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Relationship between Servant Leadership Style and Teacher Job Satisfaction and Retention

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Relationship between Servant Leadership Style and Teacher Job Satisfaction and Retention

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A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Relationship between Servant Leadership Style and Teacher Satisfaction and Retention

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Morgan K. Stamschror

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

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Abstract

Effective school leaders are vital to the success of a school. The leadership style of a school leader, specifically principals, affects teacher satisfaction and retention. Servant leadership is a well-known leadership style in the business and organizational psychology field but has applications in the education setting as well. This report discusses how principals can be servant-leaders by putting others first and themselves second. As a result, teacher job satisfaction and retention are affected. Therefore, it is important for educators to learn how principals can most effectively lead teachers and other support staff. Training and professional development opportunities are essential for school leaders to learn how to be supportive and equitable when working with others. The following paper includes a review of the current literature regarding school leadership, with an emphasis on servant leadership, and lastly, teacher satisfaction and retention.

Keywords: servant leadership, principals, school leaders, teacher satisfaction and retention

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Relationship between Servant Leadership Style and Teacher Satisfaction and Retention

Introduction

Among in-school factors that affect student learning, leadership is second only to teaching (Leithwood et al., 2004). It is widely known that good principals are critical to a successful school (Branch et al., 2013). School administration, particularly principals, has an incredible impact on learning, attendance, teacher satisfaction, and retention (Grissom et al., 2021). A school administrator's role includes providing educational, curricular, and financial leadership as well as ensuring day-to-day operations run smoothly (Barrows, 2020). Also, principals play a vital role by making decisions, managing teachers, and creating a safe and inclusive school environment (Ch et al., 2017).

In 2018, there were approximately 938,000 school administrators working in the United States including 460,000 principals and other administrators at elementary and secondary schools (Barrows, 2020). The average student to administrator ratio in the 1000 largest public-school districts by locale was 290.7 (Barrows, 2020). Due to a large number of students and staff that principals are responsible for, it is very imperative that principals know the most effective leadership styles to affect the most change (Grissom et al., 2021). Servant leadership style has recently emerged in the field of education and has been shown to improve teacher job satisfaction and retention (Eva, 2019). The purpose of this paper is to discuss and examine how the use of a servant leadership style among principals affects teacher retention and satisfaction.

Review of Literature

Understanding the American School System

School and student outcomes are impacted directly and indirectly by the school system (Grissom et al., 2021). Understanding the American public school system can be complex because each state is slightly different; therefore, this review will focus on school administration on a general level. To understand the hierarchy of a local school system, it is helpful to think of it as a pyramid with various levels. Within this pyramid, the school board would be at the top (Loo, 2019). The school board is usually composed of elected members, and their role is to govern and make policies for the school district. The superintendent that is the executive head of a school district and is in charge of day-to-day operations would fall below the school board. Thirdly, the principal and assistant principal(s) fall below the superintendent. Principals differ from superintendents because they oversee an individual school within the district (Loo, 2019). In sum, the school board dictates what the superintendent does, and the superintendent dictates what principals do.

Underneath principals lies teachers (Loo, 2019). To note, other school professionals that do not fall in a specific layer of the pyramid include school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists (Bastian et al., 2019). Finally, at the bottom of the pyramid are students, and they are the most crucial piece of the school system (Shaw & Newton, 2004). It is essential to study the leadership style of school administrators because they directly impact teachers, and teachers directly affect students. Therefore, school administrators create a ripple effect throughout the school (Grissom et al., 2021). The following section will focus on school leadership and how it has changed over the years.

School Leadership

Principals are often viewed as one of the most influential leaders in schools (Grissom et al., 2021). Though teachers directly impact the students in their classroom, principals have a more significant effect on students because they impact all students. School counselors are also trained to be leaders in schools by supporting students with their academic, career, and social-emotional needs but are often overlooked in discussions on school leadership (Wingfield et al., 2010). Nevertheless, principals' effect on students comes largely from their impact on teachers, including how principals hire, retain, develop, and encourage teachers (Grissom et al., 2021). For example, in schools where principals are seen as instructional leaders and are given greater autonomy, research shows a direct correlation between teacher retention and student success (Pechota & Scott, 2020). Therefore, we know that principals have a significant impact on the school system; however, principalship has changed.

