

The Impact of Ineffective Leaders on Organizational Performance

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Abstract

A minimal amount of scholarly and professional literature exists on the challenges of new public school principals without leadership training, resulting in high turnover and reduced organizational performance. A non-representative sample of 25 public school principals from multiple education organizations within Lancaster County, PA, became the voices of this single case study. The study's boundaries strictly followed the geographical confines of the sole education agency and its public school districts. I conducted the study over two months and explored the real-world experiences of those principals. The effects and influences of ineffective organizational leaders, and their impact on turnover and organizational outcomes performance. The study's framework included one input construct, three concepts, two actors, two leadership theories, and three output constructs. The study's purpose statement added an input construct, bringing the framework elements total to 12. Only PK-12 leaders of certified instructors contributed to this study. After contacting 88 public school principals from eight districts, 25 qualified principals answered 10 official interview questions and took an anonymous survey. Two unofficial interview questions contributed to the Application to Professional Practice and Recommendations for Further Study subsections. While responding to research instruments, the principal's collective words answered the three research questions. Five Themes emerged from the findings and included: 1) Principals' Ponderance to Leave the Profession, 2) An Abundance of Self-directed Leadership Training, 3) Underprepared to Retain Teachers, 4) Recruitment vs. Turnover/Retention, and 5) Mentorships. Constructivism was the research paradigm used, and it stood for each person's reality, as I sought to understand all 25 of their realities.

Keywords

Lancaster, PA, Public Education, Principals, Teachers, Turnover, Training

1. Introduction and Background

This section of the study began with the background of the problem, leading to the purpose statement. The research questions and a discussion of each followed those introductory paragraphs that laid the groundwork for understanding the topic's significance. A discussion of the study's design outlines the available research methods and identifies the appropriateness of the flexible method and the inappropriateness of other methods for this study. Section 2 is the literature review of scholarly research and professional literature, which solidifies the foundation of this study. The literature offered articles that supported and refuted the existence of the problem to bring new knowledge and a potential new direction to how the PK-12 public education sector organizations prepare their future leaders for leadership positions and support current leaders to lead with a renewed purposeful focus on retention and organizational performance.

Section 3 followed this section and presented the findings, which included the five themes discovered from a qualitative and quantitative analysis, which included in-person interviews and an Anonymous Survey (AS). Within that section, the Relationship of Findings included a detailed discussion of how the Findings related to key areas of Section 1. Section 4 includes potential implementation strategies, recommendations for further study, and a summary and conclusion.

Many scholarly journal articles supported the adverse effects of untrained leaders occupying leadership positions in the public education sector. In addition, many articles indicated that organizations reap the benefits of trained, new organizational leaders. Articles, government surveys, and non-profit organizational studies focusing on the problem showed the brokenness of the PK-12 public education leadership pipeline. However, reparations could improve the outcomes. Content and context drive leadership development. Jerdborg (2024) showed that the leading causes of principal burnout and turnover included a lack of new principal training and the absence of induction. The researchers showed that nearly 20% of new principals left the profession after one year, almost 40% after three years, and nearly 60% after five years. Furthermore, when novice principals cycle through schools, employee turnover and a reduction in organizational performance follow (Jerdborg, 2024). DeMatthews et al. (2023) found that novice principals benefited from a mentorship program with seasoned principals and an induction program for skill development. Mohd Tahir et al. (2023) indicated that principals prefer ongoing professional development programs. Within the public education sector, school administrators commonly gain organizational-level leadership positions in a teacher-to-principal pipeline, and educational leadership programs help new principals to flourish (Dickens et al., 2021; Perrone et al., 2022). Kwiotkowska et al. (2022) suggested that low leadership competencies lead to low leadership and effectiveness. The context of this single case study included the failure of new organizational leaders to retain employees, thwart turnover and turnover intentions, and maintain and improve organizational performance due to untrained and undertrained new leaders in organizational leadership practices. Potential solutions

include purposefully training leaders in leadership styles, influencing employee retention, and fostering organizational performance. Principals' leadership competencies development directly influences organizational performance (Choi et al., 2024).

Training new school leaders with a purpose helped them transition into new roles and influenced their success. However, Ritchie (2023) asserted that new leaders fail to succeed when organizations fail to support new leaders. Wei et al. (2022) opined that employee retention and achieving organizational goals hinged on the role of leaders. Moore and Hanson (2022) suggested that leadership effectiveness and competency development stemmed from training that facilitated learning positive leadership styles for leaders to translate theory into practice. Furthermore, organizational performance increased when administrators created a map for leaders to develop leadership competencies and understand how their roles influenced employee retention (Moore & Hanson, 2022).

1.1. Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, flexible design, single case study was to explore, add to, understand, and extend the current body of knowledge related to untrained and undertrained new organizational leaders in the public education sector in southcentral Pennsylvania, and how it affected and influenced turnover and organizational performance. McArdle (2022) discussed how flexible methodologies permitted researchers to adapt their methods and pivot them to multiple data-gathering techniques in their planned study. To fill a gap in current research, through the participants' words and my flexibility, this study explored known and currently unknown problems associated with new, untrained, and undertrained leaders and their influence on turnover and turnover intentions in the education sector.

1.2. Research Questions

This study has three main research questions and one sub-question under question two.

RQ1. What leadership actions or behaviors contribute to or hinder employee retention?

RQ2. What leadership development training have leaders received to retain employees and sustain quality education programs directly or indirectly?

RQ2a. How do leaders operationalize and implement the leadership development training they receive?

RQ3. What types of leadership development training might increase employee retention, reduce turnover intention, and contribute to organizational performance?

The purpose of Research Question RQ1 was to find specific, admitted actions or behaviors that leaders exhibited and contributed to or hindered employee turnover. Matthews et al. (2022) suggested that principals' actions influenced changes

in teachers' turnover intentions differently before and during a crisis. Scallon et al. (2023) discussed teachers' perceptions of the principal's leadership practices that influenced teacher turnover. The difference between schools led by principals plagued with high teacher turnover and those with low teacher turnover hinged on three factors. The three factors included teachers' knowledge, clear communication about the school's vision, and how it all revolved around leaders (Scallon et al., 2023). After identifying actions that influenced turnover or retention, the following sub-question explored remedies for actions that failed to retain employees.

Research question RQ2 focused on the types of past professional development opportunities geared towards employee retention and sustained quality education programs that may lead to organizational stability if the focus of training topics changed to facilitate new knowledge, skills, and abilities for leaders. Krsteska et al. (2023) found a link between organizational learning, competitiveness, and performance, stemming from an organization's commitment to continuous improvement.

The sub-research question RQ2a facilitated a discussion about the importance of training and professional development, for which the value as an organizational asset occurred only if leaders operationalized what they learned. Barthakur et al. (2022) argued that evaluating a leader's skill *before*, *during*, and *after* leadership development training is necessary to measure skill acquisition and mastery. *How*, *why*, and *if* some leaders operationalize new leadership knowledge and competencies while others do not may lead to a comprehensive approach to professional development geared towards implementing and operationalizing new knowledge.

The final research question, RQ3, reflected whether training leaders' leader-prompted strategies and techniques to increase retention, reduce turnover intention, and contribute to organizational performance occurred through leadership training. Identifying leadership behaviors contributing to employee retention and strategically training leaders in those behaviors could reduce turnover (Mey et al., 2021). Specifically, Mey et al. (2021) found that the transformational leadership style influenced employee retention based on leaders' respect for followers and high engagement levels. In addition, follower recognition for accomplishments and leaders who empowered followers benefited from high retention levels (Mey et al., 2021). Arisman and Prihatin (2021) speculated that leaders who learned the four prongs of the situational leadership style met followers on their followership journey by implementing various leadership competencies based on the situation to influence goal attainment.

1.3. Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

A few assumptions about this case study included participants' full engagement in the research process through answering all interview questions (IQ), completing all survey questions, and providing honest responses to open-ended questions (Kulshreshtha et al., 2023). Participant engagement honesty stems from the re-

searcher's trustworthiness (Wang et al., 2023). Planned mitigation strategies for this study involved establishing rapport with participants at the beginning of the study. Rapport building included offering a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, which ensured participants' anonymity. I offered participants two modes of communication: in-person and virtual. All participants chose the virtual option. To build and maintain the necessary trust for research, I solicited participant feedback regarding my interpretation of their comments to ensure I accurately expressed what they said, providing a second opportunity to share their viewpoints. This trust enabled participants to answer questions, complete the anonymous survey (AS), and respond honestly to all open-ended questions. All interviewees answered all IQs. However, only 88% of participants completed the anonymous survey, with 9% not responding to ASQ9. Trust building originated from researchers facilitating inclusion and actively listening to participants' answers. One assumption included considering participants knowledgeable, with mitigation occurring when I contextualized their roles and compared them with their interview responses.

