education system (Pelika, 2022). This trend has continued, with the current number of teacher openings totaling approximately 300,000 compared to only around 200,000 hires (Pelika, 2022). The shortage of teachers in the United States has become a long-standing issue, with various contributing factors exacerbating the problem (Dos Santos, 2021; Gillani et al., 2022). Addressing this crisis and finding sustainable solutions is crucial to ensure adequate qualified educators for present and future generations (Bethune, 2022).

Historical Context

The primary objective of education, which is to acquire knowledge and skills, has remained a constant goal for centuries (Wimberley, 2016). However, as time progresses and society and culture evolve, educational philosophy, instructional strategies, and teacher

experience have also significantly changed (Hopkins et al., 2019; Unkel, 1994). For instance, during the agrarian era, education was primarily centered around an agricultural society, with schools tailoring their schedules and curriculum to meet the demands of farming (G. Thomas, 2021), and this period had a clear and concise focus on agriculture-related education. However, as history has shown us, the education system in the United States adapts to fulfill various duties at different points in time (Hopkins et al., 2019). In subsequent eras, such as the industrial era of the early 20th century, schooling was impacted by external factors such as child labor laws (Stoddard, 2009) and nationalistic ideologies during times of war (Abu El-Haj, 2010). More recently, schools have had to adapt to address societal issues such as student safety by implementing preparedness measures and educating staff and students (Cruz et al., 2023). This pattern highlights the symbiotic relationship between education and its serving nation, with the needs of one reflecting the needs of the other. As society evolves, education must evolve to meet its demands and serve its purpose effectively.

In the 1980s, there was a significant shift in educational paradigms, policies, and practices (Howard, 2018). This change was primarily triggered by the release of *A Nation at Risk*, the final report of the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983). With its depiction of American schools as mediocre, *A Nation at Risk* (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) generated a sense of failure and fear across the nation (Kamenetz, 2018). Amidst this widespread panic, teachers were put under immense pressure and held solely responsible for the perceived failures in education. This publication, *A Nation at Risk* (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), significantly influenced the entire nation's educational approach, laying the foundation for modern educational practices in the United States (Howard, 2018). So impactful was this report

that it continues to shape discussions and decisions related to education today. The legacy of *A Nation at Risk* (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) reminds us of the power and responsibility of teaching.

During a time of controversy in education, legislation was put into place to support the development of students across America and ultimately enhance the performance of schools (Close et al., 2020; Dee & Jacob, 2011). This began in 2002 under President George W. Bush with the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act. Despite undergoing revisions and name changes through multiple presidential successions (Ydesen & Dorn, 2022), this act sparked more significant debate than the influential United States National Commission on Excellence in Education's *A Nation at Risk* report of 1983 (Rhodes, 2012). At its core, the No Child Left Behind Act was enacted to ensure that all students achieve academic standards, regardless of background or resources. Targeting marginalized groups who lacked access to high-performing schools or personal tutors, this legislation placed a heavy responsibility on teachers to meet its legal mandates and drive student success (Mitani, 2018). Educators must continue to navigate and adapt to their assignments while striving for academic excellence for all students. Although its purpose was entirely necessary, teachers once again bore much responsibility for the legal mandates within this act and its reinvigorated versions.

The No Child Left Behind Act implemented federal and state testing and created new accountability standards (Duckworth et al., 2012; Hursh, 2019). Schools were evaluated based on their performance on these exams, with low scores resulting in the label of *failing* and potential corrective measures or closure (Hodges, 2018; Rosburg et al., 2017). In this system, teachers were held accountable for poor student performance (Morgan et al., 2017; Williams, 2010), even though there are many factors at play in a student's academic success, not all of which are within

the control of their teacher or school (Aturupane et al., 2013; Liao et al., 2019). A Columbia University's Teaching College study identified significant external influences such as responsibilities at home, housing and food insecurity, and limited financial means as critical contributors to student achievement (Quarles et al., 2020). While schools can undoubtedly assist in connecting students with necessary resources, it is unfair to place the sole responsibility for test scores on the shoulders of teachers and schools when other influential factors are at play. Instead, it is essential to recognize the multifaceted nature of student achievement and address all contributing factors to truly support students' academic success (Aturupane et al., 2013; Quarles et al., 2020).

The implementation of high academic standards and accountability has been a long-standing effort in American education, stemming from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) passed in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson, which aimed to ensure equal access to education (Casalaspì, 2017; Rury & Saatcioglu, 2011). To support this goal, various subsequent policies have been enacted to promote educational equity and excellence, including requirements for standardized assessments, professional development opportunities, and targeted educational programs (Gamson et al., 2015). However, while these policies aimed to level the playing field in education, they have also created a tense testing culture that prioritizes performance results over student lifelong learning (Jensen et al., 2018). As a result, this unrelenting pressure on educational systems has consistently taken its toll on educators' and students' mental and physical well-being, leading to widespread dissatisfaction and disengagement (Kearns, 2011). The demand for higher academic standards has placed a significant burden on teachers for decades, with no signs of slowing down in today's ever-evolving educational reform landscape. With the continuous progress and growth of the nation,

advancements in technology, and growing competitiveness on a global scale, teachers in America are feeling the heat now more than ever (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020).

As our society has progressed into the 21st century, it is evident that the demands placed on education have also evolved. Alongside rapid technological advancements, educators and policymakers face numerous challenges in today's educational landscape. These include issues related to student well-being and safety (Shelley et al., 2021), classroom overcrowding (Francis & Barnett, 2019), financial constraints (S. Hill et al., 2021), equity concerns (Kyriakides et al., 2022), and most recently, high teacher turnover rates (T. Nguyen et al., 2020). With these pressing concerns, educational leaders and policymakers must prioritize student learning and development. However, achieving such goals is only possible with a highly qualified and dedicated teaching workforce. Therefore, addressing teachers' challenges must be a top priority for ensuring students' continued academic success and growth.

Social Context

One significant factor contributing to teacher retention is school leaders' leadership approach and relational building (Scallon et al., 2023; Stanley, 2021; Tierney, 2012). In a comprehensive review of this factor, Lambersky's (2016) recent qualitative study unveiled the impact of principal behaviors on teacher emotions, particularly on teacher morale, stress, commitment, self-efficacy, and collective efficacy, all of which shape the overall teacher experience. Among many other factors, Lambersky's (2016) findings indicate that principal behaviors directly influence morale, job satisfaction, teacher engagement, stress levels, and anxiety levels and ultimately lead to teacher burnout. These findings align with recent studies, such as Grant and Drew's (2022) analysis of leadership functions on teacher effectiveness and morale, Werang et al.'s (2023) study examining principal leadership and its impact on teacher

commitment and morale, as well as Morris et al.'s (2020) collaborative research on the influence of leadership on positive staff culture. These studies consistently support that school leaders are crucial in creating a positive and supportive environment for teachers, ultimately impacting teacher retention rates.

According to the research conducted by A. Meyer et al. (2022), principals in Germany predominantly view themselves as school administrators rather than leaders, which results in minimal involvement in instructional improvement and staff development. The study also revealed a need for teacher collaboration within the schools examined, with teachers primarily sharing resources and materials for instruction purposes only. This limited level of cooperation raises concerns for the state of several educational institutions. However, A. Meyer et al. (2022) found that their initial hypothesis was confirmed, as principals actively involved in instructional and staff development tended to work in schools where teacher collaboration was more prevalent. These results highlight the importance of principal involvement in promoting teacher collaboration and its potential impact on overall student and school success.

This study aims to shed light on the crucial role of school leaders in influencing and shaping school culture, particularly regarding teacher experience and retention. By doing so, this research seeks to support the development of a positive and robust cultural environment within schools, specifically focusing on enhancing teacher experience. This encompasses factors such as teacher efficacy and levels of commitment. While this study delves into leadership, culture, and teacher experience, it is essential to note that the ultimate beneficiary will be the students themselves. They stand to gain from a school culture characterized by effective leadership and contented teachers. This research has far-reaching implications for improving overarching

structures in the greater education field and the well-being and academic success of schools and students.

Theoretical Context

The Path-Goal Leadership Theory, developed by renowned psychologist Robert House in 1971, is a precursor to the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory (Fabac et al., 2022). Its primary focus is exploring leadership dynamics and how they impact employee motivation and goal attainment (Dare & Saleem, 2022). While the Path-Goal Leadership Theory emphasizes the leader's role in leveraging employee motivation to achieve specific goals, the LMX Theory delves deeper into examining the relationship between a leader and their followers in terms of motivation and goal achievement (Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004; Qi et al., 2019). It can thus be seen as a complementary theory to the Path-Goal Leadership Theory, providing a more nuanced perspective on the leader-follower dynamic. Through its emphasis on developing high-quality exchanges between leaders and followers, the LMX Theory sheds light on how such relationships can enhance motivation and drive goal attainment in organizations.

In the latter half of the 20th century, there was a shift in leadership research, with scholars such as Fred Dansereau, George Graen, and William Hago (1975) turning their focus towards closer observations of leadership interactions (Hoyt & Goethals, 2009; Morris et al., 2020; Özdemir et al., 2022). Their studies discovered that leaders develop unique relationships with their employees, adapting different leadership styles depending on the individual being led (W. Li et al., 2018). This finding disproved the previous assumption that leaders treated all employees similarly, using a uniform leadership style and relational approach. As a result, the idea of the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory was born, which initially went by the name of Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL) Theory due to its emphasis on the vertical alignment between

leaders and staff within an organization (J. Kim et al., 2020). Through further research, it was revealed that there were two primary types of linkages between leaders and team members: relationships based on negotiated role responsibilities and relationships based on the formal employment contract (Escórcio Soares et al., 2020). However, as this theory continued to evolve, a more focused approach emerged, centering on leader-member relationships and their impact on organizational effectiveness (González-Romá & Le Blanc, 2019).

Problem Statement

The problem is the influence failing school culture has on teacher experience, commitment, and subsequent teacher attrition crisis in the United States (García et al., 2022; Heinla & Kuurme, 2022; McChesney & Cross, 2023; Schipper et al., 2020). Every state in the U.S. has reported teacher shortages in at least one subject area (García et al., 2022). While many variables within schools have been evaluated in the context of student experience and success (Bayar & Karaduman, 2021; Murakami et al., 2019), the investigation into this study has revealed a gap in the current literature regarding the specific characteristics of school culture that impact teacher experience and commitment (Van der Vyver et al., 2020; Zhan et al., 2023). Specifically, this study will examine how leadership behaviors and interactions with high school teachers influence school culture (Hoyt & Goethals, 2009; Morris et al., 2020; Özdemir et al., 2022). Additionally, other factors within a school's culture, such as teacher morale (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020), efficacy (Lambersky, 2016; Pierce, 2019), and retention (Bardach et al., 2022; García et al., 2022), will be thoroughly examined. This exploration aims to contribute to the existing knowledge of how school culture shapes the experiences and commitment of teachers. Understanding these dynamics will inform strategies for improving teacher satisfaction and retention.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to describe the influence of school culture and leadership on the experiences and levels of commitment of high school teachers at a cyber charter academy in the northeastern United States. At this stage in the research, teacher experience will be generally defined as the day-to-day responsibilities, interactions, and emotions teachers endure while in their school (Kini & Podolsky, 2016). This study strives to challenge schools to prioritize school culture and leadership-teacher relationships. Developing an influential school culture in which all learning community members possess a shared understanding of beliefs, values, and norms represents effective leadership.

Significance of the Study

Considering various perspectives, this study holds substantial importance and can be examined through theoretical, empirical, and practical dimensions. Evaluating the impact of these three factors reinforces the necessity and relevance of this research, particularly considering the current state of education systems. The subsequent sections provide a deeper understanding of how this study aims to bridge a gap in the existing literature and improve the identified problem's performance. Additionally, the insights gained from this study can inform future studies and drive positive changes in educational practices. With an ever-evolving educational landscape, such research endeavors are crucial in addressing current challenges and driving progress in the academic arena.

Theoretical

Dansereau et al.'s (1975) Leadership-Member Exchange Theory evaluates the impact of leaders' interactions with subordinates and its influence on developing a positive working relationship between the leader and employee. The LMX (Dansereau et al., 1975) theory

identifies the hierarchy of relationships within a workplace and the subsequent outcomes of engagement and effectiveness that flourish or diminish because of the depth of the relationship. While the LMX theory significantly contributes and serves as the foundational premise for this study, the purpose will expand on the impact of leader-member relationships on more incredible workplace culture. As such, this study will significantly contribute to the diversity of the LMX theory and the theory's ability to transcend various fields of work and factors within a workplace.

Empirical

Empirical studies similar in nature to the premise of this study often do not focus specifically on school culture as a driving factor for teacher experience and turnover but rather on other elements such as school leadership (Matthews et al., 2022), burnout (Rajendran et al., 2020), and inadequate compensation (Ryu & Jinnai, 2021). Although the above factors contribute to school culture, understanding it and its impact on more excellent education systems is seldom mentioned in modern educational research. Through a hermeneutic approach, personal reflections from myself as an educator and the researcher of this study can contribute to the common themes and understandings of the study's participants (Suddick et al., 2020). Additionally, when evaluating the field of education, a hermeneutic phenomenological review of teachers' experiences is helpful as I have first-hand experience with the same environment and can empathize and expand upon the findings within the study (Ragulina, 2020).

Practical

Understanding the underlying culture is critical for the overall success of an organization (Schmiedel et al., 2019). Specifically, recognizing how workplace culture influences employees' experience and, subsequently, levels of engagement, effectiveness, and long-term commitment is

imperative for the sustainability of an organization (Pandita & Kiran, 2022). With teacher turnover as a primary concern for educational institutions (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Maryam et al., 2021), school leaders need to recognize how the overall school culture can salvage the density of their teaching and support staff. Through this study, the school under review can access areas of weakness and strength within its culture to capitalize on and prioritize continued improvement. Additionally, research participants, who are teachers at the site of this study, will be directly impacted as they are the beneficiaries of the changes that are hoped to evolve because of this study.

Research Questions

The research questions presented in this study are closely aligned with the problem and purpose statements. The central focus of our inquiry is on school culture and its impact on teacher experience. As a comprehensive and overarching question, it provides a solid foundation for our investigation. In addition, we have devised sub-questions that delve deeper into specific aspects of school culture, such as examining the influence of leadership on teacher experience and commitment. These carefully crafted questions will serve as a guiding force for our study. These questions serve as a clear roadmap to navigate our research and ensure that all relevant areas are thoroughly explored.

Central Research Question

How does school culture influence teacher experience?

Sub-Question One

How does leadership influence teacher experience?

Sub-Question Two

How do school culture and leadership influence teacher commitment?

Definitions

1. *Affective Commitment* is a solid emotional attachment to your organization and work (Bagga et al., 2023).
2. *Fear of Loss Commitment* – *Commitment levels depend* on the pros and cons of the organization one works for (Bagga et al., 2023).
3. *In-Group* – Also known as a high-quality exchange group, the in-group, found within the LMX theory, identifies employees with highly positive reciprocal relationships with their leader (Buengeler et al., 2021).
4. *Out-Group* – Also known as a low-quality exchange group, the out-group, found within the LMX theory, identifies the group that does not have as productive a relationship with its leader as the in-group (Buengeler et al., 2021).
5. *School Culture* – The beliefs and values that guide a school's operation (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).
6. *Sense of Obligation to Stay Commitment* occurs when one feels obligated to remain with their institution (Bagga et al., 2023).

Summary

Chapter One strives to establish an understanding of the need for this study and the impact this study will have on institutional improvement measures and future research. This study hopes to identify how school culture influences teacher experience and subsequent experience measures, including commitment. The Leadership-Membership Exchange Theory (Dansereau et al., 1975) will serve as this study's foundational theory and introduce leadership's impact on overall school culture. Through a series of three research questions, including one central question and two sub-questions, a deeper dive into the relationship between school

culture and teacher experience will be evaluated, and the importance of teacher experience in assessing school success and institutional sustainability. It is hoped that this study, through setting school culture, will directly influence theoretical, empirical, and practical realms of educational studies to motivate institutional improvement and more robust academic research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic literature review explores the relationship between school culture, teacher experience, and levels of teacher commitment at a public cyber charter school serving students in a state in the northeastern United States. This chapter offers a review of the research on this topic. The theoretical framework of this study is rooted in the Leadership-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Graen & Wakabayashi, 1999; Liden & Graen, 1980). Following the theoretical framework is an evaluation of the literature on the relationship between school culture and leadership. Although prioritizing recent literature, this study includes several earlier works to provide a breadth of understanding of the LMX theory and leadership-based research. Stemming the causal relationship between leadership behaviors and teacher commitment, this study reviews additional literature surrounding teacher experience to assess school culture's perceived impact on teachers' individual experiences. Finally, literature discussing commitment will articulate the relationship between teacher experience and subsequent levels of responsibility. A gap in the literature was identified by exploring the factors of culture, leadership, and commitment. Specifically, this study will examine how leadership behaviors and interactions with staff influence school culture, subsequently impacting teacher experience and commitment.

Theoretical Framework

The current study investigates the correlation between school culture, teacher experience, and teacher commitment at a public cyber charter school in the northeastern region of the United States. This research will be guided by Dansereau et al.'s (1975) Leadership-Member Exchange Theory as its theoretical framework. By delving into the fundamental principles of existing

theoretical models, this study aspires to make a significant impact in the field of education. Specifically, it aims to provide valuable insights for district and school leaders who play a crucial role in shaping teacher experience and the cultural dynamics within their institutions. This endeavor will significantly contribute to understanding this complex relationship, thus leading to positive changes in the educational landscape.

The purpose of the LMX Theory was to support the development of loyal and committed workplace cultures (Stepanek & Paul, 2022). Recognizing leaders' influence on an organization's culture, Dansereau and associates pursued this theory to educate leaders on a relationship-based approach to leadership (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In the LMX Theory, it is essential to note that leaders are seen at any supervisor level (Zhao et al., 2019). For example, in a school setting, this would apply to positions such as assistant principal, principal, curriculum supervisor, department chair, up to the superintendent or highest-ranking official of the school. Although some layers of leadership are more employee-facing than others, all leaders, regardless of title or breadth of supervision, can impact an organization or, in this specific study, a school.

The LMX theory has been extensively studied in leadership development; however, its application in online education still needs to be explored. This study aims to address this gap by examining the relevance of this theory in a new environment, and its findings will have significant implications for the hybrid working environments that are increasingly prevalent in today's workforce. To comprehensively evaluate this theory, it is crucial to understand its origins and constituent elements thoroughly. As such, this study will provide insight into the history and critical components of the LMX theory. By doing so, we can better understand how this theory can be applied in the context of online education and its potential impact on modern working environments.

Since the inception of the LMX theory, several renditions of the theory have evolved (X. Chen et al., 2018; Dulebohn et al., 2017; Liao et al., 2019). These successors have added elements or varying perspectives that expand on the LMX theory while maintaining the original focus and structure. Historically, the LMX theory has been most consistently linked with evaluating job performance (Park et al., 2022). In the recently developed interpretations of the LMX theory, a greater focus has been placed on transformational leadership, specifically the Transformational Leadership Theory (P. Wang et al., 2017). The LMX theory's emphasis on relationships and interactions between leadership and employees is primarily influenced by the chosen leadership style of an administrator, in which one choice, which has been strongly encouraged and promoted in modern administration, is to serve as a transformational leader (Shusha, 2013). As such, many have joined these two theories to assess connectedness, employee experience, and subsequent outcomes. Another interpretation of the LMX theory (Dulebohn et al., 2017) developed three categories that determine the quality of leader-member exchanges: follower characteristics, leader characteristics, and interpersonal relationships. Although there have been many interpretations in recent years, in this study, the original LMX theory, developed by Fred Dansereau, George Graen, and William Haga (1975), will serve as the primary theoretical foundation. However, elements of the modern perceptions of this theory will also be introduced and embedded within research.

There are several facets to the LMX theory. However, the in-group versus the out-group is a vital element of the theory (Kang & Stewart, 2007). An unwelcome reminder of high school days appears again in one's adult life through their workplace. The terms in-group and out-group were the jargon of choice in the early developments of the LMX theory (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Cashman, 1975; Liden & Graen, 1980). However, these groups are now defined as

high-quality exchanges, previously the in-group, and low-quality exchanges, also known as the out-group (Coleman & Donoher, 2022). To be in the in-group, the leader perceives the employee as routinely going beyond standard expectations in the workplace; individuals within the in-group do not stop at the parameters of their job descriptions (S. Chen & Zhang, 2021).

Additionally, in-group members typically develop more robust exchanges, conversations, and interactions with their leader than out-group members. These more robust exchanges reflect mutual respect, negotiation, and reciprocal relationships and often reap benefits not afforded to the out-group or low-quality exchange group (Yuan et al., 2023). Categorizing employees into these groups can sometimes be a conscious or subconscious effort (S. Chen & Zhang, 2021). It depends on the individual leader; however, placing employees into these groups largely influences employee experience and organizational commitment (Shu & Lazatkhan, 2017).

According to the LMX Theory, a leader assumes a supervisory role (Graen & Schiemann, 2013; Kang & Stewart, 2007). The members in this equation refer to the employees (Graen & Schiemann, 2013) who work directly with the leader (Naidoo et al., 2011). The term "exchange" within LMX denotes the leader's and employees' interactions (Graen & Cashman, 1975; Harris et al., 2009). In other words, it refers to the give-and-take relationship between them. This theory emphasizes the importance of understanding the dynamic nature of leader-member relationships and how they can impact employee performance and satisfaction. Researchers have examined various factors, such as trust, communication, and mutual respect, that contribute to the quality of these relationships.

Historically, leadership theories have identified specific traits or personality characteristics as determinants of effectiveness or success in leadership roles (Basit et al., 2017; Colbert et al., 2012; Schermuly et al., 2022). However, the role of a leader, regardless of the

profession in which one leads, is complex (Schmidt-Wilk, 2022). Although personality traits and leadership qualities are at the crux of many leadership theories (Carnes et al., 2015; Colbert et al., 2012; Snow Andrade, 2023), there are boundless intricacies (Starks, 2022) beyond those, all of which influence leadership abilities, effectiveness, and success. Rather than assessing the singular perspective of solely the leader, the LMX theory provides a unique analysis as it proves that a dyadic relationship between the leader, member, and exchanges, or interactions between the two (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Dansereau et al., 1975; London, 2023). Through LMX, leadership is seen as a process, and the effectiveness of that process is dependent on the relationships developed and exchanges between a leader and subordinate (Sears & Hackett, 2011).

Before the LMX theory, it was assumed that leaders treated all subordinates in a collective, singular approach (P. Wang et al., 2017). In short, it was believed that leaders treated all employees the same. However, employees appeared to have differing perceptions and experiences with leaders, which created an understanding that leaders do not similarly treat all employees (Çimen & Özgan, 2018; Petersen & Youssef-Morgan, 2018). These differentiated relationships primarily depend on the quality of interactions between the leader and subordinate (R. Martin et al., 2018; Zyberaj, 2022). Some employees experience more robust, thoughtful, and purposeful interactions, while others do not (Yuan et al., 2023). These interactions, or exchanges, influence the perceived quality of the leader-member relationship and impact leadership effectiveness, employee experience, and employee commitment (Chaudhry, 2023).