Principalship has changed over the past few decades in demographics, education, and legislature (Grissom et al., 2021). For instance, The Wallace Foundation, a philanthropy organization that has been researching school leadership for decades, found that the number of women in the role of principal is increasing and the level of experience amongst principals has fallen on average (especially in high-need schools). Also, racial and ethnic diversity in school leadership has only moved slightly despite the dramatic changes in the racial and ethnic compositions of students (Grissom et al., 2021). Additionally, federal education policies have shifted principalship practices. For instance, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandated "standardized testing in grades three through eight and once in high school" (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 6). NCLB introduced a wave of new data collection practices, accountability pressure, and changes to the dimensions of a principal's role. Another federal education policy that changed school leadership was the Race to the Top (RTT) grant program funded with a little

over \$4 billion by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). This program attempted to stimulate the economy by rewarding states that created conditions for education innovation, improving student achievements, and narrowing achievement gaps. This program was important for the role of a school principal because it reformed teacher evaluation methods (Grissom et al., 2021). Principals play a significant role in teacher evaluation, and it is one source of teacher stress in recent years (Ford et al., 2018). Teacher evaluation is just one of the many roles of a school principal.

Role of the Principal

The role of a principal varies, but research has been able to identify three overlapping domains that principals need to be successful: instruction, people, and the organization (Grissom et al., 2021). These domains can be broken into essential leadership behaviors. Grissom et al. (2021) identify the first behavior as engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers, such as teacher evaluation, instructional coaching, and establishing a data-driven instructional program to facilitate such interactions. Next, building a productive school climate is another important leadership behavior. For example, practices that encourage a productive school climate are marked by trust, efficacy, teamwork, engagement with data, organizational learning, and continuous improvement. In addition, facilitating professional learning communities (PLCs) is another leadership behavior needed to be successful. PLCs are a widely used strategy to provide teachers a productive place to collaborate weekly to improve their practice and enhance student learning (Grissom et al., 2021). Principals play a role in PLCs by creating and maintaining these communities and establishing them as a priority in the school. The last behavior is managing personnel and resources strategically. This can be seen in the

hiring process and selection of teachers and other support staff (Grissom et al., 2021). The next section of this literature review will include a discussion of the servant leadership style.

Servant Leadership Style and Theory

In 1970, an essay written by Robert Greenleaf called *The Servant as Leader* began generations of servant leaders. Particularly, the essay described what it means to be a servant leader and how their number one priority is serving others first and themselves second (Greenleaf, 1970). For instance, a servant-leader focuses mainly on the well-being and growth of the people around them. Since then, Greenleaf has published many more essays and books that expanded the knowledge on servant leadership (Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2021).

Not everyone can become a servant-leader because it takes a lot of time, effort, and abilities to fully develop as a servant-leader. Also, it is difficult to become a servant-leader due to the high levels of self-reflection and evolving nature of servant leadership (Coetzer et al., 2017). Historically, servant leadership was studied and utilized primarily in organizational and personnel psychology but has made its way into other fields such as healthcare, education, and hospitality (Eva, 2019). For instance, companies such as Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, Ritz Carlton, and Zappos have implemented servant leadership practices in their businesses (Eva, 2019). In educational settings, servant leadership can be understood by taking the hierarchical pyramid discussed above and flipping it upside down (Coetzer et al., 2017). Once this hierarchy has been flipped, students and teachers are seen as the leaders. When this occurs, principals become servant-leaders because they now serve and empower teachers to achieve their purpose or vision (Coetzer et al., 2017). Because servant leadership is applied in various fields, it is vital to understand its theory (Eva, 2019).