Limitations refer to factors the researcher cannot control regarding research methodology and potential weaknesses in the study (Coker, 2022). Potential limitations encompass the study design, sample size, number of actors, and the scope or setting of the study (Manyara et al., 2023). Unmitigated limitations increase the risk of diminished confidence and validity in the research findings. For instance, sample sizes limited to homogeneous actors require a smaller sample size than a more heterogeneous population; furthermore, saturation enhances validity, rigor, and credibility (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). For example, some researchers increased the number of actors from 15 to 150 to uncover additional information. This study included 25 public school principals, limited to 30 participants. Sebele-Mpofu (2020) also noted that unclear definitions exist for various saturation types. Given the small participant number permitted in this STUDY, selecting individuals with the most institutional knowledge may have mitigated the sample size problem, leading to saturation. Another limitation involved time constraints for completing this STUDY. However, Reñosa et al. (2021) found that remote data collection during interviews saved travel time and accommodated participants' convenience. The actors and I appreciated the accuracy of that statement.

One delimitation of this study involved achieving saturation, repetition, and redundancy of themes (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). Hennink and Kaiser (2022) included saturation as a guiding principle for qualitative researchers. The initial plan involved inviting leaders from all six LLIU departments and 16 school districts. The Pennsylvania legislature defined the geographical boundaries for all 29 IUs. The study limitations pertained to participant leader-actors from the two educational departments within the targeted agency (LLIU) and eight of the 16 public school district principals in Lancaster County. The study limitation specifically included the county of Lancaster and a particular educational agency. Only the public school districts and principals legislatively assigned to the geographical bounda-

ries of the agency were included. All stated parameters constituted delimitations. Nevertheless, the agency's authority encompassed two neighboring counties in Pennsylvania, each with unique customs and characteristics, many of which do not overlap ([Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2025](#)). Thus, alternative locations could have included other educational agencies within the 29 IUs in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania but were not included. The actors in this study represented a delimitation. The third delimitation restricted the targeted population to a subset of school administrators, specifically those holding certifications from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, as defined in the Pennsylvania School Code of 1949 ([Public School Code of 1949, 1949a](#)). Participants must supervise others who provide direct instruction to learners. I appropriately excluded certified program administrators who did not supervise certificated, classroom itinerants and instructors. Finally, the delimitations of this study involved a narrowly defined literature review, focusing solely on scholarly journal articles published within five years of the publication of this STUDY, along with professional literature not restricted by the five-year limit, complemented by searches filtered by related studies, theoretical constructs, and methodology.

1.4. Significance of the Study

Leadership actions in an educational organization profoundly cascade downward to influence followers. Therefore, organizations handle training leaders, given the gravity of the position and its influence on future generations of leaders and followers ([Jacobsen et al., 2022](#)). Jacobsen et al. declared that leadership training positively impacted leaders' performance. [Figueiredo et al. \(2023\)](#) found that trained leaders influenced employee retention and organizational performance. The first significant topic included the understanding that leadership training for leaders improved leadership practices, competencies, and acumen. The second significant topic included finding specific, recommended solutions to an organizational problem related to leadership training to improve leadership practices.

2. Review of the Academic Literature

2.1. Leadership Practices

Understanding which components result in good leadership, influencing retention, and increasing organizational performance includes considering leadership definitions and the missing elements. The definition of leadership includes leaders' influence over others, resulting in others following and sharing in a commonly held vision ([Alcaide-Aranda & Aguilar Alcaide, 2023](#); [Heystek, 2022](#); [MacKinnon & MacLean, 2021](#); [Muammar, 2022](#); [Panagopoulos et al., 2024](#); [Podgórska & Detko, 2023](#); [Valldeneu et al., 2021](#)). However, [Sellami et al. \(2022\)](#) argued about the elusiveness of a universal definition of educational leadership without the mechanics of *how* and *why*. Furthermore, universal norms exist, and from a study, participants can define educational leaders as those who influence and motivate with values and character ([Sellami et al., 2022](#)).

Sigurðardóttir et al. (2024) confirmed the elusiveness of a universal definition of educational leadership. However, Sigurðardóttir et al. pronounced that their study included distributive elements that influence school practices. Moshel and Berkovich (2023) concluded that superintendents influence mid-level leaders' behaviors in early childhood education settings. Leadership practices include vision casting, staff member development, and establishing organizational goals (Sigurðardóttir et al., 2024). Gümüş and Bellibaş (2020) described principles of professional development and school leadership practices. Statistically, principals' self-efficacy reflects the mediating role between professional development and leadership practices. Gümüş and Bellibaş pronounced that positive organizational outcomes must include effective leadership and foster higher self-efficacy levels in principals and professional development.

Jerdborg (2024) suggested that the absence of leadership training and induction for new principals contributed to an attrition rate of nearly 20% after one year, 40% after three years, and approximately 60% after five years. Jerdborg concluded that this attrition led to employee turnover and reduced organizational performance. DeMatthews et al. (2023) found that professional development training in the form of mentorships effectively prevents novice principal burnout. Additionally, mentorship and induction programs serve as coping strategies for novice principals. Roberts and Gonzalez (2023) indicated that their study participants reported an absence of formal pre-principalship training; they experienced informal pre-promotion training instead. However, novice principals promoted from teaching positions lacked administrative savvy, particularly in finances, employee relations, prioritizing issues, and managing facilities (Orozco Gonzalez, 2023).

Kuzmanic et al. (2024) found that high principal turnover equated to high teacher turnover and reduced organizational performance. A conclusion offered by Kuzmanic et al. included the need to improve practical leadership training to increase principal retention rates. Klein and Schwanenberg (2022) indicated that school principal study participants admitted to struggling in their newer role without leadership training. School principal participants in Acton's (2021) study results admitted that professional development opportunities occur rarely; however, they admitted to depending upon trusted colleagues for guidance. Crans et al. (2022) indicated that informal learning resulted in the appropriate knowledge and skills; however, informal training remained unstructured without predefined learning outcomes. Murphy (2023) indicated that school principals prefer formal, university-led courses and mentorship programs for leaders that encompass modeling, coaching, and reinforcing positive leadership attributes for novice and seasoned leaders. Mohd Tahir et al. (2023) highlighted a shortage of mentorship programs within ongoing education and professional development initiatives. Additionally, every leader, regardless of experience, gains from professional development. The study indicated that novice and seasoned principals benefited from mentoring programs.

Barbaroux (2022) suggested that effective leadership arises from the complex

relationship between developing leadership competencies and skills through purposeful training, experience, or simulated training. Pauling et al. (2021) revealed that the study participants recognized their underdevelopment as leaders and the lack of pre- and post-in-service training as reasons organizational change fails, negatively impacting organizational performance. The authors indicated that insufficient training and a lack of knowledge and competencies posed two barriers to leaders' success. Shan et al. (2024) asserted that adult learning necessitates that leaders actively shape learning outcomes by setting goals and defining their purposes and intentions. Houchens et al. (2021) identified practical implications for developing underdeveloped leaders. Short, group-oriented sessions effectively expanded participants' leadership knowledge and skills while increasing their work satisfaction. Through a collectivistic leadership development program, leaders' leadership effectiveness increased. Murphy (2023) revealed that novice principals' career pathways result in on-the-job mastery of basic, practical leadership skills because of pre-promotion underdevelopment.

2.2. Theories

Bradbury-Jones et al. (2022) argued that theories contain small ideas organized by an overarching idea. Furthermore, theoretical frameworks act as guardrails to keep new knowledge within those parameters. Garvey and Jones (2021) suggested that theoretical frameworks guide researchers during qualitative analysis. The authors equated frameworks to maps; the data served as an island. The findings from the data represent the treasure. Garvey and Jones, in their analogy, indicated that operating without a framework increases the risk of getting lost while searching for treasure. The theoretical framework serves as the treasure map.