However, even with knowledge of varied exchanges, there needs to be more clarity in developing effective leadership (Moin et al., 2024). Underdeveloped theories are still required to fully demonstrate how to produce or replicate a holistic picture of productive leadership, but

rather identify one facet of the leadership puzzle, most notably leadership personality traits or characteristics. However, as the LMX theory demonstrates, many factors and parties contribute to effective leadership and a united workplace (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Another unique and defining piece of the LMX theory is the focus on the quality of relationships (Hooper & Martin, 2008). LMX theory's thorough analysis of varying relationships in the workplace is often viewed as a taxonomical assessment of a leader's multi-faceted and multi-dimensional embodiment (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Although insufficient and un-descriptive leadership theories have flooded the realm of theoretical frameworks, the LMX theory provides certainty that leadership development is mainly dependent on relationships (Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020). In the LMX theory, the leader, subordinate, and the relationship between the two parties are present. Although all three were present historically, many ideas addressed each party singularly or individually from one another. The LMX theory reflects the dyadic, or interconnected, relationship between the leader and subordinate, understanding the complexities of two parties cohesively existing in the same working environment (Comstock et al., 2021). As such, throughout this study, it will remain critical to address the dependency of the multiple parties within a leadership dynamic (Donohue-Porter et al., 2019). If not, a singular perspective is provided, thus minimizing the validity and contribution of this study. Once all components of leadership are addressed, including the leader, subordinate, or follower, and the relationship between the two, greater focus can be given to how to enhance the effectiveness of leaders in certain situations. However, the reception, or perception, of leaders through the eyes of the subordinates plays a critical role in the evaluation of leader effectiveness, thus making it imperative to assess both the aid and the relationship between the leader and subordinate (Brown et al., 2019; Emery et al., 2019).

The LMX theory's evolution originated in a work socialization study (A. Lee et al., 2019). These longitudinal studies asked managers and their direct reports to describe their working relationship, including inputs and outcomes (Wilson & Cunliffe, 2022; Yuan et al., 2023)—an analysis of dyadic working relationships formed throughout these studies. The results were vastly different responses from the subordinates, largely dependent on their relationship with their supervisor (Emery et al., 2019). Some respondents cited high-quality exchanges with their leaders, while others reported the contrary (R. Martin et al., 2018). In these findings, the LMX theory is formed.

The quality of the relationship between a leader and a subordinate depends on the place in the employee hierarchy in which the subordinate lies (Singh & Rukta, 2018). If an individual is regarded as part of the in-group, they often cite stronger, more effective relationships with their leader rooted in mutual respect and trust (Buengeler et al., 2021). The out-group describes less-than-desirable relationships and exchanges (Akhtar et al., 2022). Out-group relationships are more transactional, less rooted in reciprocal emotion and respect, and more concerned with obligatory, contractual duties (Yu et al., 2018). The initial presentation of the terms in-group and out-group were placed in quotes as those were the original categorizations (Graen & Scandura, 1987).

Undoubtedly, research has determined that leaders approach relationships differently (Chiniara & Bentein, 2018). As such, leaders may have a differential strategy, consciously or subconsciously, to select members of the in-group and out-group (Schein & Schein, 2018). The most immediate thought is that leaders may form more fruitful relationships with subordinates due to performance needs (Rüzgar, 2018). Leveraging specific abilities in targeted team members through developing more emotionally concentrated relationships will generate

tremendous individual success and effectiveness (Seo et al., 2018). However, leaders will not identify every employee as advantageous and may conserve relationship-building efforts for the most needed employees (Hasib et al., 2020). Regardless of the rationale, an uneven dispersion of quality relationships with leaders creates adverse outcomes for teams of employees (Estel et al., 2019).

Most concerningly, differentiated relationships can significantly impact an organization's culture as some members may feel more valued than others based on their relationships with their superiors (Manata, 2020; L. Wang & Hollenbeck, 2019). However, to overcome these concerns of uneven team success and commitment and worrisome cultural impacts, the LMX theory states that if a leader develops intentional, thoughtful relationships with each member of their team, this will generate more holistic team success and levels of commitment (Xu et al., 2023). The measures of team success and commitment in the LMX theory include work attitudes and performance satisfaction (Furtado & Sobral, 2023).

The reciprocal and recursive nature of the LMX theory between the giving and receiving parties in leader-member relationships creates a conducive platform for the context of this study (Klein & Zwilling, 2022). Directly influencing social capital and school culture, the LMX theory is rooted in caring, thoughtful school leadership and its impact on employee experience (Comstock et al., 2021). As such, this theory demonstrates how leadership traits and interactions influence the overarching school culture, including leader-member interactions, subsequent teacher experience, and levels of teacher commitment. Establishing a foundation for this study, the LMX theory will also significantly influence the data collection strategies included in this study.

Related Literature

All 50 states have reported (García et al., 2022) teacher shortages in at least one subject area due to working conditions and insufficient wages. Staffing shortages within schools create a worrisome concatenation of increased class sizes (Marín Blanco et al., 2023), hiring of uncertified teachers (A. Castro, 2023), and deteriorating student achievement, culminating with exacerbated teacher retention (Bardach et al., 2022; García et al., 2022). Consistent turnover creates unequal learning opportunities, specifically for urban, rural, and high-poverty school districts, and depletes communities of valuable resources (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Pham et al., 2021). Compensatory concerns significantly influence the teacher shortage crisis (García et al., 2022; Sorensen, 2019); however, that remains a debate between the federal government and taxpayers (Burnette, 2019; Hansen & Lantsman, 2019; Will, 2022).

Nevertheless, workplace culture is a factor in this plight that school districts can control (Fu et al., 2022; Shuls & Flores, 2020; Zavelevsky et al., 2022). Established literature related to this study's topic will support understanding school culture's complexities, including an assessment of leadership, teacher experience, and commitment. Specifically, organizational culture is reviewed with an intended focus on school culture, approaches to leadership, and the relationship between culture and leadership. Additionally, assessing teacher experience will allow further exploration of the relationship between school culture and knowledge.

Organizational Culture

Companies deemed culturally healthy continually outperform their competitors (Gagnon et al., 2018; MacNeil et al., 2009). Longitudinal evidence corroborates these findings and asserts that organizations prioritizing and striving toward developing a healthy workplace culture achieve tangible, measurable improvements in a short time (i.e., six to 12 months) (Gagnon et

al., 2018). Whether it be a Fortune 500 company or an educational institution, the message remains the same: organizational leaders must manage the underlying health of their company to achieve desired outcomes (Busch & Fernandez, 2019; D. Fisher et al., 2012; Gagnon et al., 2018; MacNeil et al., 2009). To do so, it is imperative to understand the constructs of organizational culture.

Organizational culture is familiar, as evaluations of group norms have been studied for some time (Meng & Berger, 2019). However, the term culture and the focus on a more relational view of group environments is a relatively new phenomenon, evolving over the last few decades (Stefanovska-Petkovska et al., 2019). Schein and Schein (2018) identify the culture of a group as the accumulation and continued teaching of shared learning that reinforces an organization's beliefs, values, and behavioral norms. Over time, this common knowledge becomes the basic, foundational principles of the organization, so much so that the existence of these principles drops out of awareness and subconsciously guides the stern of the organization. Culture reflects an organization's underlying norms, expectations, beliefs, and goals. However, a critical element of organizational culture, an element that continues the learned cultural practices of an organization, is people and relationships amongst people within the organization.

Modern social sciences believe organizational culture is deeply rooted in relational theory, which has been influential in management research since the 1900s (Eacott, 2018). Like LMX theory, relational theory asserts that the relationship between organizational leaders and employees dictates a company's success (Boonyathikarn & Kuntonbutr, 2021). From an educational perspective, Daly (2010) believes that a strong and healthy relationship between leaders and teachers can often supersede the calls for educational reform looming over our educational institutions in the United States today. In contrast, Follett argues in Creative

Experience (1924) that the demise of many organizations depends on the inability to develop complex yet harmonious relationships. Although Follett (1924) and Daly (2010) provide thorough normative arguments regarding relational theory, it is Mayo (1933) who receives much of the credit for the study of relational theory.

Mayo (1933) conducted a study to evaluate the relationship between employee productivity and breaks, lighting, and pay at an electric company in Illinois. Interestingly, in 1933, during the Great Depression, lighting was a primary concern for workers. In Mayo's (1933) study, with the help of his colleagues Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939), Mayo found that employee productivity was also partly dependent on the relationships developed within work groups. Relations are such a critical element within an organization because, as Selznick (1948), deemed the father of modern organizational theory, notes, organizations are societies within themselves. As such, an organization is more than inputs, outputs, and measures of success; it is a network of relationships aimed at achieving the common good, which, in Selznick's (1948) assessment, is improving efficiency and effectiveness.

In antiquated organizational development reviews, a structured blueprint often provided a company's framework and anticipated dynamics. However, through Follett (1924), Mayo (1933), Selznick (1948), Daly (2010), and many other modern social scientists, we decipher that the relational piece of the organizational puzzle weighs great significance on both the structure and success of an organization. The work of these scholars developed the Human Relations Movement, which recognized that relationships matter equally as much as the structure and title of an organization (Grego-Planer, 2019). Regardless of the analysis of relational theory and the human relationship movement, one wishes to review an organization's culture or customs,

including its people's relations, which dictate the employees' experience in an organization (Lemon, 2019).

Evaluating organizational culture is commonly done using the organizational culture theory (Allaire & Firsirotu, 1984). The corporate culture theory considers three levels, or concentrations, of an organization's culture—artifacts, values, and assumptions (Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985). Artifacts encompass many of the visible elements of an organization (Hatch, 1993). Physical architecture, layout, smell, emotional intensity, dress code, employee interactions, tolerance of employee failure, organizational records, statements of philosophy, and other defining features all represent the artifacts of an organization (Denison & Mishra, 1995). Values present another pillar of organizational culture.

The values of an organization are often parallelly linked with its goals (Gurley et al., 2015; Hogan & Coote, 2014). Values also establish an organization's norms, or the accepted behaviors, tone, and air. Importance and value alignment among staff are overwhelmingly necessary for organizational success (Waseem et al., 2022). Additionally, the alignment of corporate values and personal values generates more significant levels of employee engagement (Gorenak et al., 2020). A value-focused leader also increases job satisfaction and performance by continually reinforcing organizational values (Waseem et al., 2022). A company's values also reflect individuals' regard for one another within the organization (Lemon, 2019). A company with employee-focused, mutually respectful values will likely present higher-quality interactions among employees, specifically between leaders and employees (Cook et al., 2019). Another influential factor in employee relationships lies in an organization's assumptions.

Organizational assumptions are less visible and often unconscious (Albu & Flyverbom, 2019). Assumptions are not discussed but are known (Lehman, 2017). Unconscious beliefs,

perceptions, feelings, and thoughts are all assumptions and largely shape the culture and identity of the company. Although assumptions are not discussed, they greatly influence an organization's overarching mood (Men & Tsai, 2014). The quiet perspectives and feelings of individuals, sectioned groups, or the collective whole can dictate the cultural trajectory of a company, thus influencing employee experiences, satisfaction, and levels of commitment (Lehman, 2017). Most concerningly, since assumptions are not discussed openly, they can be challenging to address or change (Joseph & Kibera, 2019). These very assumptions, specifically how leadership influences individual beliefs, are the data this study strives to uncover. Investigating the perspectives of school employees to understand their personal experiences within the school environment with leadership will allow us to bridge the connection between unspoken assumptions and experiences with levels of commitment, satisfaction, and teacher retention.

Organizational Climate

Although this study thoroughly evaluates organizational culture, specifically school culture, climate also plays an instrumental role in the day-to-day experiences of the participants and teachers (Protheroe, 2008). Depicted through the metaphor of an iceberg, Busch and Fernandez (2019) articulate the difference between organizational culture and organizational climate. Climate and culture are often used interchangeably. Although they are part of the same coin or iceberg, they are the two opposing faces of the coin or two different tips of the iceberg, distinct yet similar and often dependent on one another.

Organizational climate forms the visible portion of the iceberg; these facets of an organization are quickly identified, including its decisions, behaviors, and processes (Busch & Fernandez, 2019; D. Fisher et al., 2012). When dissecting the organizational culture theory, the

climate, or the visible portion of the iceberg, would include the artifacts and values. The atmosphere rests upon culture. Organizational culture is the underwater support or the part of the iceberg beneath the visible surface (Busch & Fernandez, 2019). Thus, the culture would embody the assumptions articulated in the organizational culture theory. Through this, it is understood that an organizational climate would crumble and melt away without a strong culture or the load-bearing support of the iceberg that rests underneath the water.

When there is a clear understanding amongst all employees of the mission, purpose, and intended clientele, an organization's culture is deemed healthy, or in the sense of an iceberg, sturdy (Busch & Fernandez, 2019; Gagnon et al., 2018; MacNeil et al., 2009). However, the health of an organization extends far beyond harmony in values; it also encapsulates employee engagement, attitudes and feelings toward the organization, and the holistic ability of staff to execute organizational missions (Gagnon et al., 2018; Kalkan et al., 2020). Effective leadership is the single element that can mend culture and climate together, generate a healthy workplace environment, and achieve organizational objectives (Gagnon et al., 2018; Kalkan et al., 2020; Northouse, 2018; Ozaralli, 2003). Leaders can dictate employee emotions, efficacy, and fidelity through their daily decisions, interactions, and messaging, thus holding the organization's trajectory within their breadth of responsibilities (Choudhary et al., 2017). As such, leaders are the focus of this study, for they have the immediate, lasting ability to influence the structure and longevity of the iceberg or the culture of an organization.

This study will use the terms climate and culture interchangeably for simplicity. However, culture will be the primary jargon employed as that is the preferred vernacular in organizational studies. Although essential to differentiate, these two facets of an organization, culture and climate remain part of one mass, iceberg, or single coin. Therefore, climate and

culture can serve as representatives for one another when speaking about the constructs of an organization. Thus far, organizational culture has been the frequently used phrase throughout this chapter, as it has been the focus of many theories and related literature. However, given that the setting of this study is a school when speaking about the organizational culture, the term organization, or corporate, is representative of the school under review. As such, throughout the remainder of this study, the term organizational culture will still be employed, but school culture will also be incorporated to align with and represent the setting of the study more closely.

Defining School Culture

Although organizational culture theorists often utilize industry-based settings (Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020; Schmiedel et al., 2019), elements of organizational culture discussed throughout this study are transferable to the school setting. However, it is essential to transfer the terminology from corporate to school-based to develop a clear understanding of the constructs and parties involved in a school. Like organizational culture (Spicer, 2020), school culture can determine a school's trajectory, success, and longevity (Bayar & Karaduman, 2021; Ismail et al., 2022). From an educational standpoint, culture influences employee performance and student achievement (Amtu et al., 2020).

Culture and climate within a school can still be represented through the analogy of an iceberg (Busch & Fernandez, 2019). In a school, like in organizations, culture can be described as the underground rituals, norms, values, and beliefs that reflect the school's decade, sometimes century-long traditions (Reinius et al., 2023). The hereditary culture of a school contributes to the assumptions that permeate the perspectives of staff and students (Gan & Alkaher, 2021). School culture does not just appear; it is made over time through stakeholder interactions (Odhiambo & Hii, 2012). Students, staff, administrators, community members, and the inherent

stakeholders of a school community contribute to the experiences and expectations within a school culture (Reinius et al., 2023).

School culture has complex, interconnected layers that vary depending on the school and individual. Individuals in non-education-based organizations, such as corporate or industry-based professions, fulfill a single job position (Loan, 2020). Teachers have many responsibilities in a school setting (McLeod, 2019). Teachers serve as lunch duty supervisors, recess attendants, club advisors, coaches, emotional stabilizers, impromptu behavioral specialists, and pseudo-parents, which are the inherent responsibilities that are appended to the role of a teacher (Steiner & Woo, 2021). Adding to the daunting list of teacher responsibilities are classroom management, individualized education plan meetings, faculty meetings, grade or content level meetings, and one-on-one growth meetings with administrators. Teachers juggle many mentally, emotionally, and sometimes physically demanding tasks throughout the day (Benevene et al., 2020).

Embedded in all the responsibilities of a teacher are relationships—relationships with students, colleagues, administrators, parents, and community members (Meredith et al., 2020). The quality of these relationships dictates the experiences teachers endure while working through the aforementioned day-to-day responsibilities (A. Martin & Collie, 2019). These relationships are elements of climate and culture, as visible relationships represent the environment and define the perspectives and experiences of employees, contributing to the overall school culture (Seylim, 2022). In this, like in the LMX theory, there is a dyadic relationship between two elements—school climate and school culture. If one pillar of this equation fails, the others will soon follow. As such, a school's culture can be defined as a collection of experiences that shape the assumptions of individuals within the school community, all directly influencing school outcomes, including employee performance and student achievement (Kalkan et al., 2020).

Positive School Culture

Unsurprisingly, school culture can significantly influence student success, teacher attrition, and the overall effectiveness of a school (Murakami et al., 2019). Cansoy and Parlar (2017) studied the relationship between school culture and teacher leadership. Their research identified a positive school culture as having a supportive environment, sharing and collaboration, and heightened levels of autonomy (Cansoy & Parlar, 2017). Although these elements certainly influence school culture, more specifically stakeholder experience within the school culture, educational theorists argue that trust, relationships, collective problem-solving, leadership, and sympathetic leaders all contribute to the development of school culture (Brion, 2021; Coleman & Donoher, 2022; Grissom et al., 2021; Istiqomah et al., 2019). Thus, a positive school culture reflects a harmonious relationship between supportive leaders and collaborative teachers with a shared vision of student success (Bayar & Karaduman, 2021).

Negative School Culture

Contrastingly, negative school culture presents the opposite. Rai and Prakash (2021) cited a lack of vision, dysfunctional leadership, ineffective classroom practices, and strained teacher relationships as elements of failing school culture. Negative school culture serves as a roadblock for all achievement measures within a school. Failing school culture is continual and cyclical until addressed (M. Lee & Louis, 2019). Unfortunately, school culture also largely depends on leadership initiative (Rai & Prakash, 2021). Thus, school culture can fluctuate depending on the leadership focus in the office.

Establishing a Culture of Trust

Throughout this chapter, specifically in looking at cultural development, the analogy of building blocks has been used. Before a school's culture can continue to grow, several

fundamental pieces serve as a base for continued growth. These foundational anchoring blocks include leadership, relationships, support, and trust (Francisco, 2022). Without these, it is not possible to best leverage professional development opportunities for staff, it is not possible to ensure a shared vision, and it is certainly not likely to support student growth and achievement (Deal & Peterson, 2010). As such, leaders must exercise behaviors that demonstrate the solidity and grounding of these blocks (Lesinger et al., 2018). However, multiple parties are often involved in relationships and trust specifically.

Trust can occur at several levels in a school, as in any organization. Interpersonal trust is the most intimate level in which we discover trust within ourselves to fulfill certain roles or execute specific missions (Spadaro et al., 2020). This self-trust aligns closely with efficacy (Bandura, 1977), which will be explored in more detail in this chapter. Another layer of trust occurs with colleagues, which includes leadership (Weinstein et al., 2020). Trust with others is developed through interactions in exchanging opinions and feelings. Trust with colleagues varies—one may trust certain colleagues more than others based on past experiences. Building trust requires time and effort and can be challenging to recover once lost (Breuer et al., 2020).

School leaders can also establish trust through fair treatment of all staff and students (K. Li et al., 2021). Meta-analysis studies find that when leaders exhibit consistent expectations, there are greater levels of organizational trust (Kiker et al., 2019). Fairness applies to all school stakeholder relationships, including staff, student, parent, and community relationships (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020). Uniformity creates a collective understanding and expectancy, establishing a sense of comfort, security, and ease in the school community (L. Wang & Hollenbeck, 2019).

From a macroscopic perspective, leaders are responsible for cultivating organizational trust (Yue et al., 2019). Faith in an organization, specifically a school, occurs when individuals trust in the school's efforts to uphold the mission and vision with fidelity (Canning et al., 2020). In this sense, the school is not the physical building but the collective leadership serving as school representatives. Leadership decisions, especially decisions that will significantly impact school stakeholders, are a significant way for higher-level leadership, such as superintendents and the school board, to develop trust with teachers and front-line staff members (Kiker et al., 2019).

Regardless of the level at which one serves in leadership, trust is often gained through respect (Ghayas et al., 2023). Respect is frequently created through relationships (Ilyas et al., 2020). Thus, a leader will simultaneously develop relationships with staff while establishing a trusting community. The simultaneous nature of this dynamic demonstrates the triadic dependency between relationships, respect, and trust.

Respect is also gained through expertise (E. Kim & Park, 2020). Leaders who demonstrate a realistic knowledge of the experiences of staff and students will quickly earn respect (Purwanto, 2020). Additionally, leaders who contribute intellectual and experience-based expertise to professional development conversations have proven to gain respect from subordinates (Berger & Erzikova, 2022; Morgan et al., 2017). Leadership presence is part of all these efforts to develop respect and trust (Davis & Boudreaux, 2019). An absent leader is often not respected or trusted (Hallinger et al., 2020). Therefore, to cultivate foundational relationships rooted in trust, respect, and support, the simplest yet commonly overlooked step is to be a present leader.

Establishing Effective Communication

Communication is crucial to developing relationships and establishing respect and trust (Anyaeji & Nwangwu, 2023). In reviewing the duties of school leadership, clear and compelling communication is undoubtedly one of the most defining responsibilities of that role (Shell et al., 2023). Communication allows leaders to relay a shared vision and mission, discuss instructional goals, and outline school safety measures (Naz & Rashid, 2021). Modeling effective communication at the leadership level establishes precedence for how others, staff, and students should communicate (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019).

Effective communication focuses on the content and delivery of information (Teng et al., 2020). Communication should also be purposeful and intentional, reflecting, listening, and speaking (Fuchs & Reichel, 2023). In an age where technology has become a comfortable mode of communication, leaders need to differentiate how best to deliver information, whether through online platforms or in person (Tkalac Verčić & Špoljarić, 2020). Assessing whether knowledge should be given individually or holistically is also critical. Another layer of effective communication focuses on expediency and transparency—determining whether a message is urgent or needs to be withheld (Fuchs & Reichel, 2023). When ineffective or absent, communication can harm organizational culture (Bagga et al., 2023).

Although communication may not directly correlate with school culture, it influences factors critical for the development of culture (Mohamed & Zainal Abidin, 2021). Without communication, relationships and, subsequently, trust and respect are not formed (Baxter & Ehren, 2023). With touch, the mission and vision of an organization can be shared. Communication, collaboration, and collective problem-solving can be done (Stronge & Xu, 2021). Communication is necessary for prioritizing safety (Fuchs & Reichel, 2023).

Communication is critical, whether it presents a linear correlation to culture or is embedded in every element of culture.

Defining School Climate

As indicated above, a co-dependency exists between school climate and culture (Harrison & Ashley, 2021). School climate is also called the school environment (Coelho & Dell’Aglia, 2019; Daily et al., 2019; Singla et al., 2021). The environment or climate embodies a school’s visible elements, including its welcomeness, safety, teaching and learning, relationships, and other factors (Marraccini et al., 2020). School climate, or environment, creates the school experience (Newland et al., 2019). Although there may be common factors within a school climate, each educational stakeholder may experience those factors differently. Regardless of one’s interpretations, feelings and assumptions, or the elements of school culture, are created throughout these experiences.