According to Eva et al. (2019), research on servant leadership has undergone two phases and is currently in the third phase. The first phase of research focused on the conceptual development of servant leadership. The second measurement phase focused on developing measures of servant leadership and testing relationships between servant leadership and outcomes using cross-sectional research. The third and current phase is the model development phase, where more sophisticated research designs are being conducted “to understand the antecedents, mediating mechanisms, and boundary conditions of servant leadership” (Eva et al., 2019, p. 112). This information was gathered from a comprehensive review of 285 articles on servant leadership that spans 20 years, beginning in 1998 (Eva et al., 2019). Using this data, a new definition of servant leadership is offered, and it reads,

“Servant leadership is an (1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of the follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community” (p.114).

The above definition is separated by three features that make up the essence of servant leadership: motive, mode, and mindset. First, the *motive* of servant leadership, which differentiates itself from other perspectives on leadership, is the underlying personal motivation for taking a leadership responsibility. In other words, “those who are unwilling to serve others are therefore unfit to be a servant leader” (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114). Second, the *mode* of servant leadership reflects an understanding that each follower’s needs, interests, desires, goals, strengths, and limitations are different. Based on these differences, the relationship between leader and follower will take many different forms, which also relates to the idea of stewardship. Servant-leaders have been described as stewards, which means they treat their followers as

individuals entrusted to become better versions of themselves (Eva et al., 2019). Lastly, the *mindset* of servant leadership reflects that of a trustee. Moreover, servant-leaders are focused on follower development with a concern towards the larger community and its well-being. These three features are the necessary components for understanding servant leadership (Eva et al., 2019). Not all leadership styles give as much emphasis on the development and well-being of their followers.

Another well-known leadership approach, the transformational leadership style, involves the accumulation and exercise of the power of the individual(s) at the “top of the pyramid.” For instance, transformational leaders focus on followers’ needs, similar to servant leadership, but transformational leaders’ motive to focus on needs enables them to achieve their organizational goals (i.e., a means to an end) (Eva, 2019). In contrast, servant leaders focus on the multidimensional development of followers (i.e., an end in itself). Servant leadership shares power and puts the needs of oneself second (Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2021). Servant leadership is a holistic and sustainable leadership approach that empowers followers to grow into what they are capable of becoming (Eva, 2019). Furthermore, when followers’ well-being and growth are prioritized, they become more effective and engaged in their work. Literature regarding the theory of servant leadership has been able to identify eight characteristics commonly found in servant leaders (Coetzer et al., 2017).

Characteristics of a Servant-Leader

Those eight characteristics are authenticity, humility, compassion, accountability, courage, altruism, integrity, and listening. First, authenticity is described as a genuine presentation of oneself or being true to oneself (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Next, humility is defined as accepting people for who they are and acknowledging that one can benefit from

others' accomplishments and talents. It is also related to modesty as servant leaders retreat into the background when a task is successfully completed (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Thirdly, compassion can be characterized as understanding and empathizing with others and accepting and recognizing the special and unique qualities of the people around them (Spears, 2010). The next characteristic is accountability, and it can be summarized as being responsible, being honest with one's practices, and setting clear expectations (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Courage, the next characteristic, is defined as being open to risks and standing up for what is morally right (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). The following characteristic, altruism, means having the desire to positively influence and help others by consistently serving their needs (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Further, integrity is described in the literature as being honest, fair, and having strong moral principles, and creating an ethical work climate (Melchar & Bosco, 2010). Lastly, listening can be described as a deep commitment to actively and respectfully listen. Additionally, this can be expressed by asking questions to create knowledge, allotting time for silence and reflection, and being conscious of what is unsaid (Spears, 2010). To summarize, servant-leaders are transparent, kind, responsible, and selfless (Coetzer et al., 2017). School leaders who strive to become a servant-leader in their schools have positively affected teacher job satisfaction and retention.