2.2.1. Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT)

The transformational leadership style in the public administration sector repeatedly motivated and empowered followers, which led to job satisfaction, reduced turnover intentions, and increased organizational outcomes (Panagopoulos et al., 2024). Kwan (2020) found an insignificant impact of transformational leadership style on organizational outcomes related to instructional monitoring measures. Instructional monitoring measures served a role in measuring the overall organizational performance. In addition, Marlita et al. (2024) studied variations in employees' work methods through transformational leadership and found no significant correlation between work methods, transformational leadership, and organizational performance. However, Asefa and Kant (2023) revealed that educational leaders who used transformational leadership established beneficial bonds with staff members, which increased organizational commitment. Kılınç et al. (2024) discussed teachers' trust in transformational leaders that influenced their job commitment. TLT practices include leaders' roles and ability to influence followers, rise above their self-interests, and focus on the good of the group and the organization (Puspasari et al., 2022; Sharma & Lenka, 2024). Nielsen et al. (2023) indicated that leaders who acquired and used the tenets of TLT buffer the turnover

intentions of staff members. Furthermore, transformational school principals positively influenced teachers' organizational citizenship behaviors to thwart turnover intentions (Li, 2022).

Transformational leadership in the PK-12 setting improved staff members' organizational commitment, which ignited high employee retention and low turnover intentions (Berkovich & Hassan, 2023). Transformational leadership promotes positive organizational outcomes by thwarting passive attributes (Valdeneu et al., 2021). Puspasari et al. (2022) and Sharma and Lenka (2024) suggested that transformational leaders engaged in multiple behaviors, including a casted vision to inspire the changes required to meet personal and organizational goals. In addition, transformational leaders acknowledge the importance of identifying and incorporating followers' unique talents, skills, and abilities, stimulating followers' intellectual capacity to influence goal attainment (Sharma & Lenka, 2024). Maker (2022) indicated that transformational leaders possess creative tendencies, engage in critical thinking, serve as collaborators, and engage in nimble communications to *inspire* followers to achieve goals, rather than *directing* task completion.

2.2.2. Situational Leadership Theory (SLT)

SLT offers leaders multiple leadership styles within one theory used to engage followers. However, constantly changing leadership styles may spark perceptions of inconsistent leadership from followers (Schilling et al., 2023). However, Muammar (2022) suggested that a leader's adaptability was key in SLT since the uniqueness of people and situations drove leaders to engage in an optimal leadership style. The author noted two leadership behaviors in SLT, namely, task-oriented (directives) and relational-oriented (supportive), and from there, leaders built relationships with followers. While *effective* leaders led task completion, *successful* leaders adapted their leadership style based on contextual analysis of each situation and employees' work readiness (Korzynski et al., 2021; Muammar, 2022; Podgórska & Detko, 2023). Wei et al. (2022) focused on the positive influences leaders espoused when they utilized tenets of SLT related to employee retention and organizational commitment through the contingent role of transformational leadership. However, Korzynski et al. (2021) suggested that SLT ignores essential organizational factors influencing leadership, such as organizational culture, individuals' emotions, and organizational politics. Prabahar and Jerome (2023) discussed the importance of school administrators possessing knowledge of multiple leadership styles from which to draw based on the situation. The authors indicated that leadership style influenced performance outcomes for leaders and followers. Robust training of SLT for novice school principals aided them during a crisis, absent their supervisors' guidance, according to Virella (2023). Arisman and Prihatin (2021) and Krsteska et al. (2023) summarized a connection between organizational leadership and performance through the four dimensions of SLT. Namely, directing (telling), coaching (selling), supporting (participating), and delegating. However, Podgórska and Detko (2023) theorized that SLT leaders pos-

sess only primary and secondary leadership styles based on the work conditions since situations evolve from specific events. The authors further opined that one leadership style cannot satisfy all situations. [Mukhtar et al. \(2021\)](#) indicated that professional development opportunities for school leaders, including SLT training, prepared participants to diagnose each situation and act based on their analysis. Following the analysis, leaders choose the appropriate leadership style to influence and motivate followers to attain goals ([Mukhtar et al., 2021](#)).

2.3. Related Studies

2.3.1. Non-Technical Leader Skill Development

[Tsirkas et al. \(2020\)](#) showed a gap between soft skills and the perception held by employees and employers. The authors differentiated hard skills from soft skills and indicated that hard skills included technical knowledge, experience, and computer savvy, while soft skills included traits, personality, mannerisms, and behavior. Furthermore, employability includes a combination of both types of skills. [Tsirkas et al.](#) recommended that higher education add soft-skill development to their curricula through classroom work, internships, apprenticeships, and externships. [Murphy \(2023\)](#) stated that the study participants indicated that non-technical skills development was essential in principal training programs. Non-technical skills included a combination of emotional intelligence, communication, and professional relationship building, all aiding the success of novice principals. [Gransberry \(2022\)](#) suggested that emotional intelligence was crucial in leadership and followership practices through their symbiotic relationship. The author referenced Goleman's theoretical, five-step model for leaders and followers to internalize for actualization and recognition of their strengths and weaknesses. The crux included exercising self-regulation related to perceptions and triggers to promote emotional knowledge with emotional and intellectual maturation.

[Podolchak et al. \(2024\)](#) identified crucial soft skills for public servants and other professionals to develop that foster career success. The authors opined that in the recent past, the world shifted from a VUCA-world (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) to a BANI-world (brittle, anxious, non-linear, and incomprehensible); therefore, it rendered the old approaches to problems ineffective. The remedy and focus of the VUCA model included behavioral leadership tactics. However, in the BANI world, leaders require adaptability to rapid change, reactivity during unforeseen circumstances, innovative problem-solving, cooperation in working well with others, openness to new topics through professional development, flexibility, and risk tolerance. The authors suggested that new-age soft skill development occurs through multiple learning methods, such as professional coaching, interactivity, and group cooperation activities.

2.3.2. Knowledge Management and In-Group and Out-Groups

Knowledge management and in-groups and out-groups represent tightened ropes traversed by leaders between employees' perceived and actual differences between group members under their supervision. In-group members aligned with the

leader more than their out-group counterparts (Hogg & Rast, 2022). However, leaders who promoted intergroup cooperation endorsed common goals and spurred a collective identity between the in-group and out-group members (Kershaw et al., 2021). Zeinabadi and Abbasian (2024) suggested that when principals practiced knowledge sharing with teachers, teachers followed suit and engaged in teacher-to-teacher knowledge sharing, which led to positive organizational performance. Hanif et al. (2020) discussed the characteristics of knowledge management, which included the creation, procurement, distribution, operationalization, and retention of knowledge, which affected organizational performance.

With turnover, knowledge retention occurred through exit interviews (Hanif et al., 2020). Muhammed and Zaim (2020) found that supportive leaders strengthened peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and organizational performance through knowledge management. Knowledge management gives organizations a competitive edge for increased organizational performance (Hanif et al., 2020). Employees motivated to hide knowledge engaged in it for three general reasons: (a) to satisfy their need to feel invaluable, (b) because confidentiality is an organizational expectation of their position, or (c) out of ignorance that the knowledge is not secret (Rezwan & Takahashi, 2021). Rezwan and Takahashi believed that hiding knowledge is an intentional act counterproductive to organizational stability. Exploitative and abusive leadership influenced knowledge hiding and triggered turnover intentions (Syed et al., 2021). According to Wang and Sun (2020), high turnover creates a chasm between knowledge and knowledge sharing, which negatively impacts organizational performance.

2.3.3. Leadership Competencies Development

Osworth et al. (2023) analyzed principals' leadership preparedness from purposeful partnerships between universities and school districts. The authors found that collaboration shaped leaders' leadership development and competencies through cohorts. Pannell and Sergi-McBrayer (2020) suggested that up to 75% of college programs excluded leadership skill development, and graduate-level leadership programs lacked knowledge of current, complex principalships. Leadership training influenced the development of leadership competencies (Aminu et al., 2023; Liou et al., 2022). This postulation relates to the specific problem statement of this study regarding organizational stability. Leadership competencies *influence* leadership effectiveness (Liou et al., 2022), while developed competencies *determine* leader effectiveness (Mai et al., 2022). The underpinning theories associated with supportive and unsupportive leadership practices hinge on competencies development through purposeful training (Kwiotkowska et al., 2022). Figueiredo et al. (2023) suggested a leadership competency model consisting of intelligence, management, social, and emotional elements. Leader competency development included areas beyond leader-follower relationships and data analytics for data-informed decision-making, prompting optimal organizational performance (Schmidt et al., 2023). Modern leaders must bring value to leadership by offering others guidance, inspiration, and facilitation of goal attainment instead of merely direct-

ing them to perform their jobs (Maker, 2022). Choi et al. (2024) indicated the value of a competency-based framework to assess principal leadership competencies to promote improved practices. The framework included foundational behavioral competencies such as cognitive, influential, managerial, and personal tenacity and self-motivation. Choi et al. postulated that task-oriented competencies differ from foundational competencies, and principals must possess both.