Schools can improve climate and culture through effective school leadership (Sundari & Achmad, 2023). Leadership has been directly linked to the daily experiences of both staff and students (Morris et al., 2020). School leaders also appear when discussing student achievement, as leadership presence and involvement significantly influence a school’s learning environment (Azar & Adnan, 2020). However, beyond leadership, there are a few priorities when assessing school climate, which vary depending on the stakeholder.

School safety remains the highest concern for students and parents when assessing a safe and secure school environment (Kingston et al., 2018). Students also identified resources, student voice and choice, and curriculum diversity as needed for a thriving school environment (Kaffemanienè et al., 2017). Parents, focusing heavily on the non-educational aspects of a school district, cited school safety, as mentioned previously, but also consistent behavioral standards

(Rauk et al., 2023). However, parents also noted a need for grace and individualized behavioral support for each student, depending on their circumstances (Hoyt et al., 2023). Teachers, who have the most significant impact on student achievement, cited learning standards, student benchmarks, and student interactions as their most important concerns within the school climate (Klik et al., 2023). Every stakeholder's needs and wants in an educational environment look different. However, one consistent element that can be agreed upon is that principal leadership can mold the school climate to incorporate and attain all desired outcomes.

School Leadership

For this study, much focus will be given to the role of the assistant principal when evaluating leadership. However, school leadership is multifaceted, and upper-level, central office administrative leaders often influence the actions of the associate principal. For public schools, the highest-ranking managers of a school district include the superintendent and the school board. These individuals are only sometimes visible within district school buildings; however, their decisions largely influence the abilities and constraints of teaching-facing leaders.

Beneath the central office staff are principals and assistant principals. Some schools also have curriculum directors, instructional leaders, a dean of students, and other ancillary leadership positions. From teachers' perspective, leaders in all positions are deemed more effective if they present solid relational skills rather than administrative qualities. Regardless of the post on the totem pole, leadership, across all levels, dramatically influences teacher experience and school culture, deeming it necessary to identify their role in this study.

Principal Leadership Style

Extensive school culture and retention-based research identify leadership style as a significant influence on teacher retention (Jones & Watson, 2017). Specifically, leadership styles

can positively or negatively impact teachers' perceptions (Sanchez et al., 2022). Much of this study surrounds teachers' perceptions and emotions as they interact with their school culture. Understanding that leaders greatly influence school culture, this study strives to identify what aspects of school culture, including leadership, most largely impact teacher experience. Understanding leadership styles is critical for a holistic understanding of this topic.

Leadership styles are most identified by their reflected behaviors (Jones & Watson, 2017). However, before addressing specific types, several typical factors are discovered within education-based research teachers look for in administrators. Teachers in Podolsky et al. (2017) identified support as determining whether they stay or leave their school district. In Darling-Hammond and Podolsky's (2019) more recent work, it was found that teachers seek specifically environmental and emotional support from administrators. Additionally, teachers want to be trusted as professionals to act with fidelity and give autonomy (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). As evinced throughout this study, most apparent in the LMX theory, teachers identify positive relationships with administrators as a contributor to teacher retention (Perrone, 2022; Shell et al., 2023). Regardless of the specific need or chosen leadership style, direct correlations between teacher retention and student achievement have been long explored, and districts must maintain robust and consistent teaching staff to attain the most significant levels of achievement (Young, 2018).

The idea of leadership styles has evolved over recent decades; however, the most common styles include transactional, transformational, servant, democratic, autocratic, bureaucratic, laissez-faire, and charismatic (Atasoy & Turkish Ministry of National Education, 2020; Dare & Saleem, 2022; Wirawan et al., 2019). Transactional leadership encapsulates a simple exchange in which the leader provides basic needs, and the employee completes the job (Nurlina et al., 2023).

Transactional is simple, to the point, and lacks emotion (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021).

Transformational leadership alludes to the leader will transform the business through inspirational efforts (Prestiadi et al., 2020). Servant leadership believes in serving the needs of others first, then secondarily prioritizing leadership and self (Langhof & Guldenberg, 2020). Democratic leaders appreciate and seek participative groups in decision-making (Hilton et al., 2023). Autocratic leaders exude the opposite in that they are the school's only deciding figure and primary enforcer (Briker et al., 2021). Bureaucratic is a systemized approach in which leaders follow a regimented approach (Ohemeng et al., 2020). Laissez-faire is a hands-off approach that entrusts much responsibility to teachers and staff (Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021). Finally, charismatic leadership uses its entrancing personality to rally support for change efforts (Nassif et al., 2021). Although it is crucial to have a variety of leadership styles within an organization, the most adored style is transformational, with servant and charismatic leadership coming in a close second (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). Interestingly, these specific leadership styles are rooted in emotion and feeling.

To comprehensively examine the interplay between transformational school leadership, teacher self-efficacy, and perceived collective teacher efficacy, Ninković and Knežević Florić (2018) conducted a study involving 120 secondary school teachers. Drawing on Leithwood et al.'s (2017) model of transformational leadership, which comprises four critical dimensions: setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and improving the instructional program, Ninković and Knežević Florić (2018) sought to elucidate the influence of leadership on school capital development and performance. Their investigation revealed that setting directions and developing people were significant predictors of collective teacher efficacy. Conversely, the remaining two dimensions of transformational leadership showed a

weaker association with self and collaborative efficacy enhancement. Thus, these findings provide further insight into the vital role of transformational school leadership, a more emotion- and relationship-focused approach, in promoting teacher agency and improving overall school performance.

In an additional study examining the effectiveness of different leadership styles, Börü and Bellibaş (2021) analyzed the impact of instructional, distributed, and transformational leadership on teacher academic optimism. This concept, coined by renowned educational researcher Wayne K. Hoy et al. (2006), encompasses teacher trust, collective efficacy, and academic emphasis. Despite accounting for teacher and school demographics variables, Börü and Bellibaş's (2021) study revealed that distributed leadership significantly influenced teacher academic optimism. A relatively novel approach to school leadership, distributed leadership, also called 'collaborative,' 'dispersed,' and 'delegated' leadership, distributes responsibilities among individuals who share in the ownership of school achievement. This study underscores the crucial role spread leadership plays in fostering teacher optimism and overall school success. It also highlights the need for further research on this emerging leadership style in educational settings. Through such investigations, we can continue to deepen our understanding of how different leadership styles impact teacher attitudes and student outcomes, ultimately improving education.

Principal leadership styles will not be explicitly evaluated in the data collection portion of this study. However, leadership characteristics will be analyzed. Knowing the different elements of leadership styles to understand how certain leadership traits influence teacher experience will be beneficial. Again, this study aims to identify what aspects of school culture, including leadership but not leadership alone, affect teacher experience and subsequent commitment levels.

Relationship Between Leadership and School Culture

Employees cite leadership behaviors as the primary reason for the abandonment of an organization (Reina et al., 2018). Principal leadership is at the forefront of establishing a strong culture within educational institutions (Busch & Fernandez, 2019; D. Fisher et al., 2012; Kalkan et al., 2020; MacNeil et al., 2009). As defined by Kalkan et al. (2020), leadership is the ability to mobilize individuals to achieve organizational goals. School leaders can either serve as managers or fulfill the role of change agents, directing the teaching and learning culture (MacNeil et al., 2009).

Kalkan et al. (2020) have extensively examined the interplay between school principals' leadership styles, school culture, and organizational image to contribute to the ongoing discourse on practical leadership approaches. Through a survey of 370 teachers from 20 distinct schools in Turkey, they focused on three specific leadership styles: transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire. Their empirical findings establish transformational leadership as the most effective approach to school principalship, owing to its strong correlation with trust and cooperation among teachers. Additionally, their research underscores the critical influence of leadership styles and school culture on a school's organizational image. This finding is corroborated by Leithwood et al. (2017) and other authors in their book *How School Leaders Contribute to Student Success: The Four Paths Framework*. Their comprehensive analysis validates the positive impact of transformational leadership on collective teacher efficacy, resulting in improved student performance. Therefore, it is evident that effective leadership is integral to creating a conducive school environment and promoting academic success.

Principals have far fewer opportunities to interact directly with students than teachers. Thus, the relationship and trust school principals develop with school staff are fundamental to the school's culture and play an instrumental role in reaching achievement-focused goals

(Kaplan & Owings, 2013; Lambersky, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2017). A delicate balance all principals must endure is cultivating an environment prioritizing professional productivity and trusting working relationships (Nordin et al., 2020). These relationships, although time-consuming to develop, can lead the school in a positive direction, cultivating lasting measures of success for the future.

In a leader, especially in a school setting, support is one critical piece needed in a leader-teacher relationship (Ford et al., 2019). The staff has identified principal support as another influential factor in developing a positive school culture (Leithwood et al., 2017). Most importantly, administrative support directly influences teacher experience, which subsequently impacts job satisfaction, teacher retention, and teacher perceptions of their school district, also known as the culture-based assumptions discussed previously (Khalifa, 2019). Support is a transformational and often simple presence needed in school leaders as another building block for success in school culture.

Once productive and supportive relationships are developed, a fundamental foundational building block is developed between leaders and staff; a more significant effort can be geared toward professional development. Professional development encapsulates many different learned elements of a school, including mastering the vision, identifying instructional strategies, and pursuing opportunities for life-long learning (Zepeda et al., 2019). In all of this, school leaders must lead by example (Hallinger et al., 2020). Authentically modeling the desired behaviors for subordinates has proven to be a practical approach to leadership (DeWitt, 2020). Therefore, in planned professional development opportunities, principals must become involved in conversations, sitting with their staff to collectively learn and grow (Maponya, 2020; Ng, 2019). Not only does this lead to holistic staff development, but it also creates a safe and inviting

learning environment for staff (Wasserman & Migdal, 2019). Principal modeling of desired learning environments and expectations will then translate into individual classrooms, cultivating a culture rooted in a love of learning to impact student achievement directly (Goddard et al., 2019).

Another element of school culture that is directly influenced by leader relationships is levels of teacher commitment (Khan et al., 2019). Regardless of a school leader's chosen approach to leadership, school principals can directly influence the dedication and effort of teachers (Kalkan et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2017). Strong leader-teacher relationships develop buy-in from staff, which translates to a more committed staff culture and climate (Masyhum, 2021; Torres, 2019). Elements of organizational commitment will be discussed in the succeeding sections; however, it is worth noting in the conversation of leadership and school culture.

Teacher Experience

A close focus of this study is teacher experience. Teacher experience is an overarching, holistic understanding of teachers' day-to-day experiences, interactions, perceptions, and assumptions (Kini & Podolsky, 2016). Many factors influence teacher experience and school culture (M. Lee & Louis, 2019). As displayed throughout this literature review, leadership primarily impacts school culture (Özdemir et al., 2022), focusing closely on leadership relationships with staff (Morris et al., 2020). Although leadership is a contributor, this study also strives to identify what other elements of culture impact a teacher's experience and how that experience affects teacher perceptions and assumptions. To have a positive teacher experience, specific, intentional needs need to be met. These needs, like the needs of every human, can be identified through Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs.

Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs is a fundamental principle of psychology that outlines the essential requirements of humans in a pyramid-like form. Self-actualization, or a desire to fulfill one's most significant potential, is at the highest peak of the pyramid. One can only reach this point when all other needs are met. According to Maslow, the most basic physiological needs include food, water, clothing, and shelter. On top of physiological conditions, safety provides for personal security, employment, health, and resources. Love, belonging, and esteem are the final two steps before reaching peak self-actualization. Maslow's hierarchy is often cited in educational studies as an outline of needs for students; however, teachers, too, benefit from this prioritization of requirements.

Although some elements of Maslow's (1954) pyramid, precisely the basic physiological needs, such as food, shelter, and clothing, do not fall on the responsibility of the workplace, there are several needs that school culture and leadership provide (M. Fisher & Crawford, 2020). Specifically, safety, a sense of belonging, respect, and recognition are all factors developed through a teacher's experience with school culture and relationship with leadership (Netolicky, 2020). If these needs are not met, teachers will not be able to reach that point of self-actualization (Mohale et al., 2020). If teachers do not get this point, they are ultimately not fulfilling their most significant potential, creating detrimental consequences for the school and student achievement.

Understanding Maslow's (1954) hierarchy allows school leaders to identify their employees' foundational needs, many of whom can contribute. If these unmet needs are unmet, teachers and students cannot perform fully (Levin et al., 2023). While these basic needs contribute to teachers' self-actualization or self-efficacy, they only account for one portion of

teacher experience. Teacher experience is also impacted by job requirements, pre- and post-lesson preparation workload, and accountability and performance measures (George et al., 2019).

Job requirements include a teacher's primary responsibilities, including required work hours, meetings, teaching schedule, student caseload, and so on (Glazer, 2018). Darling-Hammond and Podolsky (2019) considered the job requirements and accompanying workload of teachers in the U.S. to be excessive compared to teachers in other nations. Specifically, they cited that teachers in the U.S. are required to spend more time instructing yet need more time to prepare (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019). When assessing job responsibilities and workload, lack of time presents a significant challenge for teachers. With minimal time, work becomes less enjoyable for teachers, social interactions at work diminish, and teachers feel they do not have autonomy in their workday (Ingersoll et al., 2019). Additionally, teachers need to bring home work that was not accomplished during the day, creating undue amounts of work-related stress outside the confines of school (Maritz, 2021).

Although necessary, accountability and performance measures are other factors that stress the teacher experience (Ingersoll et al., 2019). In schools, teachers and students must meet benchmarks to reach specific accountability measures of success (Owens et al., 2020; Pharis et al., 2019). The pressure to achieve both student and teacher achievement measures often falls on the shoulders of the teachers. Additionally, attaining these measures requires additional time for data tracking and instructional implementation. Time is already a stress factor for teachers, and these benchmarks further ingrain stress and pressure, weakening the teacher experience (Ingersoll et al., 2019).

Throughout this study, it is imperative to acknowledge that individual backgrounds shape teacher experience. While certain factors are commonly cited as contributing to this

phenomenon, many other significant influences can impact educators' lived experiences. To effectively capture these complex dynamics, this literature review aims to identify various components; nonetheless, additional elements are expected to emerge as the data collection process unfolds. Overall, this study recognizes the multifaceted nature of teacher experience and seeks to comprehensively explore its intricacies by thoroughly examining various contributing elements.

Teacher Efficacy

In an educational setting, teachers with heightened levels of self-efficacy are more effective in working with children with diverse learning needs as their efficacious nature supports resilience training in students (Busch & Fernandez, 2019; Eun, 2019). Additionally, productive teachers, well-versed in self-reflective practices and confident to incite change, are more willing to alter instructional methods to meet the needs of diverse student learners. Bandura's emphasis on observational behavioral reciprocation within his social cognitive theory leads students to learn self-fulfilling behaviors, such as efficacy, through observing teachers. As in adults, self-efficacy influences students' confidence, resiliency, and stress management levels. Students with heightened levels of self-efficacy have been proven to attain more extraordinary academic achievement than their peers with deprecating levels of efficacy (Pharis et al., 2019).

As noted in the exploration of previous literature, leadership plays an instrumental role in developing school culture, which directly influences teacher experience, including teachers' belief in their abilities, also known as efficacy (Windlinger et al., 2020). In addition, self-efficacy, or an individual's belief in themselves, further influences the collective effectiveness of an entire school's staff (Bandura, 1986a). Therefore, this study aims to assess the relationship between school culture, including leadership, teacher experience, and levels of commitment, as

those factors contribute to school and student success, further explored in the literature review below.

The social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986b) evaluates the triadic, reciprocal relationship between an individual, their environment, and their behaviors (Bandura, 1986b; LaMorte, 2019). Efficacy, or an individual's belief in their abilities, is at the crux of the social cognitive theory. An individual's self-fulfilling or self-deprecating thoughts help or hinder their ability to replicate desired behaviors (Bandura, 1986b; Craighead, 2010). In education, teacher efficacy remains one of the most influential factors in teacher effectiveness (Eun, 2019; Lambersky, 2016). As efficacy reflects the internal processing of fulfilling desirable behaviors within one's environment, external factors that impact emotion and internal processing, such as leadership and culture, certainly influence efficacy (Lambersky, 2016; Pierce, 2019; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). A strong sense of efficacy is also developed through mastery experiences or experiences that provide opportunities for growth and personal achievement (Protheroe, 2008). A teacher's ability to acquire mastery experiences depends on the resources and support within a school, which directly reflect school culture and leadership.

A recent study examining principals' perceptions regarding their role in promoting organizational health has revealed that teachers reported higher levels of collective efficacy and collaboration in schools where principals were more actively involved in shaping instructional practices and teacher capital (A. Meyer et al., 2022). The authors hypothesized that collective efficacy mediated the relationship between principal leadership and teacher collaboration. The importance of individual self-efficacy and collective efficacy cannot be overstated in the success of a school district. While internal factors such as emotions play a crucial role in developing an individual's belief in their abilities, external factors such as workplace culture significantly

influence the emergence and maintenance of productive ideas. Pierce (2019) highlights the significance of collective efficacy in a school district context, which is a critical determinant of a group's ability to achieve common goals. Therefore, school leaders must understand the impact of external factors, particularly workplace culture, on evoking efficacious emotions within their faculty.

Collective Efficacy

Self-efficacy reflects an individual's belief in their abilities, while collective efficacy addresses the shared responsibility and assessment of the collaborative skills of an organization's staff (A. Meyer et al., 2022; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). In an educational environment, collective efficacy reflects the perception that the joint team can positively influence student outcomes (Pierce, 2019). Preexisting research found that collective efficacy significantly affects student achievement more than a student's socioeconomic standing (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). In addition, findings have shown that principal leadership influences the quantity and quality of teacher collaboration, resulting in collective efficacy and determining student achievement (A. Meyer et al., 2022; Voelkel, 2022). Paired with an achievement-focused culture, leaders who encourage teachers to try new strategies not only enhance self-efficacy but welcome an environment of collective efficacy that is rooted in the sharing of instructional ideas and methods (Ninković & Knežević Florić, 2018). Therefore, school principals must explore what influences collective efficacy, including culture and leadership capabilities.

Teacher Collaboration

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a sense of community and belonging is fundamental for all individuals (Maslow, 1954). As such, collaboration plays a significant role in fulfilling this need within educational settings. Furthermore, research has shown that cooperation

is crucial in developing school culture and effectiveness (Levin et al., 2023). However, with the rapid advancement of technology, collaboration among teachers has evolved into a relatively new educational phenomenon (Cochran-Smith et al., 2020). This evolution highlights the importance of examining how technology influences collaborative practices within the school community. As such, further research is needed to understand the impact of technology on collaboration and its role in creating a sense of community and belonging in educational settings.

To implement, support, and guide collaborative efforts amongst school staff, professional learning communities (PLCs) were created (Admiraal et al., 2021). In PLCs, teachers collaboratively brainstorm, plan, analyze, implement, and monitor focused, education-based initiatives, concepts, or theories (Poortman et al., 2022). The strategies discussed in PLCs and the sheer idea of PLCs support teachers' instructional creativity and growth, subsequently supporting student development and achievement (Admiraal et al., 2021). Although PLCs are intentionally planned groups, teachers work together in other ways, including content-focused, grade-level, or specific strategy-focused collaboration (Hargreaves, 2019). Teachers may feel obligated to participate in such collaborative efforts or are motivated to do so because of presently failing practices (Park et al., 2022).

Regardless of the type or intention of collaboration, a communal sharing of ideas and experiences allows teachers to grow together and improve their craft (D. Nguyen & Ng, 2020). School leaders should reinforce these practices and encourage expanding collaborative efforts, as they influence school culture, teacher effectiveness, and student achievement (A. Meyer et al., 2022). Prospering teacher leaders often invertedly emerge through these practices, supporting school leadership development (Shen et al., 2020). Additionally, a united staff generates more

substantial teacher experiences, impacting job satisfaction and retention (Thevanes & Jathurika, 2021).

Teacher Job Satisfaction

Teacher job satisfaction is undoubtedly a significant factor in teacher experience and retention (Sims, 2020). Teacher performance also shows job satisfaction (Ortan et al., 2021). Teacher attitudes, willingness to pursue new professional development opportunities, and commitment to their current district demonstrate job satisfaction. School culture often influences job satisfaction (Ortan et al., 2021). If a school culture provides an environment of belonging and leadership support, teachers will experience higher levels of job satisfaction, which leads to greater levels of teacher commitment (Samancioglu et al., 2020).

Job satisfaction greatly influences achievement measures within a school (Baptiste, 2019). Specifically, through job satisfaction, leaders can mediate student achievement (Toropova et al., 2021). Leaders shape school culture, which impacts teacher experience and job satisfaction (bin Abdullah et al., 2021). Teachers who experience greater fulfillment are more inclined to participate in professional growth and implement engaging instructional practices to support student development (Sokmen & Kilic, 2019). Thus, in ensuring a positive culture is developed, leaders can support teacher job satisfaction, student experience, and student achievement.

Teacher job satisfaction also involves relationship-building, self-efficacy, collective efficacy, autonomy, and involvement in school-wide decision-making (Olsen & Huang, 2019). As such, job satisfaction is primarily influenced by the school's culture and leadership dynamics (Lopes & Oliveira, 2020). Job satisfaction determines teacher retention and attrition levels (Ansley et al., 2019). Recent spikes in teacher attrition (Will, 2022) indicate that this once desirable profession is losing educators' job satisfaction.

Teacher Retention

School culture and teacher retention are somewhat codependent on each other, as school culture can lead to teacher retention issues, and teacher retention can cause glaring concerns within a school's culture (Davis & Boudreaux, 2019). Teacher retention is retaining and keeping teachers on staff (Holmes, 2020). In comparison, teacher attrition means the percentage of teachers leaving the profession each year (T. Nguyen et al., 2020). Studies show that factors that contribute to teacher experience, as outlined above, largely influence teacher retention (Tran & Smith, 2020). Several factors influence these decisions, such as administrative support, classroom autonomy, and workload (Reitman & Karge, 2019). More specifically, teachers who felt they shared positive relationships with their administrators also remained with their district (Shuls & Flores, 2020). It should be noted that all factors that contribute to workplace conditions are controllable by building-level administration (Morris et al., 2020). More complex topics, such as pay or benefits, are the responsibility of higher-level administration and are not easily corrected by more immediate and familiar levels of administration.

From 2022 to 2022 and 2022 to 2023, 7.7% of teachers, which amounts to over 9,000 individuals, departed from their roles within Pennsylvania's education system (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). This issue is not unique to Pennsylvania; it has become a widespread concern nationwide (Bardach et al., 2022; A. Hill & Jones, 2020). This alarming trend indicates the current state of school cultures nationwide, which is undoubtedly faltering. Teacher retention has deteriorated into a national crisis. The implications are far-reaching and demand urgent attention from policymakers and educational authorities alike.

Organizational Commitment

As teacher turnover continues to diminish the quantity and quality of educational institutions in the United States, assessing the factors that influence teacher commitment (García et al., 2022). Teacher commitment to an organization can be dependent on a variety of factors; however, preexisting literature indicates that the tenure of one's alignment with an educational institution is mainly reliant on the positive work experiences and encounters within that workplace, including the rewards and support measures implemented by leadership (Bray & Williams, 2017; Neumann & Finaly-Neumann, 1990).