Teacher Satisfaction and Retention

Teacher shortages are an overwhelming crisis for K-12 schools across the nation and unfortunately, the reasons behind these phenomena are complex and unclear (García & Weiss, 2019). Current literature states that 48.7% of teachers in the U.S. have expressed some level of dissatisfaction with being a teacher in their school, and 27.4% say they think about leaving teaching at some point (García & Weiss, 2019). Teacher turnover and rates are alarmingly high

for early career, veteran, and teachers of color, and high-poverty schools (Olsen, 2019; García & Weiss, 2019; Grooms et al., 2021). Not only are teacher staffing problems an issue for students, but it also costs school districts across the country billions of dollars annually (Olsen, 2019). The most recent *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* (2013) reports that the percentage of U.S. teachers who report being “very satisfied” in their jobs has dropped 23 percentage points since 2008 to a low of 39%. Not only are U.S. teachers unsatisfied with their jobs, but stress among teachers has also increased, with over half of teachers reporting that they experience great stress daily or several times a week (Ford et al., 2018). Similarly, one in 20 teachers says that the stress and disappointments they experience with teaching are not worth it (García & Weiss, 2019). Nevertheless, research has identified factors related to teacher satisfaction and retention.

There are many factors relating to teacher satisfaction and retention, but the overarching element is the working environment, also known as school climate (García & Weiss, 2019). A school’s climate is the quality and character of school life (National School Climate Survey, 2021). School climate affects teacher satisfaction, morale, and expectations regarding staying in the profession (García & Weiss, 2019). Other factors that contribute to teacher job dissatisfaction include low wages, lack of support and leadership from administration, large class sizes, and lack of resources (Okeke & Mtyuda, 2017; Toropova et al., 2021). Additionally, increased levels of job dissatisfaction among teachers contribute to teacher attrition and low self-efficacy beliefs. Due to this and poor school climate, teacher retention will continue to hurt the American school system (García & Weiss, 2019; Okeke & Mtyuda, 2017). Research indicates that focusing on improving the relationship between principals and teachers can promote teacher job satisfaction, increasing retention rates (Ford et al., 2018). One way to achieve this is by examining principals’ leadership styles and their effect on teacher’s job satisfaction.

Discussion

In the United States, there is little research that specifically examines the relationship between servant leadership style among principals and teacher job satisfaction and retention. The most common types of literature found when searching this concept include dissertations and research studies from other countries such as Turkey, South Africa, and Nigeria. Nevertheless, servant leadership style amongst school administrator is a factor in determining teacher job satisfaction and retention (Cerit, 2009; Shaw & Newton, 2004). For instance, a principals' ability to build trust with teachers is vital for teacher retention (Guin, 2004). Similarly, when examining levels of job satisfaction and retention amongst teachers, principals' relationship and leadership style is found to be one of the influencing factors (Toropova et al., 2021; Moore, 2012, Ch et al., 2017; García & Weiss, 2019). These findings indicate that there is a relationship between servant leadership and teacher job satisfaction, but more research is needed to explore the relationship. In the meantime, training and professional development opportunities on servant leadership will help school leaders improve their relationships, empower others, and increase job satisfaction (Eva et al., 2019).

Conclusion

All in all, effective school leaders have a large amount of influence over the success of schools. Principalship has changed over the past few decades, but one thing that has not changed is the importance of establishing a supportive and empowering relationship between teachers. Principals serve as leaders in the school through how they hire, develop, and lead teachers. Servant leadership is one of many leadership styles studied in education today, and it has shown to affect teacher job satisfaction and retention positively. The majority of research in servant leadership has attempted to conceptually define and measure servant leadership. Still, it has more

recently been focused on antecedents, mediators, and other conditions necessary to be a servant leader. Research on the relationship between principals' servant leadership and teacher job satisfaction and retention is limited, but some studies have shown a significant, positive relationship between the two concepts. This research indicates the importance of further research in this area.

Author's Note

This topic was of interest to me because through my practicum and internship experiences, I had the opportunity to work with many different principals, counselors, and teachers. I remember noticing the various leadership and managerial styles at each school and taking note of how that made staff feel and act. For instance, principals who included staff in decision-making processes and listened to their feedback led to higher staff morale and satisfaction than principals who did not engage in this behavior. Due to this, I was instantly intrigued to learn more about leadership in education. In particular, I wanted to know the amount of influence principals had over job satisfaction, staff morale, school climate, and overall student success.

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