2.3.4. Supporting Teachers' Organizational Leadership Development

Teachers served as classroom leaders; however, not every exemplary teacher transitioned into an exemplary district or school-building-level leader. Bellibaş et al. (2020) found that learning-centered principal behaviors directly affected teacher classroom leadership. Furthermore, developing teachers' organizational leadership capacity created another organizational leadership pipeline. Oppi et al. (2023) studied teacher leadership among teachers and principals and found that systematically applying leadership-focused professional development opportunities for teachers improved organizational outcomes. However, reducing the stigma associated with teachers entering leadership positions was crucial in a hierarchical industry. Historically, other teachers and administrators alike viewed aspiring teachers working towards leadership roles as traitors, abandoning their trade (Oppi et al., 2023). Although bureaucratic institutions have an authoritative hierarchy, Gülmez (2022) suggested that an educational organization's leadership culture dramatically influences the teacher-leadership and the structural culture of the organization. The author asserted that teachers contribute to and improve organizational performance, success, and quality through their teaching role when given the opportunity. The opportunity to develop into a teacher-leader depends upon the principal's leadership practices that support the development of teachers into leaders. Teacher-leadership opportunities required the support of school administrators and cooperation from their teacher colleagues. Gülmez (2022) found that by creating a supportive school culture, school principals reaped the benefits of fostering organizational trust, unity, and teacher-leader emergence.

Current leaders must develop their leadership competencies that support the professional development of teachers to improve organizational performance. So-Oabeb and du Plessis (2023) indicated that principals must develop leadership competencies. Competencies included 1) accountability, 2) communication skills, and 3) strategies encompassing verbal and listening skills. In addition, principals with competencies that have developed their relationship-building skills, subject-matter content, managerial and administrative skills, and digital competencies could better support teachers' professional development than the leaders lacking those leadership competencies. So-Oabeb and du Plessis found that developing principals' functional, distributed, and instructional leadership skills positively impacted the teacher-to-principal team's effectiveness.

3. Research and Methodology

This study included research within a social environment to interpret the partici-

pants' realities and worldviews. A flexible, single-case study design with data set triangulation was appropriate for this study.

3.1. Discussion of Single Case Study

The appropriateness of the single case study design lies in its comprehensive approach to observational research in qualitative studies (Gilad, 2021). Bounded within a geographical location, I conducted an in-depth study of phenomena within the context of the participants' environment and a specific period using multiple data collection sources. A flexible design using qualitative methods permitted latitude for me to adapt and adjust the data-gathering techniques. Often, flexible designs work best in exploration studies (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Data-gathering techniques included open-ended interview questions and an anonymous survey for this study. Furthermore, the setting of those observed permits the researcher to identify the subjects' complex worldviews and perspectives from emerging patterns (Bogna et al., 2020). In qualitative research, a flexible plan design permitted me and the actors a measure of resilience to contextually alter qualitative data-gathering methods to complement the balance between inflexible standards and an unbounded approach.

3.2. Discussion of Methods for Triangulation

I used multiple data sets triangulation for this single case study. Multiple data sets triangulation improves the credibility of the research (Vivek et al., 2023). Farquhar et al. (2020) summarized the importance of data set triangulation for case studies. Data set triangulation was best suited to this study because it included multiple qualitative data-gathering tools, such as open-ended interviews, member checking, and an anonymous survey. Da Ros et al. (2024) chose data sets triangulation since the approach permitted a multidimensional examination of the data with multiple extraction points. Bowden et al. (2021) indicated that data collection contained inherent biases, and approaching evidence from different angles through triangulation strengthened causal claims.

3.3. Participants

For this case study, I invited only certain public school employees within the public school population to participate since the study included seeking to understand the organizational influence of untrained, new public school leaders. More specifically, this study only included properly certified participants employed at the education agency in southcentral Pennsylvania (PA) and of public school districts within the agency's legislatively defined geographical area. Explicitly, all participants held a PA principal certification. Some also held other certifications, such as supervisor of special education, psychology, or a letter of eligibility for a superintendent position. Although this study named "followers" as actors, their voices did not contribute to this study. Many scholars agree that qualitative research with a relatively small sample counts as research (Chai et al., 2021; Daher, 2023; Guest

et al., 2020; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Sebele-Mpofu, 2020).

3.4. Discussion of Population

The primary group of actors included certified public school principals and supervisors of special education at an education agency in South Central Pennsylvania. Secondary groups included properly certified public school principals from 16 public school districts in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) leaders created three pathways for individuals to earn a principal certification (Education PA, 2024). As the Pennsylvania School Code (Public School Code of 1949, 1949a) indicates, supervisors must possess a principal certificate to supervise PK-12 instructors. Supervising non-certified employees, such as paraeducators, secretaries, and maintenance personnel, does not include certification. The first pathway to principalship is defined by PDE as the *traditional route*. The traditional route involves candidates completing an approved Pennsylvania graduate-level principal certification program, plus an internship class, or completing a non-Pennsylvania principalship program.

PDE's *alternate route* represents the second pathway, which includes completing the requirements found in the traditional route and requiring the candidate to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of school law and regulations through a test. Finally, *the third pathway* involves adding principal certification to complement present professional educator-related certifications, including a career and technical administrative directorship, a principal certificate, or a letter of superintendent eligibility. The rationale for limiting participants' eligibility to only leaders possessing a principal or supervisor of special education certification is related to the organizational permission from the primary study site. The agency's sample size included 33 properly certified leaders, supervising approximately 500 certificated teachers and 50 non-certified employees. Eight of the 16 district superintendents permitted me to invite their properly certified leaders. I contacted 88 leaders. The excluded group included other classifications of public school employees. The excluded group included leaders who manage programs with no direct supervision responsibilities, leaders of only non-certificated followers, and leaders who possess a principal or supervisor of special education certificate but did not lead classroom instructors. The chosen classification of public school employees led classroom instructors and influenced turnover, retention, and organizational performance through their leadership roles. Before disqualifying leaders within the public school system based on education level and certification, the upper threshold of participants for the study included 30 leaders, with a minimum of 15. The secondary group of participants in the study included followers. Followers included those who did not possess a specific certification issued by PDE and those with proper certification but did not work as public school principals. The pool of followers, not including non-agency school district employees, reached as high as 1100. Regardless of the certification status, leaders influence followers profoundly, affecting retention, turnover, and organizational performance.

For the study, I chose purposive sampling. Purposive sampling occurs through a survey for participants who meet specific requirements before contact occurs and scheduling interviews (Campbell et al., 2020; Motlová et al., 2023; Opoku-Addai et al., 2022; Tukundane & Yang, 2024; van der Burgt et al., 2020). For the study, specifically certified public school principals who supervised others providing direct services to PK-12 learners met the eligibility criteria. The rationale for using a sampling method includes targeting a population in a specific sector with specific expertise (Hamilton & Finley, 2020; Motlová et al., 2023; Opoku-Addai et al., 2022; Tukundane & Yang, 2024). The specific expertise stemmed from precise education certifications, namely, a school principal certification and the leadership responsibilities of classroom instructors and non-teaching employees (psychologists, social workers, speech and language specialists, and school counselors). The defined public school and adequately certified leaders' perspective informed and guided the study. Reaching thematic repetition occurs when there are no additional themes or new information, and the data becomes repetitive (Chai et al., 2021; Daher, 2023; Foley et al., 2021; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Ligita et al., 2020). Sebele-Mpofu (2020) indicated that thematic saturation encounters an inductive and a priori station, whereby saturation occurs when the codes or themes exhaustively represent the data. An expectation of the STUDY included reaching saturation with a minimum of 15 participants and a maximum of 30. Reaching saturation occurred through the 25 participants.