The positive experiences shared at a workplace reflect Meyer and Allen's (1991) measure of affective commitment, or the emotional connection an employee shares with their workplace (Bray & Williams, 2017; Karakaya, 2013). Affective commitment not only influences the length of one's employment but also results in highly committed, satisfied, and happy staff, representing workplace culture (Bray & Williams, 2017; J. Meyer et al., 2012). A satisfied workforce directly correlates with the growth and profitability of an organization (W. Malik et al., 2017). As indicated previously, satisfaction stems from emotions associated with affective commitment (Bray & Williams, 2017; Karakaya, 2013). However, the organization's explicitly transformational leadership attempts to influence one's emotions toward their workplace (W. Malik et al., 2017). Within transformational leadership, leaders strive to form strong interpersonal relationships with employees, which aligns with positive workplace experiences and encounters.

Three-Component Model of Organizational Commitment

Meyer and Allen's (1991) three-component model of organizational commitment establishes the relationship between teacher experience and commitment. Organizational

commitment reflects an employee's belief in and alignment with an organization's identity and goals (T. Lee et al., 1992). As such, emotional attachment to an organization begins when an employee's belief in the organization's values and vision strengthens (Mulki et al., 2006).

Embedded in this emotional attachment is the concept of commitment. To expand upon previous literature surrounding employee commitment and human resource management, Meyer and Allen (1991) first published the three-component model of organizational commitment in the *Human Resource Management Review*.

In the three-component model of organizational commitment, Meyer and Allen (1991) assert that an employee's commitment to an organization is a psychological connection influenced by three distinct components, all of which influence employees' perceptions and feelings toward their workplace. The three components include affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991). The first component, affective commitment, demonstrates an individual's emotional attachment to their organization and work (Hassi, 2019). The second component, continuance commitment, reflects one's evaluation of the benefits and detriments of remaining with their organization (San-Martín et al., 2020). The final segment, normative commitment, illustrates an individual's sense of obligation to their organization regardless of their feelings and perceptions toward their place of work (W. Li et al., 2018).

Beyond evaluating school culture and teacher experience, this study strives to identify how the abovementioned variables influence teacher commitment. Teacher shortages have plagued the United States since the COVID-19 pandemic (Gray et al., 2015), school districts must understand the relationship between school culture, teacher workplace experience, and levels of commitment (Kalkan et al., 2020; K. Li et al., 2021; Schipper et al.,

2020). Meyer and Allen's (1991) three-component organizational commitment model provides the framework for understanding the complexities of commitment and the reasons for teacher attachment to their schools.

The first is affective commitment. Meyer & Allen's (1991) three-component model is affective commitment, which is the emotional attachment an employee, or in this instance, a teacher, has to their school (Yao et al., 2023). In this, individuals evaluate how closely their values align with the importance of their workplace. School culture dramatically influences an individual's affective commitment (Khaola & Rambe, 2021). The culture of a school influences teacher experiences, including how a teacher feels, and the emotional attachment a teacher has to a school (Atasoy & Turkish Ministry of National Education, 2020). Therefore, if a teacher experiences a very positive school culture, there is likely to be a stronger emotional connection and levels of commitment (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). As such, affective commitment is when an employee wants to stay.

Another commitment category, as outlined in Meyer and Allen's (1991) theory, is normative commitment. Normative commitment significantly burdens employees, as it places a sense of obligation to stay (Özdemir et al., 2022). Often, employees will feel unhappy in their current workplace, yet they feel obligated to remain with the organization for various reasons (Parmar et al., 2022). From an educational perspective, many teachers feel a normative commitment because of their connection with their students (Almutairi, 2020). Additionally, teachers who have had tuition reimbursement provided by the district may feel inclined or are required to stay for several years following the completion of their higher education (Goldring et al., 2015; Steinberg & Garrett, 2016). Therefore, normative commitment is when an employee feels they ought to stay.

Continuance commitment, the final pillar of employee commitment, is characterized by an individual's decision to remain with an organization due to financial considerations (San-Martín et al., 2020). This type of commitment is typically assessed through salary and benefits evaluations, as employees may perceive that their current employer is meeting their lifestyle needs (Hadi & Tentama, 2020). However, this commitment can harm employees' overall job satisfaction and performance if they are solely driven by external factors rather than intrinsic motivations (Chigeda et al., 2022). Continuance commitment is a sense of obligation or necessity that compels individuals to stay with an organization. From a scholarly perspective, it is essential to understand employee commitment and retention within the workplace. Thus, examining how employees' financial needs influence their decision to remain with an organization is crucial for fostering long-term employee engagement and satisfaction.

Relationship Among Leadership, Commitment, and Student Achievement

The U.S. Department of Education found that after five years of teaching, 30% of new teachers leave the profession entirely (Gray et al., 2015). In high-poverty school districts, the turnover rate climbs 50% higher (Gray et al., 2015). Regardless of the teachers' effectiveness, failing teacher retention proves detrimental to staff cohesion and the shared sense of community within a school culture (Lambersky, 2016; M. Malik & Akram, 2020). Failing teacher retention also gravely impacts student achievement (Busch & Fernandez, 2019; MacNeil et al., 2009; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). In their study, Ronfeldt et al. (2013) found that teacher turnover directly influences student achievement, specifically focusing on math achievement. The problem of this study and the preexisting literature review is essential to the field of education. As observed, a school administrator's approach to leadership can largely influence the dynamic of school culture (K. Li et al., 2021). School culture influences teacher efficaciousness, staff continuity, and

student achievement rates (Schipper et al., 2020). Furthermore, through researching this problem, the public cyber charter school under review can better identify influential leaders, which will cultivate more significant measures of holistic success for the future of their institution.

This study examines the impact of school culture on teacher experience and commitment by analyzing various constructs of workplace culture. As stated by Kalkan et al. (2020), leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of school culture, making it imperative to investigate the influence of principals on these factors. The literature review incorporated in this study serves as a basis for further exploration of the specific leadership traits that affect school culture and subsequent teacher experience. The research will focus on a public cyber charter school that caters to students from diverse backgrounds. This study seeks to shed light on the relationship between leadership, school culture, and teacher experience in a unique educational setting through comprehensive analysis.

Summary

Organizational systems, such as educational institutions, recognize the significant impact of a positive corporate culture on success and productivity (Busch & Fernandez, 2019). Within this context, it is widely acknowledged that leadership plays a critical role in shaping school culture (Kalkan et al., 2020). Utilizing the LMX Theory as a theoretical framework, this study explores the complex relationship between school culture, teacher experience, and commitment by synthesizing relevant literature. The theoretical framework used in this study provides a valuable lens for understanding leadership dynamics within educational settings. Through a comprehensive review of existing research, this study seeks to gain deeper insights into how leaders shape and influence school culture and its impact on teacher experience and commitment.

Although research on the connection between school culture and student achievement has been evaluated in length throughout educational history (D. Fisher et al., 2012; Kaplan & Owings, 2013), more work has yet to explore the associations between school culture and teacher experience. A gap in literature exploring teacher experience, including commitment, presents an opportunity for this study to examine the mutually dependent relationship between school culture and teacher commitment. By examining the relationship between school culture and teacher experience, it is hoped that educational institutions and administrative leadership can better understand their staff's needs, which will undoubtedly support their institution's holistic success, including heightened levels of student achievement.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to describe the influence of school culture on the experiences of high school teachers at a cyber charter academy in the northeastern United States. Chapter Three reviews the execution, or steps taken, to complete a successful research study. Specifically, Chapter Three will thoroughly analyze the research design, setting, participants, researcher positionality, procedures, data collection plan, and trustworthiness. The thoroughness of this chapter will allow for a greater understanding of the study and potential for future replication.

Research Design

A hermeneutic phenomenological design was selected because it allowed for a deeper, more personal connection between the researcher and the study (Dangal & Joshi, 2020). In this study, the researcher works at the research site and has worked as a teacher for nearly a decade. As such, personal assertions will be embedded in subsequent chapters once data is discussed. Moreover, qualitative research allows one to understand the circumstances of a phenomenon and the emotions and perspectives of those experiencing it (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2021). Through qualitative analysis, an arguably deeper understanding of the complexities of the phenomenon is provided and addressed through emotions, not merely statistics, as seen in quantitative studies (Kouamé & Liu, 2021). Additionally, this study is rooted explicitly in phenomenological research.

Experiences are a vital element often assessed in phenomenological research (Greening, 2019; van Manen, 2021). As this study aimed to focus on teacher experiences, a phenomenological approach was selected to highlight those experiences best. Additionally,

phenomenological studies analyze the human experience and the factors within a phenomenon that influence human experience and behavior (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016, 2021).

Assessing the relationship between several elements of the study, including culture, leadership, and teacher experience, allowed me to understand better how teacher experience is directly linked to levels of commitment.

Phenomenological research allows the researcher to provide more than simply a description of the data within the study (van Manen, 2016). The phenomenological analysis allows the researcher to interpret the meaning of lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2006, 2016, 2021). Further distancing itself from quantitative measurements, phenomenological, or human science research, obtains data through interviews (Bevan, 2014). The data collected on human experience is integral to understanding human behaviors (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2006, 2016, 2021). Understanding the connection between experience and behaviors allowed this study to bridge the gap between teacher experience and levels of commitment.

A specific subset of phenomenological research is hermeneutic studies. The research design of this study is hermeneutic phenomenological, as it evaluated the lived experiences and emotions of individuals who experienced the phenomenon (Suddick et al., 2020). A significant contributor to organizational culture is emotion, perceptions, and feelings (Zapf et al., 2021; Zietsma et al., 2019). Thus, a hermeneutic approach was chosen to support the understanding that emotion influences culture, specifically school culture. Additionally, hermeneutic phenomenology was selected to allow researcher input and co-construct meaning with the participants (van Manen, 2016). While working at the location of the study, I gained first-hand experience with the intricacies under review. Additionally, having worked in education for

nearly a decade at various districts, I provided insight into teacher experience with different styles of leadership, school cultures, and subsequent levels of commitment.

Research Questions

The central research question of this study served as a guide to understanding how teacher experience is influenced by school culture. The sub-questions allowed a deeper dive into the culture by assessing leadership and teacher commitment. These questions examined how leadership, an element of school culture, significantly impacts teachers' perspectives, experiences, and longevity within a district, bridging the knowledge gap. The sub-questions are derived from the foundation of the central research question. Specifically, the final sub-question allowed teachers to voice their opinions on why teacher experience should be considered when assessing school culture and overall achievement. Overall, the questions guiding the study identified specific elements while remaining broad enough to discuss the complexities of those elements.

Central Research Question

How does school culture influence teacher experience?

Sub-Question One

How does leadership influence teacher experience?

Sub-Question Two

How do school culture and leadership influence teacher commitment?

Setting and Participants

The participants of this study are a group of high school teachers working at a cyber charter school serving students across an entire state in the northeastern United States. Although one school, there are many offices where teachers work located around this state in the

northeastern United States. As such, the primary mode of communication between the participants and me occurred via Microsoft Teams. Contact with a broader breadth of teachers across the state allowed this study to better understand teacher experience with school culture and leadership based on their office, office leaders, leaders, and individual demographics. Finally, teachers willing to participate were selected based on availability.

Setting

The setting of this study is a public cyber charter school serving nearly 25,000 students living in a single state in the northeastern United States. The school was founded in 2003, and its mission is to provide personalized educational opportunities to students who require a non-traditional school setting and schedule. Teachers have the option to work entirely in person or can opt to work from home. If teachers work from home, they must work in person once per month at their nearest family service center. Family service centers provide a brick-and-mortar location for families to meet with school administrators if deemed necessary and employees to work throughout the year. The school has 10 family service centers across this northeastern state, with five additional centers being built in the 2023-2024 academic year. The school under review in this study is at no cost to families as home school districts fund students' cyber education. The educational institution provides a standard school design in which teachers report to assistant principals, who inform a single head principal. However, as this cyber charter school is a business, several levels of leadership are above the head principal, including a Chief Executive Officer, nine Vice Presidents, and a Board of Trustees.

The rationale for selecting this setting extended beyond convenience purposes. All 50 states have reported (García et al., 2022) teacher shortages in at least one subject area due to working conditions and compensation. In assessing the circumstances of this plight, workplace

culture is a factor that school districts can control (Bourgault & Goforth, 2021; L. Smith et al., 2023). Online learning appears to be a promising means of education for the future (Rivas et al., 2023). To ensure teachers are retained in the U.S. education system, especially in an online setting, it is imperative to assess teachers' experiences to determine the best possible workplace conditions.

Participants

The participants of this study were teachers at a northeastern United States-based cyber school. The sample population included 12 high school teachers who have worked at the cyber school for two or more years (Patton, 1990, 2014). An array of genders, ethnicities, and ages were included among the study participants to obtain various perspectives and experiences. Although the same school employs the teachers of this study, not all participants were geographically located near one another. As this is a cyber school, teachers are placed across this entire northeastern state, not in one specific site or campus.

Recruitment Plan

The non-probability sampling methods of criterion sampling and convenience sampling were utilized to determine 12 individuals for this study (Patton, 1990, 2014). The initial sample pool available included 596 teachers. However, criterion and convenience sampling, often employed in qualitative studies (Patton, 1990; Stratton, 2021), were selected for this study as I established specifications for participants and had ready access to the participants of the survey through a shared status of employment at the cyber school under review. The specifications that participants had to meet to be included in this study were that they are high school teachers and have worked at the school under consideration for at least two years. Additionally, 12

participants were selected to provide ample perspectives and data saturation while avoiding redundancy in sampling (Patton, 1990, 2014; Von Gunten & Bartholow, 2021).

Researcher's Positionality

The purpose of this section is to review my interpretative framework for the study and the philosophical assumptions that supported my study. Through hermeneutic research, like all qualitative studies, it is essential to reflect on researcher-directed interpretation as personal backgrounds and beliefs may lead to a unique and personalized perspective of the study's results (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crowther & Thomson, 2019; Dahal, 2021). Additionally, my philosophical assumptions, including my interpretation of reality (ontology), my understanding of knowledge (epistemology), and the influence of values and beliefs in research (axiology), as these assumptions directed my research goals (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Holmes, 2020).

Interpretive Framework

In reflecting on the interpretive framework of qualitative research, I identify as a social constructivist on the conservative end of the paradigm. Naturally, all researchers develop philosophical assumptions that play an integral role in data analysis and interpretation of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It is imperative to identify an interpretive framework to identify the philosophical assumption that a researcher may embody throughout their research. By understanding the interpretive framework of choice, we can often determine the philosophical beliefs accompanying that approach. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the foundation of my study, is closely aligned with the constructivist approach to research (Arpentieva et al., 2021; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). Additionally, social constructivists derive subjective meaning from their lived experiences as they seek to understand their environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Prawat, 1999). My research

aimed to understand better the relationship between school culture, teacher experience, and teacher commitment, which the social constructivist framework assisted with.

Philosophical Assumptions

The succeeding subsections reflect the philosophical assumptions that influenced the premise of this research study. Philosophical assumptions include the value and belief paradigms that consistently contribute to an individual's perspective (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). These intellectual perceptions demonstrate my view of the world, subsequently opening the reader to a greater understanding of the perspectives embedded within the foundation of this study.

Although these assumptions reflect my beliefs, they did not influence the study's structure, approach, or outcome, thus not impacting the validity of the findings.

Ontological Assumption

From an ontological perspective, I identify as someone who believes multiple realities are developed through lived experiences and interactions with others (Akkerman et al., 2021).

Ontological beliefs assess the nature of reality, in which the spectrum of views ranges from a singular truth to multiple realities to facts dependent on individual identity (Al-Ababneh, 2020).

My alignment with various realities based on lived experiences aligns with the interpretive framework of social constructivism (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). In my qualitative studies for this dissertation, I assessed the perspectives of individuals within the field of education, specifically addressing views of workplace culture. Recognizing my ontological position before engaging in research guided my qualitative studies and assessment of findings.

Epistemological Assumption

In alignment with my ontological assumption, my epistemological assumption reflects a mutually developed belief between the research and the study's research. The epistemological

view identifies how knowledge is remembered and what is distinguished as knowledge (Al-Ababneh, 2020). The epistemological approach, which also reflects the social constructivist interpretive framework, develops meaning and understanding based on the lived experiences of research participants. In this epistemological approach, the researcher is responsible for constructing reality (Holmes, 2020). As I conducted survey research, which is rooted mainly in individual interpretations of workplace environments, knowledge and justification largely depended on the lived experiences of those researched (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). As indicated previously, I needed to be self-aware of these philosophical beliefs as they guided my research and my interpretation of qualitative data (Hathcoat et al., 2019).

Axiological Assumption

My axiological assumption departs from my consistent strand of social constructivist framework and aligned philosophical beliefs, as diverse values and perspectives should be addressed within my study. The axiological assumption assesses the role of values within the study, specifically the presence of the researcher's values. Although I did not anticipate injecting my perspective of values within the study, the diverse conversations brought forth within my research evaluated the values of individuals within a singular workplace. Assessing data that relates to workplace culture and perceptions of organizational health and values, specifically what individuals value within the workplace, was at the forefront of my research and analysis. As such, it was vital to address values, specifically diverse values, as they largely influence interpretations of the workplace. I refrained from injecting my values into this approach, especially considering I am employed at the workplace under study.

Researcher's Role

As a high school teacher in the setting of this study, I directly related to the experience of the participants. I became a teacher quickly after graduating from college to instill positive life direction in students who lack parental and familial support. Many, if not all, of my students at both schools I have worked at need adult mentorship. However, I quickly realized that teacher experience and the *reach* of teachers, or their ability to help students, is often dependent on and motivated by leadership. In my professional experience, I have witnessed various approaches to leadership, both practical and ineffective. Many of my coworkers, some of whom were included in the study, have also seen a spectrum of leadership both within the setting of this study and at other educational institutions. As an aspiring school leader, I was curious about which leadership style is most effective in teacher experience and retention, which led me to pursue this study.

In qualitative studies, the researcher is often seen as a human instrument, as our responsibility resides in collecting and interpreting data. My role in this study was to collect data through a questionnaire, individual interviews, and letter-writing prompts and analyze that data to relay teacher experience best while working at the school under review. This study reflected on leadership characteristics that influence teacher efficacy, commitment, and retention. However, as an employee of the school under consideration, I am a colleague of all the participants in the study. Professional boundaries with teachers, administrators, and additional support staff were maintained. Additionally, I do not supervise any of the participants. To ensure the validity of my research, I have employed various data collection methods. To eliminate potential bias, I reviewed the study with an objective party within the school.

Procedures

I secured study participants once approval was granted through the IRB (see Appendix

A). First, to begin the research of this study, site approval, found in Appendix B, was obtained. To gather volunteers for the survey, a recruitment letter, found in Appendix C, was sent to potential participants via email, which included a summary of the research study and participation guidelines, including participant norms, data collection procedures, and efforts to protect participant confidentiality (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Participant emails were obtained through convenience and criterion sampling, as I have developed personal connections through working with the study participants and have access to their contact information. The participants met specifications before being selected for the study (Patton, 1990, 2014). For this study, it was desired to secure between 10 and 15 participants to participate (Patton, 1990, 2014; van Manen, 2021).

Once 12 participants had been secured via the recruitment letter email, they signed the consent form, found in Appendix D, and returned it to me within one week of agreeing to participate in the study. The data collection began after all participants had signed the consent form. Participants first received a Microsoft questionnaire via email. When participants completed this questionnaire, they were prompted to schedule an individual interview with me based on availability. Once prepared, a 45-minute consultation took place. These interviews took place via Microsoft Teams, and the internal recording software allowed the interview to be recorded for review and data collection purposes. The discussion was also transcribed verbatim using the transcription tool provided by Microsoft Teams. Once I checked the transcription for accuracy, they were sent to the participant for review and confirmation of accuracy and legitimacy; including the participant in this transcription transparency process further validated the study's integrity (Moustakas, 1994). After the interview, I transcribed each and returned it to the respective participants for member checking. Once the questionnaire, individual consultation,

and accompanying data analysis were completed, I sent another Microsoft Teams form to participants with the final data collection method, the letter-writing prompt. Participants were given two weeks to return their letter-writing prompt to me. Once letter-writing responses had been collected, I completed the data analysis for the prompts.

Data Collection Plan

In qualitative studies, as in all doctoral research, it is imperative to establish strong measures of research to support the study's claims (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Since qualitative data is often more abstract than quantitative data, the collection and delivery of concise data and analysis were critical within this study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The data supporting this study was gathered through the data collection stage. Data collection of empirical research included the complexity of choices, including the research design, sampling procedures, and evaluating control variables (Aguinis et al., 2021). The options above contributed to the individuality and unique nature of the study. For this specific study, to examine the participants' lived experiences, the chosen research design framework is a hermeneutic phenomenological study.

This study's data collection measures included questionnaires, individual interviews, and letter-writing prompts. The initial questionnaire provided baseline information to the researcher on the participants' exposure and understanding of the phenomena (Ricci et al., 2019). Additionally, a questionnaire helps the researcher gauge the temperature of the participant's experience with the phenomenon (Kupfer & Eisensmith, 2021). The questionnaire was placed first in the data collection process to slowly engage and introduce participants to this process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The questionnaire was followed by individual interviews and letter-writing prompts, ensuring data triangulation. The inclusion of personal interviews within the data collection of this study represented Moustakas' (1994) emphasis on the long-interview process in qualitative research. The individual consultation was placed second in the order of data collection as it allowed the researcher and participant to meet, expand on the ideas of the questionnaire, and engage in deeper dialogue (Kruger et al., 2019). More importantly, an individual interview allowed the researcher to better assess emotions associated with responses, greatly influencing qualitative, reflective research (Saldaña, 2018).

In addition to questionnaires, embedded in qualitative values and paradigms (Kidder & Fine, 1987) are letter-writing prompts, which present richness and depth unique in their capabilities compared to individual interviews. The purpose of the letter-writing exercise was to serve as a final, reflective piece for the participant. Additionally, the angle at which the prompts were given allowed the participants to reflect on the data collection process while advising school leaders about their experiences (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012). To ensure complete saturation of the study (Guest et al., 2006), all three data collection findings were processed through coding measures to establish themes or commonalities of the participants' shared experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña, 2018).

Questionnaire

This study's initial or preliminary research began with a questionnaire (see Table 1) provided to 12 selected high school teachers who signed an informed consent form (Patton, 1990, 2014). I created the questionnaire provided. The questionnaire was assigned to the participants through the online platform Microsoft Forms. The questionnaire began with demographical information and then focused on three dimensions contributing to school climate

and culture. The three dimensions included leadership qualities, morale, and academic expectations. The primary purpose of this data collection approach was to determine the collective thoughts of the teaching staff by analyzing for similarities within responses on a uniform response questionnaire.

A questionnaire assesses participants' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about the phenomenon under review (McCoach et al., 2013; Patton, 1999, 2014). Based on the nature of the data, the questionnaire's data analysis plan looked slightly different from the succeeding approaches to data analysis. The open-ended questions within the questionnaire allowed for diverse responses and opportunities for the participants to share their experiences, yet the questionnaire's natural brevity eased participants into the entire process (Saldaña, 2018).

Table 1

Questionnaire Questions

For clarity, the sections within the questionnaire are divided below.

Demographical.