The educators in the education sector value new knowledge. Upon request and within specific parameters, my employer granted specific demographic information to doctoral candidates employed at the agency. The participating local school district leaders provided e-mail addresses, I contacted eligible participants directly and used a public school directory to extract e-mail addresses on my behalf. The stipulation of the agency leaders included a connection between the research and the organization's mission and vision. Consequently, I occupied a senior leadership position within the human resources department and ran the necessary reports from the human resources information system (HRIS). The criteria included the e-mail addresses of administrative non-bargained employees. The survey included identifying leaders of *currently* certified instructors serving as a teacher-of-record, certified teachers or professionals *currently* supporting learners (school psychologists, social workers, speech and language specialists, school counselors), certified teachers primarily in a paraeducator role, but not the daily teacher-of-record, and all non-certified employees.

I found illusiveness when attempting to identify *all* certified public-school principals. I also contacted administrative colleagues at each of the 16 school districts located within the geographical boundaries of the educational agency, limited only to Lancaster County, to request access to their properly certified leaders who supervise instructors. I was not guaranteed access to district personnel files. The vital concepts related to every organization include retention, turnover, and organizational performance. Additionally, leaders further or hinder the mission and vision

of organizations through their actions and inactions. Including school district principals added depth and breadth to this study, which depended on balancing the agency principals' leader-centric experiences. Education agencies and public school districts are two types of public school entities which operated differently within the Pennsylvania public school system.

3.5. Data Collection Plan

Before collecting data, the requirement to understand the identification process of qualified participants ensued. For this study, the Pennsylvania Public Employees Relations Act 195-1970 ([Public Employee Relations Act, 1970](#)) defined the public school administrator position. A standard reference to certain administrative positions, such as school principals, included *Act 93* employees. Cross-referencing *Act 93-1970* in the Pennsylvania School Code of 1949, specifically Section 1164, occurred ([Public School Code of 1949, 1949b](#)). Indirectly, Section 1164 defined school administrators by outlining the process to produce administrative benefits and compensation agreements between Act 93 members and a board of directors. Section 1164 identified Act 93 members through exclusion. The excluded positions consisted of the only at-will employees in the Pennsylvania public school sector; however, other specific qualifications allowed for other positions. Thereby, Section 1164 solidified school principals in middle management as *Act 93* members. The initial survey concluded after identifying the study population from all Act 93 employees at the site or sites. I created e-mail invitations and sent them to the adequately certified leaders requesting their participation in this study. The data collection plan included public school principals and supervisors of special education certificate holders who supervise others. Purposive sampling was standard and represented an intentional effort only to select qualified, targeted participants possessing specific expertise ([Campbell et al., 2020](#); [Chai et al., 2021](#); [Johnson et al., 2021](#); [Opoku-Addai et al., 2022](#); [Tukundane & Yang, 2024](#)). For this study, and at a specific date and time, within the two education departments at the agency, I initially surveyed all known Act 93 members or middle managers to identify current, properly certified leaders who supervise others. In the initial email, I introduced the study and asked potential participants to answer the purposive sampling questions. The next step included recruiting qualified potential participants from the school districts' management population. This subsection of the general population satisfies the research participant criteria ([Chai et al., 2021](#)).

This study's in-person and virtual interviews represented the primary data collection method. An anonymous survey represented the secondary data collection method for triangulation purposes. [Braun et al. \(2021\)](#) case study participants indicated that anonymous surveys offered an opportunity to fully disclose answers to questions that might otherwise have gone unanswered or not fully articulated during semi-structured interviews. Sites related to this project did not produce or make archival data available; therefore, I abandoned triangulation efforts with ar-

chival data. The interviews and surveys complemented each other in the data triangulation step. After establishing an approved research framework, other crucial steps occurred before the data collection plan commenced. With the constructivism paradigm, I used a flexible case study design to better understand the connections between leadership training for novice, properly certified leaders in the Lancaster County, Pennsylvania public school districts and the sole education agency related to retention, turnover, and organizational performance. This qualitative study primarily included data collected through in-person and virtual interviews and excluded focus groups. Focus groups represented a potential data source for this case study; however, I rejected the option since the geographical size of Lancaster County prohibited accommodation. Jowsey et al. (2021) suggested that the role of the researcher includes sensitizing concepts. Sensitizing concepts occurred through carefully crafted research questions to encourage researchers to minimize their influences and biases when designing research questions, enabling participants to understand their experiences.

At the participants' discretion, the interview location was in-person or virtual. The goal of the choice was to increase their satisfaction regarding privacy (Lev-erentz, 2023). Chai et al. (2021) reported that for geographically dispersed study populations, it was appropriate to use in-depth interviews. However, focus groups were ideal if the participants were in the same vicinity. This research's primary planned data-gathering method was in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and Egle-son's steps were used. Egelson's (2023) procedure includes semi-structured, in-person interviews since individual interviews allow researchers to personalize the interview for each participant through the flexibility of the questions. Egelson included personalizing pre-determined interview questions and crafting questions that permit respondents to answer freely and openly within the semi-structured nature of pre-determined questions. Furthermore, open-ended questions permitted researchers to contact participants later to ask follow-up questions. I obtained consent from the participants to record the semistructured interviews, and the software automatically transcribed the conversations. The questions were pre-crafted, open-ended, and in-depth. Probing follow-up questions when appropriate is necessary for research (Başöz & Gümüş, 2022; Chai et al., 2021; Henriksen et al., 2022; Husband, 2020). I destroyed the recordings after all member-checking efforts. When the potential actor met the research criteria, I sent them a Microsoft Teams® invitation and attached the consent form. In addition, I permitted the actors to choose their pseudonyms. The planned secondary data source is favored among qualitative researchers: a written and electronic survey (Busetto et al., 2020; Celhay et al., 2024; Jones, 2023). The data collection methods I used met the appropriate standards for qualitative research. The tools prompt rich, thick discussions to answer the research questions, as well as more narrowly defined answers using a Likert-type scale of pre-set responses (Busetto et al., 2020; Chai et al., 2021; Foley et al., 2021; Hamilton & Finley, 2020; Jordan et al., 2021; Stahl & King, 2020). Million and Bossaller (2021) opined that primary data collection

methods answered the original research questions, while secondary data usefully triangulates the findings from the primary data sources.

3.6. Instruments

Interview Guides. An interview guide was necessary for the study. I estimated that the in-person interviews required 30 minutes to complete. The actual time ranged from 35 to 55 minutes. The number of interviews depended on when saturation succeeded; however, I limited the participants to 15 to 30. Saturation occurred for all 12 research elements, using the words and survey results from 25 public school principals. In qualitative research, interviews represent the most common means of data collection when exploring real-world problems (Demirci, 2024). Demirci (2024) suggested that through careful planning and commitment of the semi-structured interview questions to the paper, researchers reduce the recall bias of the interviewer and interviewee. In addition, this process ensures that the researcher asks each participant the same questions, using the exact words, even if the order of the questions varies with each interview. Roberts (2020) argued that the researcher and the interview questions represented research instruments; therefore, great care was taken since humans participated. When researchers include potential follow-up questions, they show their commitment to remain focused on the purpose of the study from an exhaustive lens. Given my partial *insider* and partial *outsider* position, operationalizing words to eliminate any mistaken assumption that I and the participants share word meanings and educational-related cultural assumptions was vital. Robinson (2023) indicated that to effectively probe participants for rich details, the structure of the interview questions is crucial and prompts deep learning from participants. The author discussed the appropriateness of probing to reveal, clarify, elaborate, or explain the answers to the interview questions. Robinson suggested that probes included *silence*, *encouragement*, *elaboration*, *clarification*, and *recapitulation*. For this study, participants filled the void with additional information, filling the silence. To encourage additional information from the participant, I asked, “Really?” Elaboration and clarification probes included asking participants to help me understand further what the participant meant by a statement. When I used recapitalization probes, I took the participants back in time to retell the narrative.

Data Collection Method 2. Archive Data

Archival data represents the history of what occurred, and, by default, what did not occur (Ng et al., 2022). I pursued archival data in the form of agendas of leader specific professional development offered by department directors, superintendents, and executive directors, from each education entity participating in this case study for triangulation; available triangulation of older data might help build a stronger case for findings and provide a complete picture of what occurred in the past compared to the current, real-time perspectives from participants. In preparation for the absence of archival data at participating sites, I sought national data related to data and statistics from credible public school-focused non-profit

organizations. All types of archival data proved elusive for me.

3.7. Data Organization

Data collection instruments for this case study included semi-structured in-person and virtual interviews, SurveyMonkey® survey results, and possibly archival data, which required post-data collection organization upon completion. I stored the data on a removable, password-protected, encrypted thumb drive and secured it in a locked home safe. Data storage included my personal computer. Agency computers are subject to random scans and data mining (Lancaster-Lebanon Intermediate Unit 13, 2016), which could expose the true identities of the participants. Also set for destruction were the SurveyMonkey® survey results three years post-graduation; however, in the meantime, I stored the results in a locked home safe. SurveyMonkey's privacy notice included information regarding the confidentiality of respondent answers, except for legitimate interests and to satisfy legal obligations (SurveyMonkey, 2024).

3.8. Member Checking

For this study, the data plan included member checking. I returned their transcribed words to participants individually to verify that the written words matched their intended meanings. In addition, after completing the Findings section, each participant received the entire section to verify that I used their words appropriately. The participants verified the legitimacy of my interpretations of their words and the meaning of the words in the context of the answers to the questions. Therefore, the transcripts reflected the participants' meanings and intentions. Sahakyan (2023) declared that member checking ensures quality qualitative research.

3.9. Follow-Up Interviews

I used follow-up interviews after coding when patterns and themes emerged from participants' words, which required additional questions for clarification purposes. For example, a pattern ensued following several participant interviews related to thoughts of leaving public education leadership and the public education sector. After identifying the pattern, I asked the initial interviewees new, structured questions based on the open-ended questions answered by subsequent principals.

3.10. Data Analysis

Since this study included secondary data collection instruments, triangulation analysis followed. The framework elements of this study guided the thematic analysis during that phase of the study and used the words of the participants. Participants' words emerged from the data, themes emerged from coding, followed by my interpretations of the data representations. Comparing the identified codes, the current literature ensued. Based on the themes, data matrices emerged. Themes

identified patterns. The software of choice for this study included NVivo15® analytics software. The software, coupled with Microsoft® products for the visual representation of the data, assisted me when NVivo15® failed to provide the visual representation. I illustrated the links between theory and practice in this case study analysis through my critical thinking skills. Powell (2022) indicated that the research framework illustrates the decision-making process.

4. Application to Professional Practices, and Conclusions

The Findings revealed the need for changes to the current leader-centric training offered to public school principals at their current places of employment. The revelation of changes occurred through the participants' principalships, evidence-based, current, real-world professional practices, with intertwined leadership theories. The results revealed crucial bridges between research, theory, and implications for change throughout this single case study. Across the bridges, fertile ground awaits the implementation of recommended changes, innovations, and organizational improvements related to the concepts and constructs of this study.

4.1. Presentation of the Findings

I individually and strategically invited eighty-eight public school principals to volunteer to participate in this study through my work e-mail address. One district required the issuance of the invitation from the assistant superintendent. Overall, contact with 88 principals ensued. The work email address I used added validity and authenticity to the invitation. The e-mail invitation included an embedded link to the electronic Sampling Survey. I created codes within the electronic survey that assisted me to categorize each respondent's identification, eligibility, and interview status. I initially coded each of the twenty-nine respondents' survey results with one tag; however, as the staging of the interviews progressed, most resulted in multiple tags. The tags included: eligible, eligible but no capacity, interview complete, interview scheduled, Lebanon not eligible, non-supervisor of PROF, withdrew, no response to the invitation, only wants anonymous survey, respondent contacted, a tentative invitation sent, and untagged. Respondents' names received a tag with "no response to the invitation" after the second unanswered attempt to establish an interview date. An eligible respondent uniquely declined to engage in the in-person interview. The respondent expressed interest in only taking the Anonymous Survey.

To explore the complex phenomena in real-time, the words and expressed thoughts of twenty-five certified PA public school principals were collected through in-person interviews. After providing and receiving a completed IRB-approved Consent Form, the semi-structured interviews began between me and the public school principals through Microsoft Teams®. One interview occurred through Zoom® after my Teams® failed to launch. After each interview, the virtual platforms produced a raw transcript and video recording. Each participant received a copy of their raw transcript for review with instructions to inform me if

glaring misinterpretations by the system transpired. I saved the recordings to a thumb drive and locked it in a safe. The scheduled erasure of the recordings occurs in three years. A modern, acceptable alternative to *physically* attending, in-person interviews included virtual, in-person interviews (Fouda, 2020; Oliffe et al., 2021; Wakelin et al., 2024). Prior to finalizing the Findings, each actor received the quotes, in context, through email as a form of member checking. This step guaranteed that my quotes accurately presented the intentions of the participants' voices. Twenty-five in-person interviews commenced on November 20, 2024, and concluded on January 9, 2025. All quotes came from the raw, unredacted transcripts; however, brackets within quotes indicated minor grammatical corrections and contextual clarifications.

The final phase of coding includes *selective coding*. Thematic analysis requires developing and interpreting keywords from the data (Al-Eisawi, 2022; Bingham, 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2023; Campbell et al., 2020; Jowsey et al., 2021; Lochmiller, 2021; Mishra & Dey, 2022; Morgan, 2022; Naeem et al., 2023; Pearce et al., 2022; Thompson, 2023). I created codes from the research questions (RQ) and *manually coded* the interview answers to the corresponding codes. This action maintained coding continuity. The limited use of Microsoft Excel® assisted with percentage calculations and tracked the use of participants' quoted words in the Finding section of the project.

A feature of NVivo15® software included artificial Intelligence (AI). As an experiment, I copied the raw, uncoded transcripts into a test case and applied the AI functionality. AI produced unsatisfactory results. Furthermore, using AI took my decision-making, coding, and analysis, which resulted in odd and mismatched coding of the participants' words and phrases. Since I conducted the interviews and read the transcripts multiple times, I knew the nuances and essences of the answers, producing accurate coding. AI failed to accurately code the transcripts because it failed to interpret the *essence* of the participants' words.

For triangulation purposes, I sent the participants' raw transcripts and AS link from my work e-mail address after each interview. I delivered the transcripts and the link through the participants' work e-mail addresses since each participant indicated their work e-mail address as their preferred contact method. I purchased a subscription license from SurveyMonkey® and crafted the AS. Instilling layers of validity in this project included two steps: 1) not using a work subscription to SurveyMonkey® and 2) not using the e-mail functionality of SurveyMonkey®. My small financial investment resulted in genuine anonymity for the respondents. SurveyMonkey® expected a 71% completion rate; however, this project reached 88%.

The most popular pseudonym included a grandparent's name. The participants' ages ranged between 31 and 60+ years. The majority, 52%, fell into the 41 - 50 range, 32% fell into the 51 - 60 range, and 16% into the 31 - 40-year range. All participants identified as female (80%) or male (20%), and the ethnic compositions included African American/Black (8%), Asian (4%), and Caucasian (88%).

The years of service with their current employer ranged from four months to 31 years; however, none exceeded 19 years as a school principal. Of the twenty-five participants, 76% had 10 years or less of experience as a certified principal who also supervised certified instructional staff (professional employees) *at their current place of employment*. However, 44% had over 10 years of experience as a certified principal throughout their careers, meaning over half of the participants left an education entity for another and then had to learn new, various leadership expectations in different public school entities throughout their principalships. Several principals discussed the status of being a new principal at different school entities. An important, recurring theme included the impact on their leadership abilities without district-centric leadership training, induction, or a formal, internal mentorship program upon arrival. A description of this phenomenon occurred later in the Findings.

Jerdborg (2024) elucidated that content and context drive leadership development. The Findings from this study amplified the need for contextual, ongoing, targeted principal preparation training. New and seasoned leaders needed entity-specific, targeted training, but not necessarily limited to retention and turnover topics. The desire included efforts to mold the identity and formation of leadership practices unique to each public school entity. Prior public school experience in a principalship with a different district or local education agency, signaling years of experience throughout a career, did not translate into a smooth transition into a new principalship. Acceptable leadership practices and development varied by each entity, and no two entities' practices or expectations of superintendents or executive directors overlapped. Therefore, when principals transferred to a different school entity, leadership practices that worked in a previous entity did not necessarily work in the new one. Common, recurring themes emerged from the data.

4.2. Overview of Themes Discovered

Qualitative, in-person interviews occurred over two months with certified public school principals, limited by their Lancaster County, PA work locations. The principals' words were from the in-person, virtual interviews, which served as the primary source for theme discovery, prompted by the interview questions (IQ) and other information not directly requested but offered freely by the principals. The RQs served as the basis from which the IQs emerged. The secondary source of data emanated from a close-ended, Likert-type Anonymous Survey (AS), of which 22 of 25 (88%) research participants completed. Cronin et al.'s (2024) and Stoffel et al.'s (2024) indicated that validity becomes weaker when participants decline to complete a survey. The authors suggested that the length of a survey, *incentives*, communication efforts, and the actual sender influenced the completion rate. Most importantly, the authors indicated that incentives do not introduce response bias, and donating to a charitable organization might increase participation.