1. What is your age?
2. What is your race and ethnicity?
3. What is your gender?
4. How long have you worked at this school?
5. How many schools have you previously worked at?
6. In total, how many years have you worked in education?

Leadership Qualities.

1. How do your principal and assistant principal's expectations influence your experience? SQ1

2. How do your principal and assistant principal's behaviors influence your morale and levels of commitment? SQ1, SQ2

Morale.

1. How do relationships among teachers influence your experience? CRQ
2. How does your experience influence your commitment? SQ2
3. From your perspective, how does the morale of the collective teaching staff influence the staff's overall commitment? SQ2

Academic Expectations.

1. How do the school's academic expectations impact your teaching and grading techniques? CRQ
2. How does the school's emphasis on educational excellence affect your commitment? SQ2

Individual Interviews

Once the questionnaire was completed, I conducted one-on-one interviews (see Table 2) with the participants. Through the interviews, this study took a deeper dive into the lived experiences of the high school teachers as outlined in their questionnaire. The set group of questions provided to all participants is below. However, individualized follow-up questions were necessary when there was a need for a more significant explanation from one of their questionnaire responses. This reflected the semi-structured qualitative analysis approach in which interviews had an overall structure and uniformity. However, personalized or individualized questions may be warranted in response to past data collection or follow-up efforts (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams to best adhere to the participants' schedules. Microsoft Teams is the selected platform, providing an internal transcription service that automatically transcribes the conversation. Participants participated in one interview, which lasted 45 minutes to one hour, depending on the length of participant responses. The interview questions were all open-ended responses to elicit a more significant explanation of teacher perceptions and experiences. A simple demographic examination was used at the beginning of the interview to ease the participant into questioning, followed by more in-depth questions relating to leadership and school culture.

Table 2

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe your educational history and professional background. CRQ
2. Please describe your overall experience as a teacher at your current school. CRQ
3. How would you describe the culture of your current school? CRQ
4. How has the culture of your current school influenced your experience? CRQ
5. What specific traits of school culture do you find most supportive? CRQ
6. How has the culture of your current school influenced your students' experiences? CRQ
7. How would you describe the peer engagement between staff at your current school? CRQ
8. How would you describe the engagement between school leaders and employees at your current school? SQ1
9. What traits in a leader do you find most supportive of school culture? SQ1
10. What specific traits in a leader influence your experience? SQ1
11. How does the current school leader influence your day-to-day commitment? SQ1, SQ2
12. How does the current leadership and culture influence your level of commitment? SQ2

13. How does the current leadership and school culture influence the collective staff commitment? SQ2

14. Is there anything else you can think of that may benefit me to know about school culture, leadership, teacher experience, or teacher commitment at your current school? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2

Question one provided an understanding of the participant, their work history, and length of time in the field of education. This is relevant as it allowed for a point of comparison for the participant. Question two dove deeper into the participants' experience working in the study setting. This perspective influenced their perception of culture as their overall assessment may weigh negatively or positively on their experience and perceptions. Question three provided a greater understanding of the cultural perceptions of the school under review. Questions four, five, and six assessed the influence school culture has on teacher and student experiences. Questions seven and eight more thoroughly evaluated the school's engagement or community aspect, specifically leader-teacher and teacher-teacher dynamics. This is imperative, as a sense of belonging can certainly influence perspectives. Questions nine and 10 asked for the specific traits in leadership that best support school culture and teacher experience. Questions 11 through 13 reviewed school culture and leadership's impact on teacher experience and commitment. Question 14, the final question, allowed the participants to explore any additional thoughts that were not uncovered throughout the interview.

Letter-Writing Prompts

Letter-writing prompts (see Table 3) expanded the participants' thoughts when assessing school culture, teacher experience, and commitment. This approach was a capstone, reflective piece that culminated the participants' views at the close of the data collection process (Patton,

1999). Through letter-writing prompts, this study collected the more intimate thoughts of the participants without directly interacting with them. These prompts built upon the questions in the questionnaire and individual interview above; they allowed participants to reflect more thoroughly and intentionally on their feelings towards their employing institution (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I provided participants with three letter-writing prompts at one time. The turnaround time for the letter-writing prompt responses was two weeks. After two weeks, I reviewed all letter-writing answers and began an analysis of participant experiences, as cited below. Like the questionnaire, the online Microsoft Forms collected the letter-writing prompts.

Table 3

Letter-Writing Prompts

Teachers were given letter-writing prompts and asked to respond as if they would offer advice from a school leader on establishing a strong school culture.

1. Based on your experience, please describe how school culture can influence school culture. SQ1
2. Based on your experience, please describe how school leadership can influence teacher experience. CRQ
3. Based on your experience, please describe how teacher experience can influence levels of commitment. SQ2

Data Analysis

The framework began with conducting the data collection process, in which data was collected through the three methods above—questionnaire, individual interview, and letter-writing prompt. Throughout the entire data analysis process, I processed through the hermeneutic circle (Gyollai, 2020) to ensure bracketing (van Manen, 2006, 2016, 2021) or removal of

personal bias. The hermeneutic circle assisted with interpretation (Koban, 2019). One's understanding is often shaped by pre-existing individual experiences, including our beliefs, knowledge, and expectations (Kinkaid, 2022). By exploring the results of this study through a hermeneutic lens, one can understand the experiences of others while still maintaining one's own beliefs and understanding of that topic. As such, the hermeneutic circle strives to help the reader objectively process information (Huttunen & Kakkori, 2022). As part of bracketing, I practiced journaling to exercise the hermeneutic circle process within this study (Gyollai, 2020). This helped me differentiate my experiences and my participants' experiences while objectively understanding the study's greater phenomenon.

Before explaining the overarching approach to data analysis, I first explored the individual collection measures' respective analysis approaches. First, upon receipt of the returned questionnaires, I proceeded with data analysis. The overarching data analysis plan presented elements of van Manen (2021), Saldaña (2018), and Moustakas (1994). The first layer of analysis identified significant statements, followed by formulating the meaning of those statements. Per Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological reduction process, themes were developed, including theme descriptions. Theme development within a questionnaire presented a unique opportunity to employ a deeper layer of data analysis. Specifically, Saldaña's (2018) coding cycle supported making themes.

The first coding cycle that was employed fell within effective methods, which evaluated participants' human experiences with an acute focus on emotions and values (Saldaña, 2018). Specifically, emotion coding (Prus, 1995) labeled the feelings participants experience with intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. I identified emotionally charged language in the questionnaire's qualitative open-ended responses to better assess teacher experiences. Values

coding is a concurrent method to emotional coding that adds additional context (LeCompte, 2000; McCoach et al., 2013). Values coding represents a participant's values, attitudes, beliefs, and perspective or worldview (Saldaña, 2018). I identified individual values, attitudes, and opinions in this coding approach while transcribing participant responses. Through emotion and values coding, I located participants' feelings, thoughts, attitudes, and perspectives on leadership, school culture, and teacher experiences.

The second cycle occurred once the first coding cycle was complete using the individual quantitative and qualitative decoding systems. Specifically, pattern coding allowed me to place the previously derived emotion coding and values coding data into themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I clumped statements from multiple participants' questionnaires into standard pieces through pattern coding. These themes helped to organize the data and identify common perceptions of school culture and teacher experiences. Additionally, these themes helped me close the data analysis loop by formulating a narrative to share with participants for validation and member-checking efforts. Aside from the specific coding cycle from Saldaña, the overall data analysis approach remained consistent amongst all three data collection measures to streamline the data analysis process and thoroughly explore the collected data. Finally, all data was sent to the participants for individual review and member checking to validate the findings and the narrative developed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

After completing the analysis for the questionnaire, I transitioned to collecting and analyzing the individual interview data, in which I first copied the transcription of each interview into a separate Microsoft Word document. I read the interview first for clarity and corrected any transcription errors. I re-read the transcription again to assess its overall meaning. A third review of the transcription allowed me to eliminate any repetitive or off-topic statements. In the fourth

review of the transcription, I began the analysis process, using elements from van Manen (2021), Saldaña (2018), and Moustakas (1994) for a thorough data analysis.

The individual interview data analysis plan began with Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological data analysis process. Moustakas's phenomenological reduction process encourages the researcher to decode participants' experiences by developing common themes within individual interviews and among all participants' interviews. As indicated in the questionnaire's data analysis plan, supporting theme development was also Saldaña's (2018) cycle of coding. Once themes were developed, compositions were determined, and the personal interview themes could be compared with the themes that emerged during the questionnaire's data analysis. Through this, a common understanding of teacher experiences began to form. Once themes were developed and defined, I added to the narrative created through the questionnaire analysis. The study participants vetted and validated the report and reviewed the record through member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, for the letter-writing prompts analysis, I began the process by analyzing the statements of my participants, removing repetitive or overlapping ideas, and replacing words with similar vocabulary terms (Given, 2008). I then found commonalities among participants' messages within the writing prompts and organized statements from prompts into themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña, 2018). Throughout these processes, I placed equal importance on each account or piece of data. Through this process, I gained a greater understanding of the human experience of the participants in this study. Definitions for the themes were developed to provide greater structure in the analysis. From theme development and organization, a narrative was written and shared with participants in a member-checking effort to ensure validation and resonance.

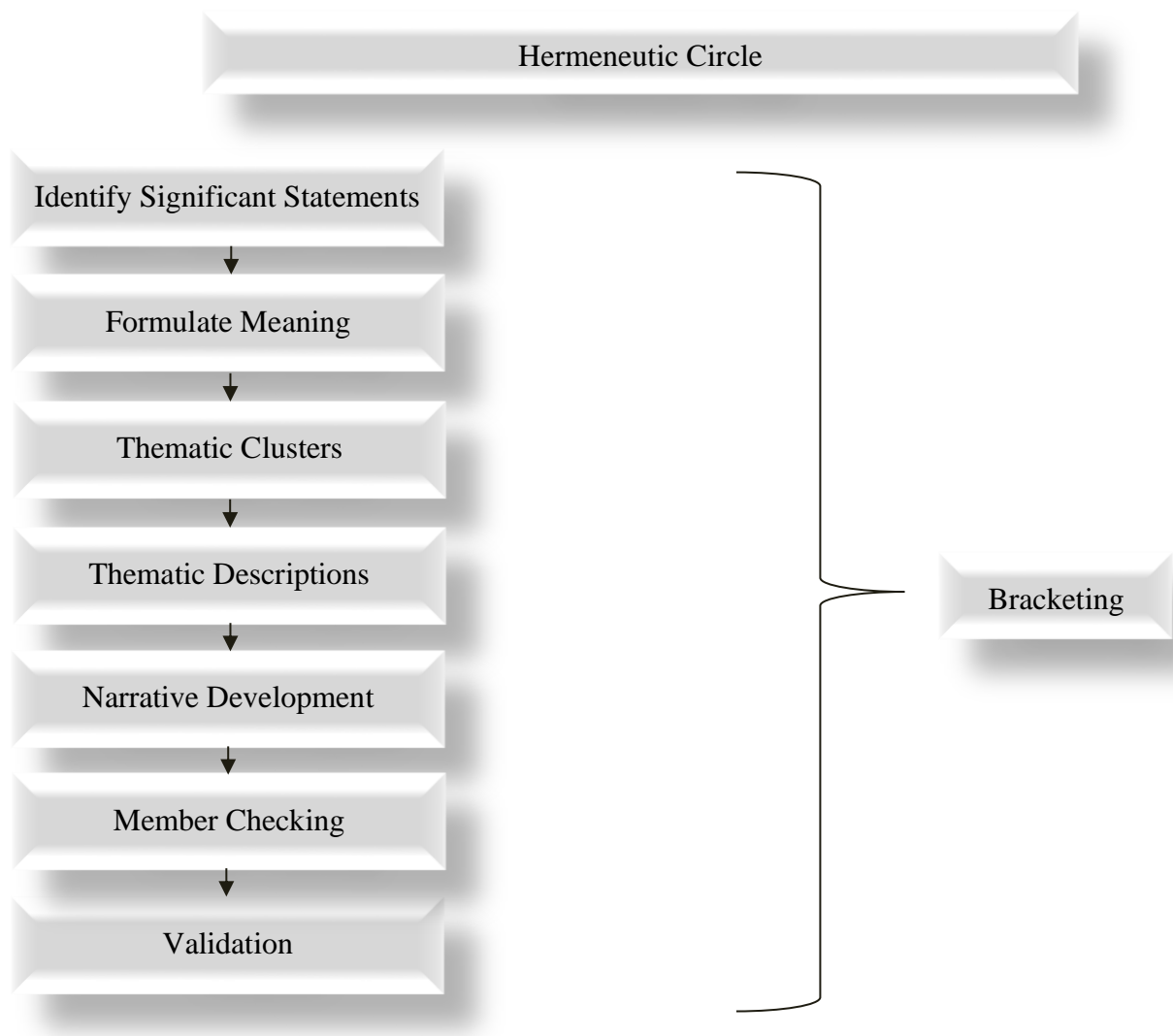
Once the data has been derived from each data collection approach, I merged all elements to form a holistic narrative. First, I identified significant statements in each data collection method (van Manen, 2021). After the considerable statements had been extracted from the data pool, I began to formulate the meaning of these critical statements (van Manen, 2021). Once sense has been linked with each critical statement, the implications were placed into thematic clusters, grouping similar ideas (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2021). After identifying themes, I created descriptions for each theme using the participants' lived experiences as the basis for these descriptions (Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña, 2018; van Manen, 2021). A greater narrative is formed once the theme descriptions have been developed (van Manen, 2021). I then employed member checking to enhance the validity and resonance of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study's results were returned to the participants to validate the study's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The findings were validated as the conclusions aligned with the participants' experiences.

Considering this study's limited number of participants, utilizing Qualitative Data Analysis Software was initially not considered. However, NVivo, an online qualitative data analysis software, was used in conjunction with a comprehensive data analysis framework. The comprehensive data analysis framework was applied across all three modes of data collection: questionnaires, individual interviews, and letter-writing prompts (see

Figure 1). This framework has been meticulously crafted by incorporating van Manen's (2021) bracketing approach, as well as drawing on critical aspects of Saldaña's (2018) and Moustakas's (1994) methods. This approach has been carefully designed to ensure that all findings are credible and uphold the highest standards of validity.

Figure 1

Data Analysis Plan



(Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña, 2018; van Manen, 2021)

Trustworthiness

Emerging from the positivist paradigm proposed by Schwandt et al. (2007), it is crucial to communicate the trustworthiness of a study to uphold honesty in research practices and dissertation development (Mahmud & Ali, 2023). In assessing credibility, Shenton (2004) highlights Guba's four constructs of accreditation: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmation. By situating my study within the framework of these constructs, I aim to establish

the validity and credibility of my research findings. This effectively demonstrated the rigor and reliability of my study. This approach guarantees that the study's outcomes can be trusted and extrapolated to other contexts.

Credibility

Credibility, or the honesty and validity of the source of information, is one of the most significant factors when assessing trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004). To ensure credibility is portrayed throughout my study, I employed various approaches to data collection and multiple strategies to interpret data (Omrani et al., 2021). The data collection methods include a questionnaire, interviews, and letter-writing prompts, all rooted in participant responses and opinions. Additionally, the approach to data collection, in which participants responded through three different rounds of questioning, required prolonged engagement by both myself, the researcher, and the participants. Interpreting the participant-led data included peer debriefing, triangulation, and member checking, all supporting validating participant responses (Natow, 2020). Additionally, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and consent confirmation are required portions of the study; as such, credibility and rigor are inherently supported at the initial approval of the IRB.

Denzin's (2017) and Patton's (1990, 1999, 2014) triangulation served as the validation mechanism for this study. In line with their comprehensive approach, Denzin (2017) and Patton (1990, 1999, 2014) have identified four distinct triangulation strategies, one of which was explicitly employed in this study. Methodological triangulation, involving multiple methods to gather data on a particular phenomenon, was conducted through three distinct approaches to data collection. These triangulation efforts are intended to improve the overall validity and reliability

of the study's findings. As such, rigorous attention was given to each stage of the research process, ensuring the highest methodological rigor.

Transferability

The purpose of transferability is to allow others to utilize the premise of your study and apply it to various contexts (Burchett et al., 2013). However, this is only achievable through honest, trustworthy data collection and reporting. The detailed descriptions of the setting, participants, data collection, and analysis methods included in this study provide the reader with a thorough understanding of how to replicate this study in different and more significant contexts. Additionally, maximum variation is contained within the sample population, reflecting the diverse thoughts of teachers from various ethnicities, genders, educational and professional backgrounds, and other demographic variables.

Dependability

Aligning closely with credibility and transferability, dependability is established if the study is credible (Shenton, 2004). Dependability is developed throughout the study by thoroughly explaining the research design, implementation, data gathering, and reflection on the survey (Shenton, 2004). This study is rooted in the components mentioned above of dependability. Additionally, the reader's determination within their credibility assessment dictates their interpretation of dependability. The dependability and subsequent confirmability were also validated through an independent audit, external audit, and peer review, which can be done through the committee assigned to this study.

Confirmability

Confirmability ensures objectivity on behalf of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). As such, through confirmability, the reader of the study assessed the methods created to gather data, such

as questionnaires and interview questions. Inevitably, there was a layer of researcher opinion in many studies as researchers often select a topic that interests them or provides convenient sampling. To enhance the study's confirmability and ensure the researcher's transparency, it is best practice to discuss researcher predispositions within the survey (Shenton, 2004). In doing so, the reader gains honesty from the researcher, as they do not attempt to disclose any influential data or information. Within my study, I specifically reference my experience as a teacher in the study setting. As such, I have selected a hermeneutic phenomenological study to inject my interpretation of the study setting. Additionally, as presented above, an audit process was employed throughout the data collection process to enhance the confirmability and trustworthiness of the study.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations of this study are standard considerations included within every quantitative and qualitative analysis. The primary level of moral consideration begins with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and Liberty University's internal IRB approval. Following IRB approval at both levels, I attained site approval through the Chief Executive Officer of the chosen site. Once IRB and site approval were established, consent requirements were completed by all adult participants through the informed consent form. The informed consent form includes the voluntary participation status, the ability to withdraw from the study at any moment, and the promise of confidentiality. To ensure confidentiality, participant responses were secured in an electronic file protected by a password. Three years following the release of the study, the data will be destroyed to preserve participant engagement further. Another ethical consideration to review is the risks and benefits of participation. Participants do not face significant risk because of the study's confidential nature. Additionally, the site process is

primarily through online communication, thus making it challenging for others to witness any study interaction. The benefits of the study far outweigh the risks, as the benefits provide the participants with an opportunity to reflect on the school's cultural dynamic while inspiring other researchers to duplicate the steps of this study with hopes of corroborating the findings.

Permissions

To initiate the research phase of this study, the administrative team at the selected site was approached for site permissions. Internal IRB-related approvals are unnecessary to conduct the research study at said location, thereby minimizing barriers to site access. Upon obtaining site permissions, participant engagement is sought through completing consent forms provided by all participants. Finally, consent forms are carefully reviewed to ensure full compliance with established regulations and guidelines. The meticulous procedures employed in this study guarantee ethical propriety, safeguarding both participants' rights and data integrity.

Other Participant Protections

In requesting participation in the study, I informed prospective participants of its voluntary nature and their ability to remove themselves from the study at any point throughout the process. With each communication and data collection effort, participants were continually reminded of these rights throughout the research process. Also, pseudonyms protected the participants and the site's identities. Characteristics alluding to the identity of the site and participant remained as uniform and generic as possible to ensure the ethical protections of both parties. This study's electronic data was stored in a secure folder requiring a password to access the information. The data was stored for the duration of the study, which is presumed to be six months. However, if more time is needed, per Liberty University's IRB regulations, the data will be destroyed after three years of safekeeping. Through participation in this study, participants

can support the development of a positive school culture while contributing to this research in the greater field of education. The most significant risks associated with participating in this study include unveiling participant identity when disclosing personal perceptions of the school under review. However, as indicated previously, appropriate measures, including participant pseudonyms, were taken to protect the participants' identities.

Summary

Chapter Three carefully examines the procedures employed in conducting this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study. The primary aim of this chapter is to present a comprehensive analysis of the fundamental data-centric principles that serve as the basis for this study, thereby ensuring its potential for future replication. Data for the study was collected through a combination of questionnaire surveys, individual interviews, and letter-writing prompts. As the researcher, I served as the human instrument for this study, undertaking the crucial tasks of data collection, analysis, and synthesis. Confidentiality and trustworthiness are paramount in this process, with participant identities protected using pseudonyms. Additionally, ethical considerations are embedded within the study design, with measures to minimize participant risk and ensure the findings' credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability. Overall, this chapter provides a thorough overview of the rigorous methods utilized in this study, thereby enhancing its validity and reliability as a research endeavor. With these measures in place, the analysis can confidently contribute to the existing body of knowledge and serve as a foundation for future research in this area. Therefore, it is essential that all procedures are carefully documented and transparently presented to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness in the findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to describe the influence of school culture and leadership on the experiences and levels of commitment of high school teachers at a cyber charter academy in the northeastern United States. Chapter Four begins with an introduction of the 12 teachers who were selected to participate in this study. An account of the experiences of the 12 participants, collected through a questionnaire, individual interview, and letter-writing prompt, is summarized in the results section of this chapter. Using Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological reduction and Saldaña's (2018) coding cycle, four themes and accompanying subthemes are derived from the participants' experiences. Following the themes is an assessment of outlier findings and a concise narrative response to the research questions. Chapter Four concludes with a summary of the research findings.

Participants

The study began by emailing 12 full-time teachers to elicit potential participation. These teachers were selected using convenience sampling, as they are my colleagues, and criterion sampling, as they all were required to be high school teachers who have worked at the site of this study for two or more years. Of the 12 teachers contacted, all 12 agreed to participate in the study. Before beginning the data collection process, all participants signed and returned the consent form (see Appendix D). All communication with participants was done through Microsoft Outlook, Teams, and Forms software.

Participants were approximately 58% female and 42% male. The 12 participants share a median teaching experience of over 13 years. The participant pool included two English

Language Arts teachers, one Special Education teacher, four Social Studies teachers, two Math teachers, one Science teacher, one Health and Physical Education teacher, and one Foreign Language teacher. Including various course subject teachers contributed to a more holistic understanding of school culture, leadership, and teacher experience, as they shared united yet diverse perspectives. However, to protect participant anonymity, the subjects taught were not directly associated with individual participants in the descriptions below. In Table 4 and the descriptions below, pseudonyms describe the research participants.

Table 4

Teacher Participants

Teacher Participant	Years Taught	Highest Degree Earned	Grade Level
Brittany	20	Master's	11th
Chad	8	Bachelor's	9th
Colleen	15	Master's	9th - 12th
Elizabeth	18	Master's	11th - 12th
James	21	Bachelor's	9th
Katherine	9	Bachelor's	10th
Matthew	7	Bachelor's	9th
Melanie	3	Master's	11th
Nicholas	30	Master's	9th - 12th
Richard	10	Master's	10th

Stephanie	7	Master's	9th
Vanessa	15	Master's	10th

Brittany

Brittany has worked at this school for two years and serves 11th-grade learners. Brittany has been an educator for over 20 years and possesses a master's degree. In addition to working as a teacher, Brittany is also an adjunct professor at a local community college. Before working at this study's site, Brittany worked at two other schools. Brittany shared a rather pessimistic perspective of the research phenomenon and is unwavering in her perception. Her pessimism is the product of several unpleasant encounters with school leadership in which she felt unsupported, micromanaged, and targeted.

Chad

Chad works with 9th-grade students. He has been an educator for nearly eight years and has worked at the site of this study for five years. Previously, he worked at three other schools and possesses a bachelor's degree. Chad embodies an approachable and mellow personality. In all three data collection methods, he combined his impassioned perspectives on education with quips about the realities of teaching. In speaking to the phenomenon of the study, Chad expressed concerns sensibly and provided pragmatic solutions.

Colleen

Colleen supports high school students from grades nine through 12. Colleen has worked at this school for two years but has been in education for 15 years. Before this school, she worked at three other schools and holds a master's degree. Colleen's natural disposition is rather timid. She is forthright when spoken to but will not outwardly express her opinions. Colleen's

responses were fixated on her experiences with poor employee-leader communication in all three data collection methods. She also heavily compared the site with a previous cyber school she worked for, which seemed to allow her to fully unravel her honest opinions on the phenomenon of the study.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a veteran educator with 18 years of experience. She has worked at this school for 16 years and has previously worked at only one other school. Elizabeth possesses a master's degree and currently teaches an honors-level course for 11th and 12th-grade students. Elizabeth, who has the longest tenure at this site, unloaded a wealth of knowledge in all three data collection methods. Specifically, she was able to articulate the evolution of the site's culture and leadership dynamics. Her responses were honest, thorough, and commendably level-headed, even when discussing alarming examples of flawed leadership.

James

James is also a veteran teacher with 21 years of experience. He has worked at this school for two years. Before working here, James worked at another school. He has a bachelor's degree and is currently teaching a 9th-grade course. James' has a quiet, introverted demeanor. Having worked in a brick-and-mortar environment for over 20 years before transitioning to this site, James' perspective on the study phenomenon was one of grace and appreciation. James recognized that there were flaws in the site's leadership and culture but expressed his degree of concern with the phenomenon of the study was much less here than in a brick-and-mortar environment.

Katherine

Katherine has worked at this school for five years. In total, she has worked in education for nine years. Before working at this school, Katherine worked for two other school districts. Katherine possesses a bachelor's degree and currently teaches a 10th-grade course. Katherine was noticeably pleasant; she had a warm and welcoming presence. Katherine was resolute in her responses but not rigid. She expressed firm beliefs on her disappointment with the school's current academic expectations and culture but also recognized the challenges principals face given the complex layers of leadership.

Matthew

Matthew has worked at this school for six years. Before teaching here, Matthew taught at another school. In total, Matthew has been in the field of education for nearly seven years. Matthew holds a master's degree and teaches a 9th-grade course. Matthew identified himself as a hermit at work. He indicated that he was once more approachable and involved at work, but after several negative experiences with leadership, he became more reserved. His responses were brief and unemotional; he appeared unphased and emotionally exhausted by the research phenomenon. Although curt, his responses were rich in experiences that supported a greater understanding of the phenomenon.

Melanie

Melanie has worked at this school for three years and has been in the field of education for four years. Before working here, Melanie worked at another school. Melanie holds a master's degree and currently teaches an 11th-grade elective course. Melanie is both well-known and respected by her colleagues. Beyond her teaching responsibilities, she is heavily involved in extracurricular activities at the school. Melanie is a passionate educator eager to discuss

challenging topics that others may shy away from. She is in the know and fierce in her viewpoints. Although Melanie is firm in her beliefs, she is non-confrontational and welcomes solution-focused conversations.

Nicholas

Nicholas is a veteran teacher with 30 years of teaching experience. He teaches 9th through 12th-grade high school students. He possesses a master's degree and has worked at this school for two years. Before working here, Nicholas worked at six other school districts. Nicholas has an easygoing disposition. He is approachable and willing to share his wealth of knowledge in the education field. Nicholas worked for several inner-city school districts before working at this school and often referenced the hardships he faced in those districts. As such, his perspective on the phenomenon of the study was enthusiastic and encouraging.

Richard

Richard has worked at this school for five years. In total, he has worked in education for 10 years and has taught at three other schools. Richard holds a master's degree and currently teaches a 10th-grade course. Richard's demeanor was rather casual and carefree. He recognized shortcomings in school leadership and culture but cited, "It is what it is." Rather than determining ways to address his concerns with leadership and culture, Richard found ways to work around them. Richard's disposition was more about accepting reality and not being impassioned to incite change.

Stephanie

Stephanie has worked at this school for two years. She has also worked in education for eight years and served one other school district before her role here. Stephanie possesses a master's degree and currently teaches a 9th-grade course. Stephanie is a noticeably apprehensive

individual. She keeps very busy at work and is always aware of her responsibilities and what she needs to do to accomplish them. Stephanie was talkative but more reserved in her responses, almost as if she was anxious to discuss the research phenomenon. Stephanie cited concerns specifically about the management of academic accountability by the leadership. As someone who takes her professional duties very seriously, she expressed frustration with the school's "lenient" academic expectations for students.

Vanessa

Vanessa has worked at this school for two years. She currently teaches a 10th-grade course. Vanessa has worked in education for 15 years. Before working here, she worked at two other schools. Vanessa possesses a master's degree and a reading specialist certification. Vanessa is very agreeable, with a cheery and vibrant personality. Vanessa is a zealous educator with a deep passion for instructional growth. Although lighthearted and cheerful in her responses, Vanessa expressed discouragement over leadership's lack of concern for professional development regarding engaging teaching strategies. Although disappointed, Vanessa remained optimistic about the school's potential.

The combined tenure of the 12 participants totaled over 160 years in education. Although the educational and work experiences of the participants immensely varied, all twelve participants shared a rich understanding of their acute relationship with the study's phenomena. Even though the participants specifically identified individual experiences with the phenomena of the study, their recollections struck similarities amongst the collective group. These similarities helped to generate themes within the findings of this study. The essence of participants' experiences aligned closely with Dansereau et al.'s (1975) Leader-Member Exchange Theory, in which the two-way relationship between an employee and leadership

largely dictates the employee's experience. Based on the Leader-Member Exchange Theory, the participants either had a positive or negative outlook on their overall experience, associated levels of commitment, and anticipated tenure at the site.

Results

The results of this study and themes were established through three data collection measures: a questionnaire, an individual interview, and a letter-writing prompt. All participants' data were rigorously analyzed to identify words, phrases, and ideas that illustrated the participants' experience with the phenomenon of the study. Leveraging the guiding theory of this study, the Leader-Member Exchange Theory (Dansereau et al., 1975), specific themes were derived from the data collected to provide a cohesive understanding of the phenomenon. The four themes include divided interpretations of school culture, highly desired leadership traits, buy-in, and work-life balance. The thematic saturation method (Guest et al., 2020) was used to determine these four themes. The thematic saturation method for determining themes assesses individual codes within the research findings to create groupings amongst participant data, generating themes. The data saturation method was employed to help identify individual codes within the research findings.

Data Saturation Method

Code saturation, a measure for assessing data saturation, was employed to reach maximum fidelity in data analysis (Guest et al., 2020; Hennink et al., 2017; J. Thomas & Harden, 2008). Saturation was initially coined by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 in their qualitative-based theoretical developments (Saunders et al., 2018). In short, a saturation of data identifies the point in data collection when no new information emerges, and all data and identifiable codes have been explored and exhausted (Hennink et al., 2017). Code saturation is when all possible codes

have been derived from participant data, meaning no new codes emerge (Guest et al., 2020). A measurement of code saturation was employed to demonstrate the potential for validation and trustworthiness in qualitative studies.

Table 5

Thematic Saturation

Data Collections Participant Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
New Codes Per Participant	17	6	4	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Thematic Saturation Method	Base Size of 4 = 30 Themes				Run Size of 2 = 1 Theme		1/30 = 3.3%					

An examination of this study's data from all three data collection methods revealed 31 separate codes from the first five participants. The subsequent seven participants did not present additional codes; instead, they repeated sentiments associated with the initial codes of the first five participants. The repetition of like codes validated the thematic development and successful data saturation. Table 5 illustrates the point at which the code saturation threshold was reached. While data collected from the first five participants was enough to provide rich code saturation, the data from the remaining seven participants helped to enhance understanding of the codes.

Code Saturation

Specifically, for code saturation, the thematic saturation method was employed (Guest et al., 2020). The thematic saturation method approach, measured post facto, operationalizes saturation as a proportion to find the saturation ratio. The thematic saturation method has three elements for measuring—base size, run length, and new information threshold. The base size identifies the minimum number of data collection events a researcher should analyze to reach a

point of data saturation. Guest et al. (2020) identify four as an adequate base size. As such, 30 new codes were identified in this study in looking at the first four participants. The total codes, 30, derived from the base size, four, serve as the denominator in the proportional calculation. The run length is the number of consecutive data collection events after the base size in which new information is discovered. Guest et al. (2020) cite two as an appropriate measure for run length. In assessing the subsequent two interviews, participants five and six, only one new code emerged. As such, in this equation, the run length of one is the numerator. When calculated, one divided by 30, there is a data saturation ratio of 3.3%.

The new information threshold identifies a specific limit the researcher would accept as evidence of successful data saturation. The new information threshold of this study was $\leq 5\%$. The threshold percentage of $\leq 5\%$ was chosen as a baseline; however, Guest et al. (2020) note that all studies can reach a new information threshold of 0% with advanced data collection efforts. The data saturation ratio of this study, 3.3%, falls within the new information threshold of $\leq 5\%$. Using the thematic saturation method (Guest et al., 2020), the integrity of this study's data collection and saturation were validated.

Theme Development

Themes were developed after analyzing the initial collection of 31 codes, grouping those of similar sentiment, and removing those irrelevant to the study. In examining the codes and thematic development, I removed personal biases and experiences by engaging in the hermeneutic circle (Gyollai, 2020), explicitly bracketing (van Manen, 2021). In my frequent bracketing exercises, I would use an independent hard-copy journal reserved exclusively to house my experiences in this study. In this journal, I often identify topics that participants discuss and unload my experiences and perceptions of that topic. Journaling helped me recognize

my biases related to specific codes derived from my data collection and separate those biases from the rich experiences of my participants.

I employed NVivo, an online qualitative data analysis software for coding development and data storage. Specifically, NVivo supported with preliminary thematic analysis and sentiment categorization, narrowing down the initial 31 codes into significant concepts. While NVivo was used, it primarily served as a secondary resource in thematic development, as I generated the specific themes using the coding data derived in NVivo. The thematic saturation process aided in triangulation saturation, as the codes derived from all three data collection methods were synthesized to create robust, cohesive themes. In concurrence with the NVivo software, I followed Moustakas' (1994) data analysis efforts of horizontalization to support the phenomenological reduction of data and meaning. Moustakas' (1994) reduction progression helped to develop the four themes of the study. The themes produced were (a) divided interpretations of school culture, (b) highly desired leadership traits, (c) buy-in, and (d) work-life balance. Each participant discussed these themes in some variation throughout the study.

In each theme, several sub-themes that reflected the more intricate thoughts of the participants emerged. Divided interpretations of school culture yielded the sub-theme leaders determine culture. Highly desired leadership traits developed three sub-themes, including (a) ever-evolving leadership, (b) the unknown of middle management, and (c) unclear expectations. Buy-in discusses the sub-themes of (a) rigor or reputation, (b) burnout, and (c) unfocused professional development. The final theme of work-life balance yielded one sub-theme: flexibility in an otherwise inflexible profession.

Divided Interpretations of School Culture

School culture reflects the beliefs and values of an educational institution; moreover, it is a collection of experiences that shape the assumptions of individuals within the school community, all directly influencing school outcomes, including employee performance and student achievement (Kalkan et al., 2020; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Although there were varied interpretations of the school's culture, all questionnaire and individual interview participants agreed that school culture "influences their day-to-day responsibilities" and overall work experience. There also was a consensus amongst all participants in all three data collections that there is "great division" in interpreting school culture amongst the teaching staff. In answering the letter-writing prompts, Elizabeth identified the culture as "divided," while Chad described the school as having "pockets of culture."

Although all participants identified that the school's culture influenced their working experience and that there were positive and negative perceptions of culture, most participants agreed that the opposing perception of school culture "did not influence their experience or sway their perception." Colleen, who works with a significant and varied number of staff members in her position, noted when discussing school culture in her interview, "I think because most of us work from home 75% of the month, we can better compartmentalize our emotions versus the emotions of others, and not let their experiences influence ours." Colleen's thoughts unearthed a more significant conversation about work-life balance, which commanded its own theme.

Several teachers who had worked at the site for longer tenures than others, specifically Elizabeth, Matthew, and Richard, all cited in their individual interviews that the culture mainly had "stayed the same" even though the school itself had "changed significantly." In speaking of the consistency of the culture, Matthew shared in his questionnaire, "I do not think the culture

has changed significantly since I started, which was pre-COVID,” referencing the COVID-19 pandemic. He continued, “Even though the school has seen a growth of nearly 19,000 additional students and several thousand staff members, the feeling of the school environment has remained the same.” While Elizabeth agreed that the culture had not significantly changed over time, she did reference in her response to the letter-writing prompts more significant efforts from leadership to “know employees on a more personal level” done in the past but also recognized that the rapid growth of the school likely made it “impossible” to continue those efforts.

Regardless of the tenure of the teacher, all participants in all three data collections referenced, to some degree, relationships with leadership and relationships with colleagues when discussing school culture. In recounting colleagues’ relationships, Vanessa shared in her questionnaire, “You never see people being nasty to one another, which you more often see in brick-and-mortar schools.” Vanessa continued, “Leadership is constantly trying to acknowledge what staff members are doing, and that transitions down to staff-to-staff relationships.” Nicholas shared a similar perception in his questionnaire: “Teachers feel happier here, and because of that, they are more inclined to help each other.” While Vanessa and Nicholas had a positive perception, others identified teachers as trying to “one-up” each other and leadership as “aloof” to the realities teachers faced. Again, regardless of the sentiment shared or the “pockets of culture” one fell into, all participants drew a direct link between school culture and relationships.

In defining the school culture as having pockets of culture, Chad meant that pockets or groups of people are grouped because they share similar interpretations or experiences with the school’s culture. In responding to the letter-writing prompts, Matthew shared that there are “groups of employees who have a positive perception of school culture and groups of employees who share a different sentiment” about the school’s culture. Most participants, like Matthew,

echoed Chad's beliefs and brushed it off as the "reality" of workplaces—employees who have a positive perception versus those who do not. While Chad generally assessed the positive and negative perceptions of school culture, Melanie highlighted a more specific division when evaluating the school's culture.

In her interview, Melanie shared her interpretation of school culture: "The culture here is so vastly different than if you were to go to a satellite office." In this, Melanie discusses the different cultures found within the various office buildings the school owns in the state where it is located. Melanie shared a personal experience, noting, "I visited another office building in a different part of the state to collaborate with a colleague, and 100% the culture was different in that office in a much more positive way." Elizabeth, having worked at the site for 16 years, attested to Melanie's observation, citing the relaxed nature of the satellite office and sharing in her questionnaire that she feels that she is "always under a microscope" while working out of the main office because of the presence of top-level leadership. In this, it is understood that leaders, in both their presence and demeanor, establish a workplace dynamic that directly influences the positive or negative interpretations of school culture.

Leaders Determine Culture

When interviewing other participants, many, like Melanie and Elizabeth, drew a connection between leadership and culture in all three data collections. Katherine, who had worked at the school for five years, shared in her questionnaire, "I used to have a negative view of the school's culture. But, since I was assigned a new principal and assistant principal, my perception of this school's culture has changed." Katherine's comment unfolded yet another "pocket," or division of culture. Each interview and individual school culture analysis revealed a deeper understanding of culture. School culture cannot be defined from a singular, holistic view

because school culture looks different in each office. Diving even further, school culture looks and feels different under each leader. In this, it was apparent that even though everyone worked at the same school, their perception of culture vastly differed depending on their circumstances.

In discussing school culture, it was apparent that all participants in all three data collections cited a “connection” between leadership and culture. Most often, participants would associate their relationship with or perception of leadership as a measure of positive or negative school culture. Additionally, many participants in all three data collections alluded leaders “set the tone” of culture, noting that different offices and leadership teams generate different cultural environments. In this, the sub-theme of leaders determine culture evolved. The site is so large that the high school has four different head principals. Underneath each principal are approximately one dozen assistant principals. According to the participants, it is understood that each principal, or leadership team, has their own culture, and there are “distinct and divisive differences,” per the words of Katherine in her letter-writing response, that create significant misalignment throughout the entire school.

Although not all participants used the word “misalignment,” their experiences demonstrated the vast differences between the four school leaders. For example, Stephanie shared in her interview, “Just this year, I have come out of a supervision meeting with my principal crying because of unrealistic expectations.” Another participant, Vanessa, from a different leadership team, shared in her questionnaire, “Both my principal and assistant principal are extremely approachable and have set realistic expectations for my course.” Elizabeth noted in her questionnaire, “My principal makes me feel confident and gives me ideas on how I can enhance learning in my classroom,” Matthew, a participant from another leadership team, stated in his letter-writing response, “My supervisor docked me on instructional strategies in my post-

observation evaluation but did not offer strategies on how I could improve.” The participants’ lived experiences with leadership and culture indicate that leaders influence teachers’ perceptions. A teacher's positive or negative interpretation of the school culture largely depends on their leader. In an effort to understand the relationship between leadership and culture, an overarching theme emerged: highly desired leadership traits.

Highly Desired Leadership Traits

When asked in the questionnaire what specific qualities are most needed in a school leader, participants listed qualities including patience, encouragement, flexibility, trustworthiness, and other redeeming qualities most would hope to see in a leader. However, empathy and communication were the two words most cited in participant responses. Matthew shares in his questionnaire, “Compassion and empathy are the two biggest qualities I think are most needed in school leaders. They should be people who have been in the classroom and experienced the struggles of both students and faculty.” In his questionnaire response, James joins the conversation on empathy: “School leaders need to recognize, no matter how large our school grows, that teachers and students are humans, not numbers. They must be empathetic and understand our needs and unique circumstances.” In discussing communication, Nicholas writes, “This is in every part of communication. Letting people know your vision and expectations. Being an active listener to all people involved.” In her questionnaire response, Vanessa comments, “School leaders need to be able to clearly state and explain any plans or changes in a way that all staff members understand. They also need to be a strong listener. I'm not just talking about listening to respond; I mean listening with the intent to truly hear what the other person is saying.” While there was a consensus amongst teacher participants about desired leadership qualities, developing a positive rapport with leadership built on effective communication and

empathy seemed nearly impossible because of the constant turnover in assistant principal placements.

Ever-Evolving Leadership

With the school's growth, a common experience many participants shared was ever-evolving leadership. Each year, or every several years, participants cited being assigned a new assistant principal, some calculating four different assistant principals in five years or three different assistant principals in two years. Often, their principal would remain the same, but their assistant principal would change. In all three data collections, participants compared their experiences with current versus past leaders at this school. The constantly evolving leadership appeared to be such a common practice that most participants spoke rather apathetically when citing the change in leadership and its often-adverse impacts on their work experiences. The trend of ever-evolving leadership further demonstrates the theme of misalignment. Chad writes in his questionnaire response, "Consistency! We need consistency in leadership and expectations. It is appalling how every assistant principal and principal are on different pages." Overall, participants noted a feeling of being "unsettled" with the constant change.

The Unknown of Middle Management

While most participants felt "unsettled" by the ever-evolving leadership trends, almost all participants in all three data collections, even those who had worked at the school for several years, noted the "unknown" of middle management. In this school, middle management refers to leaders who fall between head principals and the Chief Executive Officer of the school. When asked how leadership influences her experience, Stephanie acknowledged in her individual interview that her "assistant principal and principal have the greatest impact on her day-to-day experience." However, she recognized that "I think a lot of decisions are made above them, and

they are just messengers. But honestly, I do not even know who is above them or what they do.” In her letter-writing response, Colleen described middle management as an “ominous cloud” that looms over them. Brittany noted, “I am sure they [middle management] are watching what we do and keeping track of how we are performing, but I could not even name who is above my principal, nor do I know what they do.”

When speaking of middle management, participants appeared frustrated by the unknown. They shared an understanding that many of their responsibilities as teachers stem from the decisions of middle management; however, there needed to be a clear line of communication between teachers and those in mid-level managerial positions. Elizabeth writes in her letter-writing response, “Principals and upper administration seem aloof. I cannot tell if they do not care or are not invested enough to care. It seems they are not working together and do not listen to teacher feedback.” James writes, “I would be interested in hearing more about the policies and goals of the ‘higher-ups.’ I wish they were discussed more openly.” The unknown of middle management creates a disillusioned chain of command and unclear expectations, another frustration discussed in participant reflections.

Unclear Expectations

A similar tone of frustration was ever-present when discussing different expectations between leaders. Amid misalignment, ever-evolving leadership, and the unknown of middle management, teacher participants shared that one of the most significant points of contention this year was the difference in expectations between leadership teams. For example, James shared in his individual interview that “in the Math department, teachers were grading the same assignments differently based on the directives given by their assistant principal.” Many students and parents were upset by the different grading expectations between teachers. The teacher

discrepancy led some participants, like Katherine, to question in her interview, “Are there differing expectations amongst leadership teams, or is there bad communication between the leadership teams?”

Although teachers cited frustrations with these seemingly different expectations between leaders, several stated that the confusion benefits their day-to-day work experience as they feel well-rested. Nicholas even noted in his individual interview, “I am almost thankful that the leaders are not in sync with each other because if they were, I think our expectations as teachers would be a lot stricter.” In the same strand, many participants could identify which principals and assistant principals were preferred over others. Brittany noted, “my former assistant principal,” highlighting the theme of ever-evolving leadership as she pens her “former” assistant principal, “was great because not only was she a teacher before moving into leadership, but she was also a teacher *here*, so she understands our specific hardships.” Chad and Matthew share a similar perspective, both noting that the principals and assistant principals who appeared to have the most “realistic” and “supportive” expectations were those who had teaching experience at this school specifically. Through evaluating participant experiences, it was apparent that teachers with assistant principals who were former teachers, especially former teachers at this site, experienced more significant levels of buy-in or commitment in their work as they knew their supervisor was in tune with the realities of their teaching experience.

Buy-In

For this theme, buy-in refers to participant commitment to the school’s mission and vision. When asked how their current principal and assistant principal influence their commitment levels, all but one participant cited in all three data collections that their supervisory team greatly influences their commitment. Although almost all participants in all three data

collections cited leadership's "influence" over their levels of commitment, the influence did not always have positive undertones. Richard shared in his interview, "I know they [principal and assistant principal] work extremely hard and balance many responsibilities. They have always gone the extra step to support me, so I want to support them and follow through on my commitments." While Richard shared a positive correlation between leadership and his levels of commitment, Stephanie wrote in her questionnaire, "I have gotten 'yelled at' for several things, so I am afraid to make mistakes or ask for too much help. This discourages me from getting involved or being fully committed." Regardless of the positive or negative connotation, 11 out of 12 participants indicated that leadership directly impacted their levels of commitment. Even those whom their leaders' work ethic may inspire shared a reluctance to fully commit because of three common points of contention between teachers and leadership: academic expectations, burnout, and unfocused professional development.