Only 19 participants responded to the AS. Furthermore, based on the anony-

mous nature of the survey, a targeted e-mail that captured only non-respondents could not happen. Therefore, I sent an e-mail to all study participants with a financial pledge to the Lancaster-Lebanon Education Foundation (LLEF, 2025). The condition of the pledge included 100% participation. By January 19, 2025, 88% of the participants completed the AS. Some survey respondents avoided answering 100% of the questions. For example, two respondents, 9%, skipped ASQ9, which asked, *If employee retention is not an organizational goal, should it be?* Ultimately, three participants, 12%, declined to respond to the entire AS for unknown reasons.

4.3. Discussion of Themes

The following section includes a detailed discussion of the Findings. The Themes Discovered led this section and included: 1) Principals' Ponderance to Leave the Profession, 2) An Abundance of Self-directed Leadership Training, 3) Underprepared to Retain Teachers, 4) Recruitment vs. Turnover/Retention, and 5) Mentorships. A detailed account of each Theme Discovered followed. In addition, participant quotes added unique worldviews from their perspectives. Participants in this study enjoyed anonymity; therefore, this document excluded the transcripts produced from the in-person recorded interviews. At a minimum, all participants held a current Administrator I certification. All participants' work locations included public school districts or the sole education agency in southcentral Pennsylvania.

Theme 1: Principals' Ponderance to Permanently Leave the Profession. Narayanan (2023) painted an ominous picture of the diminishing principal pipeline. Throughout the interviews, principals offered spontaneous answers to four unasked questions. The questions stemmed from the icebreaker and demographic questions related to years of service at their current employer and within the public education sector. Organically, participants offered answers to unasked questions that revolved around whether the principal had ever (a) obtained a PA Department of Education issued emergency Administrator I certification for a leadership role (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2024b), (b) contemplated leaving public education leadership, (c) contemplated leaving the public education sector, and (d) whether they ever left public education leadership and later returned to it.

Slightly over 50% of the participants (52%) contemplated leaving the public education *leadership*. Their years of service in a principalship ranged from less than one year to 16 years. In addition, 40% of all participants contemplated leaving *the public education sector*. The years of service in a principalship ranged from less than a year to 18 years. Two participants indicated *pending retirements* as the reason for leaving education leadership. In follow-up e-mails to those participants, asking if they planned to substitute as a leader or classroom staff member in retirement, Mary-Joyce said, "[I am] not sure" (Mary-Joyce, personal communication, 01/04/2025), and Thelma said "Yes" (Thelma, personal communication, 01/09/2025).

4.4. Application to Professional Practice

The participants shared a wealth of knowledge, beginning with ice-breaker questions and ending with one question related to relevant, overlooked topics associated with this study. Triangulation planning did not occur with either question. Instead, those questions provided fertile ground for the actors to offer improvements to general leadership practices and recommendations for further study. The actors offered answers to the non-triangulable questions with the dream of contributing to improving future leadership strategies for future organizational leaders.

The first ice-breaker question asked participants to provide three sentences explaining why they participated in this study and whether they thought that through their participation, they might contribute to future organizational leaders' professional development for needed change. The post-interview question asked if there were additional, important, unasked topics related to this study. Their answers prompted me to recommend improvements to general leadership practices. The principals' experiences informed me, since I held neither an Instructional nor Administrative certificate.

4.5. Improving General Leadership Practice

Mohd Tahir et al. (2023) indicated that principals prefer ongoing professional development programs. Leadership development must include careful development, support, follow-through, and follow-up. This study showed the professional development relationship between principals and instructional staff members. The study simultaneously revealed the professional development relationship between principals, their superintendents, and directors. The richness or absence of the leaders' respective leader-member exchanges geared towards guided professional development became the crux of this study. The leader-member exchanges from superintendents and directors to principals were insignificant compared to those between principals and instructors. The principals routinely revealed visions related to the instructional development of teachers, then rose above the goal of improving that segment of organizational performance and developed willing instructors into new leaders.

The principals mentioned methods to improve general leadership practices throughout the interviews independently of the IQs. Their recommendations for improvements included *the prevention of burnout*. Another recommended improvement included *breaking a cycle of trauma-inducing toxic leadership* in the leader-to-leader and leader-to-member exchange patterns. Principals recommended improving the teacher-to-principal pipeline with relevant, entity-specific training, such as new leader induction and onboarding programs. *A formal leader-to-leader mentorship program* was a coveted leader development tool; however, 96% of the principals' new leaders' experiences did not include it. Principals mentioned the need for *entity-specific coaching programs with seasoned internal leaders* who purposefully train new leaders in leadership traits to emulate situational and

transformational leadership and reject toxic situations. Improving organizational culture and climate might hinge on the following improvements to general leadership practice within the public education sector in Lancaster County, PA.

Preventing Burnout. Burnout requires leaders to leverage tomorrow's energy for today's events. Su-Keene and DeMatthews (2022) opined that chronic job stresses contribute to principal burnout. Furthermore, the authors suggested that principals' professional standards and preparation courses exclude burnout mitigation topics. Karaevli (2024) studied principals' feelings of burnout and revealed that principals planned to remain in the education sector for the short term; however, their long-term plans included altogether leaving the education sector. From this STUDY, 60% of the participants mentioned *their* contemplation of leaving education leadership. Of the 60%, 33% mentioned the word *burnout*. Improving general leadership practices to prevent burnout might result in higher leader retention. In general, it might also lead to less turnover. Marinac et al. (2024) explored burnout mitigation strategies. Developing supportive strategies within the school environment was crucial in mitigating principal burnout. Burnout mitigation included positive relationships between principals and instructors.

Preventing Toxic Leadership and Preventing Leaders' Professional Trauma. Greer (2024) and Griffin (2020) indicated the elusiveness of a universal definition of *trauma*. Greer (2024) studied employees' perspectives on trauma-informed work environments. From followers' perspectives, a central theme from the study indicated the importance of leaders viewing followers *as people, not resources* for task completion. In addition, employees longed for leaders to value and hear their voices. Griffin (2020) succinctly reported *how* people speak to others about matters (tone, inflection, context). Within a traumatic experience evaluation, three factors existed and included: 1) the event, 2) the individual's reaction, and 3) the short-term/long-term effects (Griffin, 2020).

Griffin (2020) studied participants who suggested educating and training leaders in trauma-informed decision-making to protect *adults*. Discussions led to recommended methods to thwart an organizational foundation that included a toxic leadership environment ripe for traumatic-filled events and tiny tragedies that followed and haunted leaders for decades. The principals recommended providing a physically and emotionally safe environment, a supportive network, and the development of culturally sensitive training (Greer, 2024; Griffin, 2020). The avoidance of creating a toxic environment was paramount (Griffin). IQ9 of this STUDY asked participants why employees might *remain* in a toxic leadership environment.

From their unique perspectives, every principal provided possible reasons. Several principals referenced *the hope* that the toxic leader would eventually leave. Others referenced "*learners or students*," who were the most important aspect of their jobs, and they would keep their heads down low and hope to avoid a clash with their leader. A more haunting, personal reason reported by one principal was that it never occurred to the principal to leave because of *dedication to the job and*

the profession. Many referenced *the devil you know* as being better than *the devil you do not know*. Improving general leadership practices might include identifying, dismantling, and preventing toxic people from leading others. Throughout this STUDY, conversation after conversation included the importance of *relationships*. Relationships might include school board presidents' active involvement and interaction with supervisors to learn the leadership practices of their superintendents and executive directors. Superintendent and executive directors might benefit from forming relationships with leaders below the leadership ranks of their direct reports to understand the leadership practices of organizational directors.

Gay (2023) countered Lord Acton's ominous observation regarding power corrupting and absolute power corrupting absolutely. The author suggested that the fortuity of positional senior leadership was a privilege with high responsibilities to lead teams, not coerce them into followership. In effect, rectifying unchecked, unbalanced power was the foundation needed to discover and disband harassment, toxicity, and abuse to benefit all organizational members. Supporting those who report toxic environments and providing zero tolerance for such environments was key to establishing a safe environment for leaders and learners (Gay, 2023). One interviewed principal spoke about using restorative practices to heal a team within a new leadership assignment after years of toxic leadership practices perpetuated by the former department director.