Rigor or Reputation

It was apparent that academic expectations were a "hot-button issue" this school year, as Vanessa described in her individual interview. When asked how the school's emphasis on educational excellence influenced their levels of commitment, participant responses included, "the school's mindset right now is that educational excellence equals students passing," "school leaders do not have much concern for the quality of education," and, "the goal is to get students to graduate, not necessarily provide them with a rigorous education." Regarding commitment, Stephanie writes in her letter-writing response, "It honestly makes me not want to try. If they [leadership] are going to go behind our back and change students' grades, then why should I try?"

A clear emphasis on student passing comes from state scrutiny concerning school success measures. Specifically, the site of this study has a 68.4% graduation rate, which contributes to its identity as one of the lowest-performing Title 1 schools in the state. These statistics, provided by the site's school website, have landed the school in a state-mandated school improvement plan. As a cyber charter school, funding comes from students' home districts. With the increased popularity of cyber education, brick-and-mortar schools are becoming increasingly frustrated with the amount of money they are providing cyber schools to educate their district's learners. These frustrations have called for reform in education, specifically in delegating educational funds. While legislation is still being debated in the state's legislature, a close eye has been evaluating cyber schools' performances to ensure they are fulfilling their role as educational institutions.

As a result of state pressure, Elizabeth noted that this year, teachers' year-long goals are directly linked to students' grades. As such, she shares in her individual interview, "Of course, teachers are going to lower their expectations to allow students to pass so they too can pass their 'test.'" Richard explained that train of thought in his interview: "It is almost like we will get in trouble if we do not lower our academic expectations...it is like the school is teaching us to be bad teachers by having lower expectations." Emily questioned in her letter-writing prompt, "Sometimes I wonder if we are, in fact, a school or just a business." The financial implications that accompany students' academic success highlight the realities of distinguishing between rigor and reputation in the field of education.

An additional layer of complication in academic expectations emerges from the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools' academic and behavioral expectations became noticeably lax during the unprecedented global pandemic. Students, parents, and school districts

alike became accustomed to these expectations and have faced challenges shifting to the previously held, more strict expectations. Katherine disclosed in her questionnaire response, “Many of the current academic expectations this school has go against my moral code as a teacher who wants their students to be successful in life, not just academics.” A rising sense of hopelessness among participants led to an apparent reluctance to buy into promoting and upholding educational excellence in their classrooms. Additionally, a significant amount of blame from the participants fell on leadership for not maintaining rigorous academic expectations, drawing a correlation between leadership and commitment.

Burnout

Deepening the disdain for the current academic expectations, or lack thereof, was a heightened demand for teachers to carry students over the “finish line,” as Stephanie referred to the successful passing of their course. In the individual interview, several teachers highlighted the pressure on teachers to help students pass, not help students learn. In this, Stephanie noted with a tone of resentment, “Teachers are expected to put in more work on top of what they already do to make individualized catch-up plans for students who did not work on the original lessons the teacher created.” Melanie echoed Stephanie’s feelings, stating in her questionnaire response, “If I am going to be asked to make an easy assignment to help a student pass who did not try all year, then why should I even try in the first place?” In his interview, Matthew reflected on the evolution of these individualized catch-up plans, “It did not used to be like this. Previously, teachers had the discretion to determine which students would be offered a second chance. Now, it is an expectation that teachers provide it to all students who are failing.” Participants cited that going the “extra mile,” as many put it, to help students pass, has led to teacher exhaustion and a sense of fear as to what may happen if they did not offer these second-

chance opportunities. These efforts and lingering feelings led many to employ the word “burnout” in their response to commitment questions.

Unfocused Professional Development

Several participants also cited unfocused professional development contributing to their reluctance to buy in. In her questionnaire reflection, Vanessa seemed incredibly frustrated, citing the school’s current professional development plan as “inconsistent” and “lacking accountability.” She shared, “Creating that unified goal and holding teachers accountable will make a tremendous difference in the quality of education students receive.” Richard also identified the “revolving door of initiatives” as an example of unfocused professional development in his interview. He cited that it was challenging for teachers to keep up with new initiatives. Rather than being eager to take on new ideas presented by leadership, several participants indicated that teachers are reluctant to commit to these professional development plans as they have seen them come and go without any long-term traction or true significance to their work.

Work-Life Balance

All participants, regardless of their disgruntled feelings toward the school, cited in all three data collections the “work-life balance” as one of the primary reasons for remaining with the school and showing some level of buy-in to their work. In his letter-writing prompt, Matthew wrote, “I am willing to tolerate the failing academic expectations because of the ability to work from home three-fourths of the month.” In her questionnaire response, Brittany shared a similar sentiment: “My assistant principal understands that we are humans and is super supportive and accommodating of the needs of my family if an emergency arises.” As a cyber school, this school functions differently than a brick-and-mortar learning environment, allowing for more

flexibility in teachers' work schedules. The school's unique schedule, devoid of the immediate, hands-on responsibilities required of teachers in a traditional classroom setting, allows school leaders to be more understanding and empathetic when personal needs may interrupt the workday.

Flexibility in an Otherwise Inflexible Profession

Flexibility is often not synonymous with the traditionally overloaded day in the teaching profession. When working from home most of the month, teachers are not tied to the exact expectations as those in conventional schools. Specifically, teachers only teach one, possibly two classes per day, can provide individual tutoring to students as needed throughout their day, and can collaborate with teachers any time outside of the instructional time. In all of this, teachers are also not required to dedicate emotional and physical energy to classroom management as they are not confined to a physical classroom with in-person learners. In his interview, Nicholas shares, "At my old school, we barely had five minutes to ourselves daily. Here, we are given time to breathe and think clearly from the comfort of our own home, which has made me a better teacher." Amongst all participants, the ability to work from home, autonomy over their daily schedule, and accommodating leadership to real-life needs contributed to a sincere appreciation for the work-life balance the school provides. The newfound reality of flexibility in teaching appeared to contribute significantly to teacher job satisfaction and heightened perceptions of school culture.

Outlier Data and Findings

One of the more profound pieces of outlier data arose when participants were asked how school leadership influences teacher morale. Brittany writes in her questionnaire reflection, "My current principals do not influence my morale. My morale is engrained in me based on my

enthusiasm as an educator, my pride in my work, and my interest in students' achievement.” In all other participant responses, participants referenced leadership’s positive or negative impact on their morale. Most participants placed great responsibility on leadership for the school's successes and shortcomings. Reading Brittany’s seemingly unbothered response and relinquishing leadership of their influence over her discipline was intriguing.

Another example of outlier data was noticed when participants were asked how the school’s academic expectations influenced their commitment. Most participants noted the school’s “lenient” academic expectations significantly impact their commitment. Melanie writes in her letter-writing response, “It [academic expectations] lowers my commitment because it’s very fake. We aren’t looking for educational excellence. Otherwise, we would have different policies in place.” While most agreed with Melanie’s sentiments, James shared in his questionnaire response, “I have expectations of myself that are mostly tied to knowing and sharing my content accurately and effectively. The school’s academic expectations do not influence my effort. As long as I know I am helping students develop new skills, I am satisfied, no matter how frustrating the academic expectations may be.” James’s natural demeanor was level-headed and even-keeled, so although his response differed from other participants, it aligned with his disposition.

In discussing academic expectations, a somewhat jarring outlier finding emerged. In her interview, Melanie stated, “I almost hope the legislation to reduce our school’s funding is passed.” The participant continued, “I want the school to feel pressure and to make changes in their practice.” In this, the participant was referencing the perceived apathetic academic expectations of the school. While coming from a place of concern and frustration for the lack of fidelity in educational rigor, this participant did recognize that the ramifications of this

legislation could be detrimental to their job and others, as funding for this site would likely be significantly reduced. In all outlier findings, participants expressed abnormal sentiments that diverted from the shared experiences of other participants. While this outlier data is not congruent with the lived experiences of all participants, it does encourage further exploration of the research phenomenon, which is outlined in the recommendations for future research section found in Chapter Five.

Summary of Themes

Through a cohesive data analysis plan, the lived experiences of the teachers in this study, as they relate to school culture, leadership, and commitment, were able to be shared concisely in the form of four distinct themes. Additionally, the hermeneutic approach to this study allowed for the collection of the emotional accounts of teachers as they relate to the research phenomenon (Ragulina, 2020). As time and setting aligned the teachers in this study, the four themes presented reflect not only the lived experiences of each participant but also the shared experiences of all participants (Moustakas, 1994). As such, the themes of perceptions of divided interpretations of school culture, highly desired leadership traits, buy-in, and work-life balance represent the culmination of a data analysis plan that incorporated elements of Moustakas (1994), Saldaña (2018), and van Manen (2021).

Research Question Responses

Guiding this study were three questions—one central research question and two sub-questions. All three questions sought to elicit the lived experiences of the study participants as they relate to school culture, leadership, and commitment. Specifically, these questions aimed to ascertain the influence school culture has on teacher experience, how leadership influences teacher experience, and how school culture and leadership influence teacher commitment. This

section aims to bridge a connection between the developing themes of this study and the guiding research questions.

Central Research Question

How does school culture influence teacher experience? Several themes surrounding the greater topic of school culture emerged when addressing this question. Like the study's overarching themes listed above, the themes that answer the central research question of this study include relationships, buy-in, and flexibility. All participants in all three data collections cited that the school's culture directly "influenced" them in their "day-to-day responsibilities" and their broader reflection on their overall work experience. While all teachers felt impacted by the school's culture, their perception of the culture, be that positive or negative, differed from person to person and sometimes swayed individually depending on the topic.

The relationship between leaders and teachers significantly impacted teachers' perceptions of school culture. Melanie shared a positive perception of the school's culture in her letter-writing response, yet she noted that in the broader sense, "our experiences are determined by what office we work in and who we work for." While Melanie was the first to articulate the differing office cultures, many participants echoed her observation that school culture depends on the leadership team. The disparity between teacher experiences with leadership is evident in participant responses. Stephanie notes in her questionnaire, "My principal and assistant principal are accessible and responsive. They set aside time to meet with me and genuinely care about my well-being. This helps me remain optimistic even on challenging days." Nicholas shares a similar positive relationship with leadership, citing in his questionnaire reflections, "My assistant principal genuinely cares about me. She provides me with great feedback and challenges me to grow professionally. I do not have many years left before retirement. I want to stay here because

of the overwhelming support.” While several participants felt encouraged by their relationships with leadership, Matthew expressed a sentiment of being “burned” several times by leaders, making him reluctant to share and collaborate with others, warping his perception of the school’s culture. The experiences of Stephanie and Nicholas compared to Matthew’s appear so vastly different. Educators’ relationship with their leaders is noticeable and influences school culture and teacher experience. Understanding the connection between leadership and teacher experience is consistent with the findings of Dansereau et al.’s (1975) Leader-Member Exchange Theory, the foundational theory of this study.

While leader-teacher relationships appeared to influence teachers’ professional working experience, the relationships with colleagues helped retention levels. When asked about staff-to-staff relationships, Colleen noted in her individual interview, “I have great relationships with other teachers, and honestly, they are the ones keeping me sane most of the time! They are also the reason I probably have not quit yet!” Katherine also shared in her individual interview, “I think to be successful in this career and stay until retirement, having a solid teacher friend group that can be trusted to vent to is essential.” Colleague relationships were thoroughly evaluated when addressing school culture. Although many participants cited having positive relationships with colleagues, Elizabeth reflected in her questionnaire that the school had previously held “more intentional opportunities for staff connection, but those have since fallen off with the growth of the school.” James recognizes in his letter-writing responses that these “relationships can flourish because of our open schedules,” giving teachers more time to interact and collaborate.

In reflecting on teacher-leader and teacher-teacher relationships, participants associated their relationships with buy-in, commitment, and tenure conversations. Throughout the quotes

above, a teacher cited hopes to retire at this site because of the support in their relationship with their school leaders. In contrast, another teacher notes that the relationship with her colleagues is what will carry her to retirement. Teachers like Stephanie also indicate that the relationship with leadership dictates their outlook on responsibilities and challenges. There is a bridge between relationships and commitment. Consistently, when teachers felt supported, heard, and empowered by leaders and peers, there was a greater sense of buy-in to their responsibilities and anticipation of a long-term commitment to the site.

Teachers like Nicholas cited in his questionnaire in his day-to-day responsibilities, “Teachers are generally happy because of the flexibility and autonomy we are given. This gives us the time and energy to put more effort into our work.” The virtual learning environment's flexibility and work-from-home capabilities significantly contribute to teachers' positive perception of school culture and retention. Richard echoed Nicholas's sentiments, stating in his questionnaire, “Having flexibility throughout our daily schedule allows me to address things in stride and do what is best for the students.” Melanie reflected on flexibility, trust in teachers, and retention. She noted in her letter-writing response, “Letting me do what I need to do as a teacher, not being micromanaged, has helped me stay at [this site].” In this virtual learning environment, it is common for teachers only to teach one to two classes per day. The remainder of their day is spent lesson planning, tutoring students, and fulfilling other job responsibilities. The schedule is highly accommodating and vastly different from the rigid schedules most teachers experience in a brick-and-mortar setting. As such, all participants in all three data collection methods gave a nod of “appreciation” for the flexibility and associated this flexibility with a positive school culture and working environment.

School culture is a complex topic, as many variables influence it. The study's findings

prove that school culture certainly influences teacher experience; however, to what degree is mainly dependent on a teacher's experience with the many intricacies of school culture. While flexibility in the work-from-home format consistently contributed to a positive reflection on school culture, positive and negative perceptions of school culture evolved depending on the teacher's relationship with leaders and colleagues. These relationships then contributed to varied levels of teacher buy-in and long-term reflections on commitment and retention. The far-reaching bounds of this question unearth the layered complexities of school culture. The sub-questions below provide a more narrowed understanding of specific elements of school culture and teacher experience.

Sub-Question One

How does leadership influence teacher experience? Beyond evaluating the relationship participants shared with school leadership, participants cited several other ways leadership influences their experience. From a positive perspective, Vanessa cited leadership work ethic as an "inspiration, and one worth mimicking" in her questionnaire. Brittany and Matthew praised leadership for being "accommodating," "understanding," and "flexible" in times of personal need. Conversely, leadership was also challenged with "diminishing academic expectations," raising teacher expectations, leading to burnout, creating unfocused professional development, and being "aloof" to the realities of teaching. While there was a consensus that leadership did impact teacher experience, the degree of impact was influenced by which leadership team the teacher was assigned and the topic of discussion.

Sub-Question Two

How do school culture and leadership influence teacher commitment? In assessing participant data, it is evident that many bridge a connection between school culture, leadership,

and teacher commitment. The data presented for the research questions above essentially answer this one, and the answer is: it all depends. Commitment is influenced by which leadership team one is assigned, what office they report to, and the topic. While commitment appeared to depend on various factors, many participants, like Vanessa, cited the work-from-home feature as a significant motivator when evaluating commitment. In her letter-writing reflections, she notes, “I feel a tremendous amount of appreciation for the flexibility our school provides. Because of that, I want to stay here and am committed to doing a good job so I can stay here.” Overall, amidst any glaring frustrations or concerns, it did appear that teachers were generally committed because of the work-life balance the school provides. As such, the culture of the school and leadership certainly influenced levels of commitment, but the workplace flexibility contributed to a consistent level of buy-in.

Summary

Chapter Four provided a comprehensive analysis of the lived experiences of the teachers who participated in this study. With nearly 200 years of experience in education, many of the participants of this study have experienced various school cultures and leadership styles in their working experiences. As such, a richer understanding of the phenomenon of the study was derived, as these participants had points of comparison within the field of education. In assessing the experiences and emotions of participants, four common themes emerged: divided interpretations of school culture, highly desired leadership traits, buy-in, and work-life balance. Participants placed significant negative and positive responsibility on leadership and school culture for influencing their overall experience. While these thoughts relating to leadership and school culture provided a thorough analysis of the first two research questions, the third research question drew together the phenomenon of the study into one concise understanding. Through

these four themes, one common trend emerged—teachers were willing to tolerate any grievances. They were inclined to put more effort into their responsibilities because of the autonomy and flexibility the work-from-home environment provided. In all, it is apparent through assessing the phenomenon of this study that teachers seek empathetic leaders who create a flexible and autonomous working environment, both of which will inspire teachers to put more effort into their responsibilities.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to describe the influence of school culture and leadership on the experiences and levels of commitment of high school teachers at a cyber charter academy in the northeastern United States. Fulfilling the purpose of this study, chapter five provides an opportunity for reflection on the findings of this study. This chapter begins with an interpretation of the findings. Following the researcher's interpretations are implications for both policy and practice. Theoretical and methodological implications, as well as limitations and delimitations, will also be explored. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and a summary of the chapter.

Discussion

The study's findings demonstrated the interdependence between leadership, school culture, and teacher experience. A gap in current literature highlighted the need to review the relationship between these factors, as many educational studies historically prioritized student experiences and outcomes or institutional factors beyond the scope of school culture as the focus of their research. Additionally, the findings of this study revealed the influence leadership and school culture have on teacher commitment. Specifically, qualities of school leadership were assessed to aid in understanding the impact school leadership has on school culture, teacher experience, and levels of teacher commitment.

Four themes emerged through a thematic analysis of three data collection methods: a questionnaire, individual interview, and letter-writing prompts. These themes aligned with the universal understanding of the theoretical framework guiding this research, Dansereau et al.'s

(1975) Leader-Member Exchange Theory. The following segments within the Discussion section review the study's themes and an interpretation of the findings. Implications for policy or practice and theoretical and empirical implications will also be addressed. Finally, the Discussion section concludes with limitations, delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the influence school leadership and culture have on teacher experience and commitment. The guiding theoretical framework of this study, Dansereau et al.'s (1975) Leader-Member Exchange Theory, evaluates the impact leader-employee relationships have on employee experience and commitment. In assessing all three data collections, Guest et al.'s (2020) thematic saturation method helped derive four themes from a cohort of 31 separate codes, all aligning with Dansereau et al.'s (1975) theoretical dispositions. The four themes include (a) divided interpretations of school culture, (b) highly desired leadership traits, (c) buy-in, and (d) work-life balance.

Divided interpretations of school culture assessed how teachers perceived school culture, whether negatively or positively. The divided interpretations of school culture theme yielded the sub-theme of leaders determine culture. Highly desired leadership traits were evaluated in the participants' reflections on empathy and communication skills in school leadership. The theme of highly desired leadership traits developed three sub-themes, including (a) ever-evolving leadership, (b) the unknown of middle management, and (c) unclear expectations. The third theme of buy-in represents participant commitment levels. Buy-in discusses the sub-themes of (a) rigor or reputation, (b) burnout, and (c) unfocused professional development. The final theme of work-life balance discusses work-from-home capabilities, flexibility in the daily schedule, and

autonomy in teacher responsibilities. The work-life balance theme yielded the sub-theme of flexibility in an otherwise inflexible profession.

Interpretation of Findings

Interpretations of the research data bridge a connection between the phenomenon of the study, participants' lived experiences, the site, literature, and foundational theories guiding this study. After assessing the findings of this study, the following interpretations evolved: (a) onus on leadership, (b) autonomy, and (c) jeopardizing accountability measures. All interpretations are derived from participant data, and participants' lived experiences help address the phenomenon of the study. An evaluation of each interpretation can be found below.

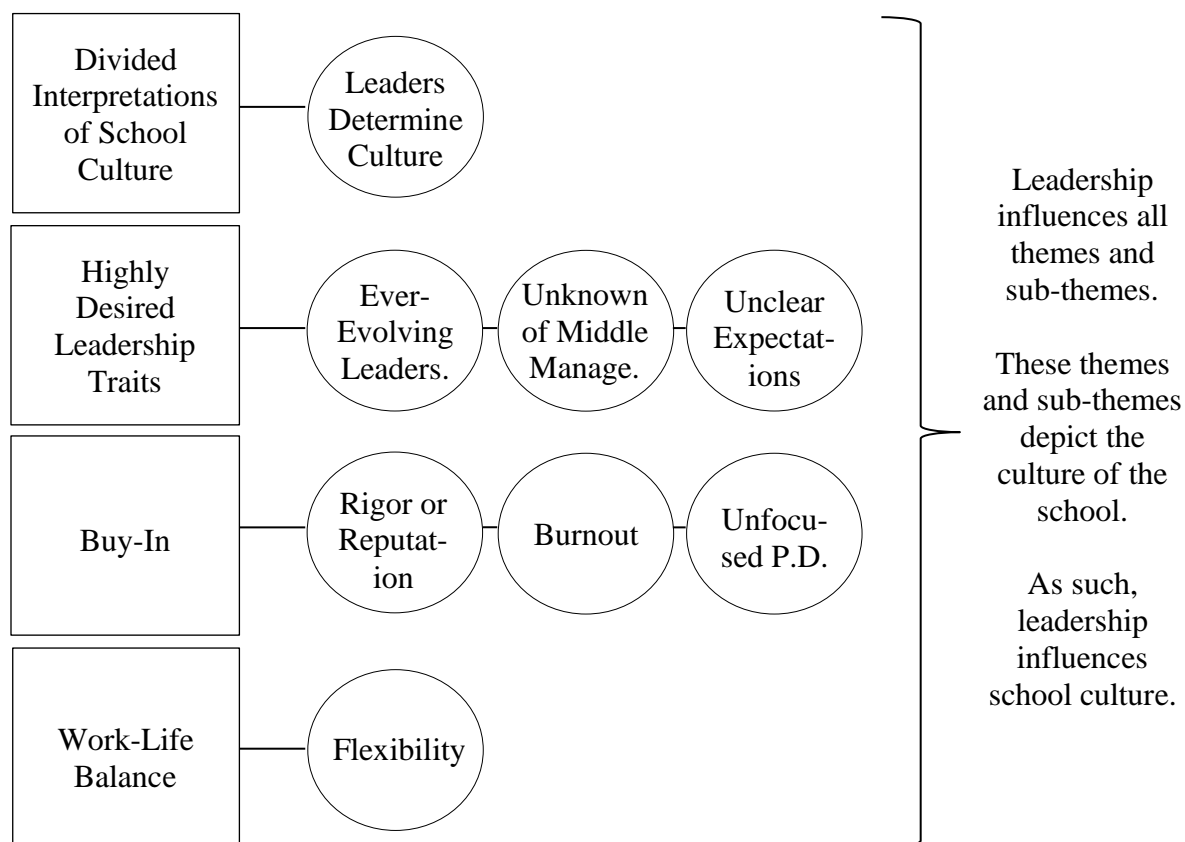
Onus on Leadership

In assessing the findings of this study, it is evident that leadership is the most significant contributor to a school's culture. School culture is a broad, overarching theme. Many layers and complexities contribute to school culture. However, from the teachers' perspective, it is evident that the onus of cultural development within a school is leadership. To demonstrate the influence leadership bears on a school's dynamic, **Figure 2** articulates the themes of this study and the interpretations, all of which seek to address the phenomenon of this study. The themes of the study are represented in the square boxes, while the sub-themes are portrayed in the circles. In the first theme, divided interpretations of school culture and its sub-theme, leaders contribute to the division in interpretations as different leadership teams embody different working environments. Additionally, the relationships leadership forges with teachers influence teachers' understanding of school culture. The second theme, highly desired leadership traits, and its sub-themes discuss the influence leadership qualities and continually changing leadership have on teacher experience and perceptions of school culture. The third theme and sub-themes articulate

leadership's impact on the school's academic rigor and subsequent teacher expectations. The final theme of work-life balance and the sub-theme discussing flexibility demonstrate how the organization of the workday and leadership flexibility contribute to teachers' positive interpretations of school culture.