Improving the Teacher-to-Principal Pipeline. School administrators commonly gain organizational leadership positions in the teacher-to-principal pipeline within the public education sector, and educational leadership programs help new principals flourish (Dickens et al., 2021; Perrone et al., 2022). In 2015, the National Policy Board for Educational Administrators updated and published the *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* (National Policy Board of Education Administration, 2017). Although the publication placed learners at the center of the framework, crucial practical educational leadership actions included principals' relationships with others steeped in collaboration, transparency, trust, perseverance, fairness, and integrity. The established standards recognized the importance of relationships and the leader's responsibility to lead with quality interpersonal communications while gaining social and emotional awareness through understanding staff members' backgrounds and cultures. Capitalizing on the recent trend to utilize virtual platforms for communication enables the development of instructors into new leaders through digital professional development efforts (Sterrett & Richardson, 2020). In the educational leadership sectors, the scholarly authors added that school leaders must lead through personal interactions, not from a physical office. A combination of in-person and virtual leader-member exchanges might improve the teacher-to-principal pipeline through this professional practice.

4.6. Potential Implementation Strategies

One potential implementation strategy to improve general leadership practices

includes asking the experts (Administrator I and II certificate holders) to identify *their* perspectives on current and needed supportive measures. Crafted surveys must enable Administrators the freedom to express their views through qualitative methods. In-person interviews with a trusted Administrator, imposing the strictest of confidence parameters, might offer the most constructive results. Triangulation through quantitative, closed-ended surveys represents an ideal tool. The process must be cyclical, and results *must be fully disclosed* to organizational administrators to foster true transparency, trust, and unity in being part of the solution with their supervisors, superintendents, and executive directors.

Focus on Improving Organizational Culture. Leadership styles and citizenship behaviors determine organizational culture (Khan et al., 2020). Furthermore, organizational culture theorists agree that organizations include many layers of pervasive constructs with social implications (Tasoulis et al., 2024). Bogale and Debela (2024) suggested that an organization's identity crisis stemmed from inefficiency and ineffectiveness. Leaders' organizational learning steeped in positive leadership styles increased employees' innovative work behaviors and heightened organizational citizenship behaviors (Khan et al., 2020). Bogale and Debela (2024) emphasized organizational culture through workplace dynamics, influencing employees' interactions, treatment, and management. Bogale and Debela stated that the dimensions explored included innovations, teamwork, and power distance, emphasizing leader traits and the organizational cultural transfer from them to subordinates.

Foundational elements of any organization include its culture and beliefs, shaped by its employees through adaptation and integration (Bogale & Debela, 2024). Pillay et al. (2023) suggested that middle management leaders influenced organizational culture and defined it as shared and accepted norms, patterns, and behaviors. Fehsenfeld et al. (2024) recommended that when organizations evaluate their organizational culture through intersectoral coordination, they process and organize activities across departments (intersectoral). The authors approached the topic from a *bottom-up* perspective to produce a better understanding of the topic and a pathway to build bridges between organizational and professional boundaries, resulting in a shared meaning. Tasoulis et al. (2024) explored pathways to successfully changing organizational culture. The authors asserted that employees possessed complex reactions, and a configurational perspective ushered in more successful organizational cultural change than failure.

Personality Inventory and Emotional Intelligence

Several principals mentioned using personality inventories to foster dynamic, successful teamwork. Westberry and Zhao (2021) conducted a quantitative study and found discrepancies between leaders' confidence ratings and leadership abilities scores. A shift from believing that leaders are born to believing that leaders are made and developed occurred over the last century (Schreyer et al., 2023). In addition, an emotional intelligence focal point plays a leading role in leadership. The scholarly author evaluated the relationship between personality and transforma-

tional leadership. The Big Five included leaders' openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Schilling et al., 2023; Schreyer et al., 2023). The HEXACO model revamped the Big Five Model and added *honesty-humility* (Schreyer et al., 2023).

4.7. Recommendations for Further Study

Participant Anna recommended that school entities investigate and support "new leaders [who] struggle to care for people." Steilen and Stone-Johnson (2023) investigated what "caring leadership" resembled while emphasizing the criticality of principals' care establishment. The authors found that efforts to increase academic achievement sometimes outshine the formation of caring relationships. Ballin (2023) defined a *caring community* as a school entity in which the employees genuinely care about the well-being of others within an organization whose common beliefs include *caring for others*. According to Landorf (2023), a caring environment includes active listening, relationship-building, and possession of a historical consciousness, coupled with an organizational movement toward integrity and hope.

4.7.1. The Power of Self-Awareness

Participant Chuck recommended a further study into "the power of self-awareness, [since] the power of self-awareness is important among leaders. The better you know yourself as a leader, the better, I think, you can lead [and] be true to yourself." The construct of *self-awareness* enjoyed a multitude of definitions, according to Carden et al. (2023). The author indicated that earlier definitions of self-awareness include negative connotations. However, more recently, the definition included self-awareness as a path to reflexivity, which became a route to learning from both inter- and intra-personal perspectives. Brinkmann et al. (2021) postulated that building self-awareness flowed from leaders' development of reflexivity, which led to self-efficacy. The authors indicated the value of leadership coaches for self-awareness development.

4.7.2. Preemptive, Active Mitigation Measures to Reduce Burnout

Participant Jane recommended further studies around the effect [and] aspects of burnout and how that affects retention as a leader. [Basically], how to possibly address burnout and attempt to retain employees. Destabilization of the school community stemmed from principal burnout and turnover (DeMatthews et al., 2023). DeMatthews et al. suggested that burnout occurs when novice principals focus on the technical aspects of their school leadership instead of the relational aspects of their school leadership. Two preemptive supports included mentoring and induction programs. Marinac et al. (2024) underscored the importance of establishing pre-emptive support for principals to avoid burnout. According to Marinac et al., participants prolonged professional stress (i.e., administrative overload, criticism from parents, demands from aggrieved teachers) contributed to principals' stress levels and propensity for burnout. Marinac et al. (2024) indicated

that the participants recommended solutions to avoid burning out, including additional education and professional development focused on coping strategies to reduce stress, delegate responsibilities, and principal networking. [Ulfiah et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Marinac et al. \(2024\)](#) added that the manifestation of stress for principals resulted in physical ailments, such as headaches, body aches, and high blood pressure. Mitigation efforts included hiring competent support staff and delegating. Those measures created a supportive environment for the principals.

4.7.3. Creating Real-World Teacher Prep Coursework

Participant Rachel's future vision regarded a topic for additional study and included "[focusing] on the next generation coming into our educational world because I think that there are [many] things that are missing, [and] what can we do to continue to better them." During the in-person interview related to this STUDY, Rachel mentioned a professional dream of working with universities to create real-world curricula to support successful first-year teachers in their teaching roles. [McKissick et al. \(2023\)](#) studied special education preparedness courses at a U. S. university. McKissick et al. evaluated the preparedness and confidence of pre-teachers to meet professional standards expected in their first teacher placement within a school district. McKissick et al. concluded that there were deficiencies in their ability to engage in professional practices (collaborating with others) and their role as classroom leaders. McKissick et al. recommended developing individualized education programs to support college students' learning. The cohort experienced classroom internships and full-day classroom experiences for an entire school year. The university administration increased clinical experiences so students could develop collaborative efforts and classroom leadership skills ([McKissick et al., 2023](#)).

5. Summary and Study Conclusions

Five discovered themes emerged from the contributions of 25 public school principals. The themes included: 1) principals' ponderance to leave the profession, 2) an abundance of self-directed leadership training, 3) underprepared to retain teachers, 4) recruitment vs. turnover and retention, and 5) mentorships. The findings suggested that the principals' self-motivation for self-improvement outshone organizational efforts to offer general and specific leadership training. The principals offered recommendations for improved leadership practices and future study topics. The recommendations may bolster organizational expectations of the currently ill-defined leadership growth expected of public school principals by their superiors.

The recommended positive leadership support and training derived from this study may decrease the further professional trauma that current and future leaders must endure in the public education sector in southcentral Lancaster County, PA. Reflecting upon the findings and recommendations to adopt thoughtful and caring practices while performing duties might benefit superintendents and executive directors.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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