Figure 2

Interpretation of Thematic Findings



Note: The interpretation of thematic findings articulates the connection of all four study themes to leadership. Thus, the onus on leadership and the connection between leadership and school culture are largely understood.

Given the weight teachers place on leadership's responsibility for school culture, school leadership must understand the gravity of their position. Perceptions of school culture influence commitment to the school's mission. If a school aspires to have buy-in amongst its staff, with strong levels of long-term commitment and retention, it must recognize the influence of

leadership on school culture and both factors' influence on commitment. As such, schools must prioritize hiring influential leaders who recognize the significance of school culture. Specifically, as noted in participants' reflections, teachers look for empathetic leaders who demonstrate effective communication skills. Teachers want leaders who can maintain human connection and understanding while establishing rigorous academic expectations and accountability measures. Overall, the onus on leadership demonstrates the need for effective hiring practices of consistent leaders who understand their influence on school culture and subsequent levels of teacher commitment.

Autonomy

Another significant takeaway from this study is that teachers yearn for autonomy and flexibility. Historically, autonomy and flexibility were not included in a teacher's day-to-day reality. Teachers working in a traditional setting are often handed a set curriculum with clear expectations for assessment. They are given a schedule that includes mere prep periods and structured, five-minute bathroom breaks. In a brick-and-mortar setting, the bleak reality is that teachers do not have much say over their day. For many participants who previously worked in a traditional school setting, this site provided what teachers were trained to think is impossible in their field—flexibility and autonomy over their daily schedule. This sole factor significantly contributed to positive perceptions of school culture. I was amazed at how much teachers were willing to accept or endure so long as they were allowed to work from a work-from-home setting. I then questioned: how can this takeaway translate into practice for other schools? While this degree of work-life balance is seemingly not feasible in all educational settings, especially brick-and-mortar environments, there are ways in which in-person institutions can provide more flexibility for educators. The implications for practice section below further explores these

suggestions for practice.

Jeopardizing Accountability Measures

My final interpretation of this study's findings focuses on academic expectations and their influence on teachers' perceptions of self-significance and institutional credibility. During the COVID-19 pandemic, both behavioral and academic expectations were adjusted to accommodate the harsh realities surrounding the unknowns of navigating a global pandemic. These adjustments often credited students for merely completing their work, not completing it correctly. These jeopardized accountability measures have unfortunately become an expectation from students and parents. It is obvious that schools, including the site of this study, are now struggling to return to the academic expectations upheld before the pandemic.

Teachers who experienced pre- and post-pandemic expectations are beginning to lose hope in the return of rigorous curriculum and grading. Additionally, the recent state-mandated performance measures have placed more significant pressure on the site and teachers to improve the school's measures of success. Participants repeatedly mentioned that they were told to help reach "the finish line" or asked to create a catch-up plan to help a student pass. These requests from leadership diminish the need for students to earn a grade. As such, teachers begin to feel that their work bears little significance. If they are simply told what the students' grade outcomes will be at the end of the school year, why try to develop mastery and understanding for students? These feelings of insignificance translate to lower levels of commitment and diminishing perceptions of school culture.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The implications for policy and practice found below identify strategies that support the holistic development of school culture, including the subsects of the culture of leadership and

academic expectations. By addressing these implications, the site of this study can create a more prosperous working environment for school leaders and teachers while simultaneously developing a more rigorous educational institution for students. Specifically, these implications should address the present challenges in the United States education system, including teacher retention and buy-in, which would support the growth of a positive school culture. The implications below review a four-day workweek, quality of educational practices, enhanced professional development for school leadership, alignment in leadership, and renewed academic expectations.

Implications for Policy

The study's findings demonstrate teachers' lived experiences working for a cyber charter academy in the northeastern United States. The experiences, both positive and negative, helped to identify specific areas of growth needed in the field of education. Policymakers and legislative stakeholders can overhaul current educational practices that do not best serve students, teachers, and school districts. The policy implications that emerged include (a) a four-day workweek, (b) ensuring quality education, and (c) appropriate professional training for school leadership.

An entirely virtual learning environment is impossible for students and teachers who engage in learning in a traditional brick-and-mortar school district. However, the remote teaching opportunity is what many participants perceived to be the most significant contributor to establishing a healthy work-life balance. While this exact approach is not feasible for all educational institutions, a schedule that provides greater flexibility and balance could contribute to healthier perceptions of school culture and teacher responsibilities and improve levels of teacher commitment. A four-day work and school week has been widely explored by think tanks, research institutes, and consulting firms (Jahal et al., 2024). Perceptions of this policy

recommendation vary on a spectrum of support to opposition. However, according to a recent poll conducted by the RAND Corporation, an American non-profit research institute, pertinent stakeholders in an educational community, including students, teachers, parents, and school leaders, all appear to favor this recommended change (Peetz, 2024). Additionally, the same study determined that teachers would be more likely to accept a job offer from a school that instituted a four-day week versus one that had a traditional five-day workweek (Peetz, 2024). The RAND Corporation's study echoes sentiments divulged in this study—teachers yearn for flexibility in a profession that traditionally presents a rigid schedule. Greater flexibility in teachers' schedules translates to less teacher burnout, reduced turnover, and increased teacher commitment. These factors would undoubtedly contribute to a stronger and more positively perceived school culture.

A concern that was widely discussed in the findings of this study is academic expectations. Teachers in this district and schools nationwide cite jeopardized behavioral and academic expectations following the COVID-19 global pandemic (Alvarez-Rivero et al., 2023). The unprecedented challenges caused by the pandemic forced schools to adapt expectations to meet the needs of learners, many of whose families were also overcoming unforeseen obstacles. Amid a global health scare, these adaptations to expectations were both accepted and appreciated by students and teachers alike. However, in the post-COVID-19 era, the ramifications of these changes have become ever-present in classrooms across the nation. Curricular rigor has suffered, grading policies and practices have weakened, and it is apparent that both students and parents assume a passing grade will be given regardless of what was rightfully earned. In response to these mounting pressures, school leaders have encouraged and sometimes forced teachers to work beyond their daily responsibilities to help students pass. Policymakers can re-establish rigor and appropriate academic expectations once present in American schools. In this, specific

curricular frameworks, assessment expectations, and professional development requirements can help strengthen the evolving needs of students, teachers, and schools and help reinvigorate excellence in learning. These policy implications would help to provide an overarching structure to America's education system, which in turn would establish consistency and preparedness in school cultures.

A final implication for policymakers that evolved from the data of this study is creating appropriate professional training for school leadership. Educators are required to participate in annual professional development to enhance their instructional practices and keep up to date with school safety measures. While required to attend similar trainings as educators, school leaders are often not provided with thorough leadership training that prioritizes continued acquisition and development of leadership skills. The study's findings highlighted the immense pressure placed on school leaders by school staff. With the current fragile state of America's education system, in which teacher and leader retention have peaked to levels of grave concern and behavioral and academic expectations are failing, the nation's schools must rebuild under sound leadership. As such, policymakers should require more supportive and rigorous training for school leaders to ensure longevity and stability in United States school districts.

Implications for Practice

While several policy implications can support the holistic growth of the United States' field of education, there are implications for practice that can specifically address opportunities for continued development at this site. The lived experiences of the study's teacher participants highlighted several commonly understood challenges, including misaligned leadership and academic expectations. The implications for practice section aims to identify strategies to improve the challenges cited explicitly by the site's teachers. While these implications prioritize

the needs of this site specifically, they may also meet the needs of teachers in other school districts.

Misalignment in leadership, a theme of this study's findings, appears to cause significant frustration amongst teachers at this site. The school has several layers of middle management that fall between the powers of the Chief Executive Officer and head principals. An understanding of the school's organizational structure is muddled and unclear to non-administrative staff. Many teachers could not name leaders beyond their immediate assistant principal and head principal. Additionally, teachers addressed issues of misalignment amongst school leaders, in which differing expectations were relayed from various high school principals. This created an environment of uncertainty, as educators were unclear about their responsibilities. Another concern that has breached the ever-evolving leadership is that teachers are continually re-assigned assistant principals. These continual adjustments do not foster an environment that prioritizes strengthening leader-teacher relationships. It is evident that leadership restructuring, to some degree, may be beneficial for alignment, consistency, and relational purposes.

Teachers are randomly assigned to different assistant principals as they are hired. A suggestion for restructuring is placing content-specific teachers under specific head principals. Although teachers in the same content area may have different assistant principals, they share the same head principal, making consistency in communication and expectations more attainable. Another suggestion for restructuring is to develop a clear organizational chart that outlines the roles and responsibilities of each layer of leadership. Although it may appear inconsequential to the greater success of the site, this simple step could improve teacher perception of leadership participation in the school environment, subsequently enhancing the overall assessment of school

culture. A final suggestion for improving alignment in leadership is to generate more forward-facing opportunities for leaders to interact with teachers. Not only would this allow teachers to have a more significant pulse on the roles and responsibilities of leadership and vice versa, but it would also provide an opportunity for teachers to discuss concerns with the change-makers of the school district. These implications would require intentional logistical effort from upper-level management; however, the long-term positive impact of these suggestions is invaluable.

Failing academic expectations was another topic of concern for participants in this study. Participants questioned school leadership's concern for rigorous curricula and grading practices in all three data collection methods. As a cyber charter school, the student's home school district provides funding for the school. The financial element, paired with the exponential growth in student population following the COVID-19 pandemic and discomfort or unfamiliarity with non-traditional learning environments, has led many to question the legitimacy of the school under review. As such, state legislature and policy stakeholders have placed the school under close watch to ensure it functions as an educational institution, not simply a business. With this, school leadership has heavily advocated for teachers to pass students to enhance the appearance of student pass rates and graduation rates. Teachers have become increasingly frustrated with prioritizing passing over mastery and learning. An implication for practice is to establish more rigid deadlines for students. Rather than allowing students to turn in work at the end of the semester or school year, create marking period-based deadlines that hold students accountable for completing work on time. Another implication for practice is creating school-wide grading expectations consistent across leadership teams and accessible to teachers. Finally, developing a recovery plan with clear expectations for students who fall behind in their coursework can help to enhance rigor and accountability. Students will not be automatically provided with an

extension or alternate assignment. Still, they must contact their teacher, attend tutoring sessions, and complete appropriate assignments to prove mastery of the content. While individualizing the curriculum for students would still be an expectation of teachers, these implications would provide more structure and consistency, creating a sense of assurance in roles and responsibilities. Additionally, these implications would establish more faith and legitimacy in the educational practices of this site.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

This section evaluates the empirical and theoretical implications of this study's findings. This section aims to compare the findings of this study with the information gathered in the literature review found in Chapter Two. Specifically, the implications below identify this study's corroboration of previous research and contribution to the field of education. Additionally, the theoretical implications will articulate how the findings of this study enhance the universal understanding of the theory guiding this study.

Empirical Implications

The purpose of this study is to identify how school culture and leadership influence teacher experience and subsequent levels of commitment. The research data confirmed the critical nature of school culture and leadership in shaping teacher experience (Busch & Fernandez, 2019; D. Fisher et al., 2012; Kalkan et al., 2020; MacNeil et al., 2009). Specifically, the findings of this study articulate the increasing responsibilities placed on school leadership to spearhead a positive working environment (A. Meyer et al., 2022). To establish a positive working environment, this study was able to decipher leadership traits teachers hope to see in their leaders (Kaplan & Owings, 2013; Lambersky, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2017). The pre-existing literature found in Chapter Two primarily emphasized these traits of empathy and

effective communication (Fu et al., 2022). These findings align closely with the discussions in education-based literature that serve as the foundational publications of this study.

Furthermore, the research contributed to the literature by evaluating culture, leadership, and teacher experience in a virtual learning environment. Pre-existing studies assess school culture and leadership from a conventional brick-and-mortar learning environment (Amtu et al., 2020; Atasoy & Turkish Ministry of National Education, 2020; Bayar & Karaduman, 2021; Cansoy & Parlar, 2017; Deal & Peterson, 2010; Fu et al., 2022; Heinla & Kuurme, 2022). Similar hardships were present in both virtual and in-person learning and working environments. However, the work-life balance and schedule flexibility evaluated in this study significantly contributed to the implications for educational policy and practice. Overall, this study's findings agree with current literature and extend our present understanding of the phenomenon.

Theoretical Implications

The research of this study was guided by Dansereau et al.'s (1975) Leader-Member Exchange Theory. The Leader-Member Exchange Theory identifies the influence leader-employee relationships have on employee experience and long-term commitment. The findings of this study corroborated the underpinnings of Dansereau et al.'s (1975) theory as participants cited the profound impact leadership relationships had on their perception of workplace experiences and school culture (Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004; Qi et al., 2019). Additionally, the research data echoed the pressure placed on leadership to determine workplace culture, which is a theme in the Leader-Member Exchange Theory, as responsibility is placed on leadership to cultivate positive working relationships with employees (Hoyt & Goethals, 2009; Morris et al., 2020; Özdemir et al., 2022).

While much of the study's findings confirmed Dansereau et al.'s (1975) theory, one

implication extended our understanding of the Leader-Member Exchange Theory—a remote working environment. Initially assessed in an in-person workplace, the Leader-Member Exchange Theory evaluated relationships between leadership and employees in an environment more conducive to relationship development. The study proved the theory’s assertions in a nearly entirely remote workplace. Not only does this have implications for the theory, but also implications for the future of education. The theoretical implications prove that leadership relationships are significant in determining employee experience, whether in-person, hybrid, or remote, regardless of the type of work. Subsequently, as the field of education continues to evolve and a greater emphasis on virtual learning becomes a reality, it is imperative to continue to regard the role of school leadership as equally influential in all learning environments.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations are restrictive elements of a study that are uncontrollable by the researcher. At the same time, delimitations are intentionally developed parameters that limit the scope of particular aspects of the study. The study encompasses both limitations and delimitations. The limitations of this study surround the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in participants, my relationship with the site as the researcher, qualitative research inherent subjectivity, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The delimitations reflect the boundaries established in determining the site and participant eligibility.

Limitations

Criterion and convenience sampling helped elicit participants for this study, hoping to identify a diverse participant pool. However, representation in the participant pool was limited as the school has a small teacher population of people of color. Although there was a relatively even representation of male and female participants, only one person of color in the 12

participants was included in this study. While every effort was made to include diverse perspectives in the participant pool, most responses were from white participants. Unfortunately, this participant pool indicates the current state of racial representation among teachers in public education.

Another limitation of this study was my close relationship with the site as the researcher. As an employee of the site, I have developed my interpretations of the school's culture and leadership practices. While this limitation was a limitation, bracketing was used to ensure the participants' voices were revealed and any personal biases were censored. This limitation illustrates the more significant limitations in the design of qualitative research. Qualitative studies cannot be quantified, do not allow for causation, and can present ethical concerns due to the close relationships with participants. While a qualitative approach was selected, this application of study inherently presents limitations.

A third limitation of this study included the external environmental factors that influence the realities of participants at this site. First, academic expectations in the pre-and post-COVID-19 pandemic era significantly influenced teacher experience and interpretations of school culture. A second external factor affecting the experience of teachers is the pressure from the state legislature to reach specific measures of school success. As a result of both the COVID-19 pandemic and mounting state legislature pressures, teachers are articulating a decline in academic expectations, diminishing rigor, and increased assumption of passing students who did not demonstrate knowledge or mastery of the course content.

Delimitations

Although the specificity is a limitation, this school was specifically chosen as the site of this study as it represents the future of education. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic,

the site of this study has more than doubled in size. The student population is nearly 30,000, making it the second largest school district in the state, second only to a large inner-city district. Cyber charter schools and online learning opportunities, in general, have become highly desired approaches to learning. As such, this study chose to evaluate leadership, school culture, and teacher experience in a virtual learning environment as it reflects the future of education. Additionally, the participant pool was intentionally limited to teachers who had worked at the site for two or more years. These specifications in participant recruitment ensured teachers had adequate exposure to school culture and leadership.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study articulated the influence school culture and leadership have on teacher experience. While this study emboldened school culture as a topic that should remain at the forefront of school leadership's minds, many facets of this study and its findings warrant recommendations for future research. The most significant recommendation for future research is to evaluate the interdependence between school culture, leadership, and teacher experience in an in-person learning environment. Virtual learning has gained popularity recently; however, brick-and-mortar schools have remained ever-present in America's education system. As such, assessing how school culture and leadership influence teacher experience in an environment that reflects the U.S. education system is imperative.

Additionally, assessing the study phenomenon in an in-person learning environment where work-from-home capabilities are not feasible will be beneficial. Participants of this study associated a positive school culture with their hybrid and remote work opportunities. As noted in the implications for policy and practice, it would be worthwhile to test the interdependence between school culture, leadership, and teacher experience in various school models, including

entirely in-person, hybrid, and fully remote. Through this further research, it would be interesting to evaluate if an in-person working environment alters the consistent findings of this study.

A second recommendation for future research is to include a more diverse population of teachers in assessing the study's phenomenon. While this study provided a rich understanding of school culture, leadership, and teacher experience, it is imperative to understand how differing racial, ethnic, and cultural identities influence participant perceptions. Expanding the study to include more diverse perspectives is critical to ensure its findings represent different populations. More inclusive and intentional outreach methods can aid in this for future studies.

A third recommendation for future research is for an independent researcher not affiliated with a school to conduct the study. Although bracketing was employed to prevent researcher bias, my close relationship with the school and the participants added complexity. Additionally, it may be beneficial for future researchers to be removed from the field of education entirely, for the hardships articulated in participant responses can be felt in schools across the United States, not solely at this school. If the researcher is not personally associated with the challenges faced in the field of education, the emotion that often interferes with qualitative reflection can be significantly more objective.

Another recommendation for future research is to conduct a similar study in a school that has experienced minimal ramifications from uncontrolled external factors. The COVID-19 pandemic greatly influenced education systems, including social norms, behavioral expectations, and accountability measures within schools. The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly impacted every school in the United States in some way. As such, it may be beneficial to conduct this study after school expectations have normalized and external factors have been minimized. Although this could take decades, it may provide a more precise interpretation of the influence of

school culture and leadership.

Conclusion

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to describe the influence of school culture and leadership on the experiences and levels of commitment of high school teachers at a cyber charter academy in the northeastern United States. The goal was to understand the interdependent relationship between school culture and leadership and its impact on teacher experience and commitment. Specifically, the study's objective was to assess the lived experiences of high school teachers as they relate to the research phenomenon of a non-traditional educational environment. Dansereau et al.'s (1975) Leader-Member Exchange Theory guided this study's theoretical framework. The study's findings affirmed the impact leadership relationships have on employee experience and commitment as outlined in the Leader-Member Exchange Theory.

The four major themes of perceptions of school culture, misalignment in leadership, buy-in, and work-life balance provided the foundation for interpretative analysis of the study's research data. The most significant findings of this study were the interpretations of the onus on leadership, autonomy and flexibility, academic expectations, and teacher self-worth. The first interpretation perceived the overwhelming responsibility of school leadership to cultivate a positive school culture. In this, leadership decisions and actions help to establish the school culture. If leadership decisions and relationships are productive, they often create a positive school culture, which translates to a positive working experience for teachers and higher levels of commitment. The second interpretation assessed the value placed on work-life balance in education. In this, the hybrid and remote work capabilities for teachers at this site created more flexibility in the teachers' daily schedules, which allowed for greater time to prioritize lesson

development, student conferencing, grading, and additional teacher responsibilities. The autonomy to determine one's daily schedule and flexibility to prioritize tasks while working in the comfort of one's home created a positive experience for teachers and an accompanying positive perception of school culture. Finally, the third interpretation discussed the relationship between academic rigor and teacher self-worth and commitment. As expectations and accountability for students decreased, so did teachers' self-worth assessment. When given the autonomy to challenge students academically, teachers felt valued, committed, and empowered to fulfill their job responsibilities dutifully. This enhanced school culture and levels of teacher commitment as teachers felt their individual efforts contributed to the school's overall success and mission.

The study concludes with policy, practice, empirical, and theoretical implications, followed by recommendations for future research. Efforts to corroborate foundational literature and the theoretical framework allow this research to be validated academically. Furthermore, the recommendations for future research encourage other scholars to explore the phenomenon of this study through various perspectives and environments. I hope these recommendations help prioritize school culture and leadership in proposals for school improvement and greater efforts for growth in the nation's field of education.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 27, 2024

Sarah Brodish
James Sigler

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-1175 School Culture, Teacher Experience, and Commitment: A Phenomenological Study of High School Teachers at a Cyber Charter School

Dear Sarah Brodish, James Sigler,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application per the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data-safeguarding methods described in your IRB application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study Details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents, **which you must use to conduct your study**, can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

This exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B



Site Request and Approval

November 16, 2023




Dear 

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership degree. The title of my research project is School Culture and Teacher Experience: A Phenomenological Study of High School Teachers at a Cyber Charter School in Northeastern United States and the purpose of my research is to assess how school culture influences teacher experience.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at 


Participants will be asked to complete an online survey, individual interviews, and letter-writing prompts. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please respond by email to 

Sincerely,

Sarah Brodish

Today at 11:25 AM

To:  Sarah Brodish

Hi Sarah,

I approve of your research at this site and look forward to seeing your work.

Thank you!



Appendix C

Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Potential Participant,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership. The purpose of my research is to assess how school culture influences teacher experience and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are employed at [REDACTED] and have worked at this school for two or more years and are willing to participate, you will be asked to complete a consent form, answer a questionnaire, partake in an individual interview, review interview transcription for accuracy, and produce responses to letter-writing prompts. It should take approximately two to three hours for you to complete the procedures listed above. Your name and other basic information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, go to the form linked in this email. Please complete and submit the consent document. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please click on the questionnaire link at the end of the consent information to indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the questionnaire.

If you choose to participate, you will receive three separate Amazon gift cards throughout the duration of the study.

Sincerely,

Sarah C. Brodish
Researcher

[REDACTED]

Appendix D

Participant Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: School Culture, Teacher Experience, and Commitment: A Phenomenological Study of High School Teachers at a Cyber Charter School
Principal Investigator: Sarah Brodish, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be employed at [REDACTED] for at two or more years. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to assess how school culture influences teacher experience.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Complete an online questionnaire that will take 30 minutes to complete.
2. Participate in an audio-recorded one-on-one interview via Microsoft Teams that will take 45 minutes to 1 hour to complete.
3. Review the interview transcription to ensure accuracy in messaging, which will take 30 minutes to complete.
4. Complete online letter-writing prompts that will take 1 hour to complete.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include an enhanced understanding of the impact of school culture on teacher experience, thus cultivating a great emphasis on culture in leadership training, school initiatives, and educational literature.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the conclusion of the survey, participants will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card. At the conclusion of the interview, participants will receive a \$15 Amazon gift card. At the completion of the letter-writing prompts, participants will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or [REDACTED]. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Sarah Brodish. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED] or

██████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. James Sigler at ██████████.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is ██████████

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date