

Examining the Complexities of the Teacher-Principal Communication Relationship in a
K-12 Educational Setting

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the

Professional Communication Program

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

December, 2021

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ABSTRACT

In this study I explored communication interactions between K-12 teachers and principals. I reviewed previous studies regarding multiple related topics including school leadership, educational climate, and gender communication to identify multiple factors as influential contributors to the positive or negative communication interactions between K-12 teachers and principals and the ultimate influence of communication on teachers' commitment to their jobs and teacher retention. Results from a participant pool of 11 teachers suggest that teachers view administrative support as an important aspect of positive communication and relationship building and that while this study did not find that gender was a clear influencer of communication breakdown, this study did confirm the existence of the glass escalator described by Williams (1992) and the existence of gender-stereotypes related to leadership and the resulting gender double bind for women.

Keywords: gender, glass escalator, gender communication, educational communication, educational leadership, teachers, principals, educational climate, gender double bind

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Introduction

This paper discusses a qualitative study that investigated communication interactions between teachers and principals. Noteworthy areas of focus in the study include investigating a person's intent versus the perception of the other person involved in communication interactions, how these communications interactions succeed or fail, and emergent themes when gender was explored as an influential factor in these communication interactions. For the purposes of this study, 'teacher' was defined as a licensed professional who had taught in the classroom at least one full year prior to the study and who was fully responsible for the management and instruction in their classroom (Berry, 2019). A 'principal' was defined as the highest level of leadership in a school building who is responsible for being an "instructional leader" and for the "structuring of teachers' working conditions" (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008, p. 459). 'School administrator' was defined as any person, including principals, in leadership roles in a school district, excluding teacher leaders (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008, p. 459). The adjectives "male" and "female" were used as descriptors "when appropriate and relevant" as instructed by the AP Style Guide (American Psychological Association, 2019).

Although it has been a topic of concern recently, teacher turnover actually began to increase sharply in the 1990s, moving the issue to the forefront of educational research. Although small amounts of turnover are necessary to keep the job market healthy for recent graduates, current rates of 16%—and in some cases over 20%—create an alarming shortage that causes a strain on multiple aspects of the education system (Caver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). In investigations into why teachers leave their jobs,

researchers identified “lack of administrative support” (Caver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. 4) as a leading factor. Administrative support has been defined in multiple studies (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008; Price, 2012; Berkovich & Ori, 2018; Tarter, Bliss, & Hoy, 1989) as a principal truly listening, being helpful and demonstrating “genuine concern about the professional and personal welfare of the teachers” (Tarter et al., 1989, p. 296). Key areas of consideration from a communication perspective include the leadership and organizational communication strategies employed by a principal, to the establishment of trust through supportive communication strategies such as empathic listening.

One communication theory that has been applied to the study of communication between teachers and principals is muted group theory. Muted group theory posits that “those who do not participate equally in the generation of ideas and the subsequent encoding into communication are silenced, leaving the group who holds the power to control the expressing of ideas” (McKenzie & Halstead, 2017, p. 32). As of the 2017-2018 academic year, 54% of principals were female while 76% of all US public school teachers were female (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). Despite the increase in female principals—an increase of ten percentage points from 2000 to 2018 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020)—most teachers are still likely to be female and to work for a male principal. Despite increases in numbers, female administrators are still operating in an historically male-dominated field of school administration and have not been equal partners in the creation of the communication of the field. In other words, the gains in employment numbers have not necessarily translated into positive gains in communication interactions. Despite the fact that women

are increasingly finding themselves with a seat at the metaphorical table as principals, they are not finding that this translates to having a voice as a principal or a teacher.

A second communication theory examined in recent research is co-cultural communication theory. This theory has been used to examine the ways in which women “may inadvertently enact reactionary communication approach[es] rather than a strategic communication approach” (McKenzie & Halstead, 2017, p. 32) in workplace communication settings and has explored not only the way women are treated, but the way women react to these treatments as well. Women tend to be “interrupted, questioned, and criticized” (Helgesen, 2017, p. 3). Furthermore, they are “more apt to be ignored or simply not heard” (Helgesen, 2017, p. 3). Tannen (1995) describes this as a gender-based linguistical issue that is developed from childhood. Where men tend to “speak in ways that position themselves as one up and resisting being put in a one-down position by others,” Tannen (1995) argues that as a result of social conditioning from childhood, women tend to “speak in ways that save face for others and buffer statements that could be seen as putting others in a one-down position.” This happens in part as a result of the constant pushback women receive in communication interactions due to their gender. The theory and Tannen’s (1995) research posit that women may inadvertently retreat into a defensive mode of communication instead of employing more strategic methods of communication when they experience microaggressions. “These linguistic patterns are pervasive” in society and in work-place situations, and ultimately, as Tannen (1995) argues, impact whose voice is heard and who is given credit for ideas and communication.

Statement of the Problem

Determining and addressing the cause of the sharp increase of educator turnover is critical as this turnover is costly both in terms of the physical expense to a district—an estimated \$20,000 per teacher who leaves an urban district (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017)—and in terms of the toll it takes on the education of students who do not have consistency in educators. This study addresses the potential communication disconnect that is shaping or framing the communication between teachers and principals, a factor that has been identified as impacting teacher turnover, and examines potential strategies that could repair the disconnect. Further, this study addresses whether there is an effective middle ground between good intentions and bad perceptions that can be resolved or amended through different communication strategies between teachers and principals and, more specifically, between female teachers and male principals, because multiple studies have shown the impact of the teacher-principal relationship on teacher satisfaction and retention (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008; Price, 2012; Berkovich & Ori, 2018; Williams, 1992; Berry, 2019; Tarter et al., 1989; Devos et al., 2014) when looking at aspects such as trust building, use of organizational strategies, and leadership strategies.

Purpose of the Study

This study's purpose is the qualitative examination of communication interactions between teachers and principals. Within these interactions, also explored are the influence of gender, leadership, and organizational climate on the success or failure of the communication situation, and ultimately, their influence on the quality of the relationship and workplace environment created by principals for teachers and the feeling of support

or lack thereof as a determining factor in teacher turnover. The perceptions of a communication interaction versus intent of the communicator and the impact gender has on this particular aspect of communication is one of particular area of focus.

This review of the literature examines the complexities of communication interactions between teachers and principals by analyzing prior related studies and applicable communications theories. Specifically, the first section focuses on studies related to gender in the field of education and gender communication, and the communication theories related to this study. The second section looks at different dimensions of educational leadership related to this study. The final section examines previous research defining the building of the organizational climate of a school.

To conclude the review of the literature, the methods utilized in previous data collection that have investigated the problem of the sharp increase in teacher turnover in the United States over the last decade will be examined, and the research questions for this study will be presented.

Significance of the Study

Several studies have examined the influence that principals' leadership and communication styles have on teachers and overall school climate (Berkovich & Ori, 2018; Devos et al., 2014; Grissom et al., 2012; Jingping 2004; Price, 2012; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Few qualitative studies, however, have been conducted in which teachers have had the ability to detail their lived experience in terms of their interactions with school leadership, especially the principal, who is typically their immediate supervisor. Researchers have indicated that there is some kind of connection between teacher-principal gender differences, leadership, and organizational climate, but have been

limited by the constraints of quantitative research to explore the nature of this connection further. As explained previously, this qualitative study investigated the communication interactions between teachers and principals by asking teacher participants in the study to answer questions about their communication interactions within the teacher-principal dynamic. This was done to contribute research to a heretofore underexplored area in the research: How communication interactions between teachers and principals affect those relationships, and whether factors like gender affect communications within the relational dynamic. These findings and their implications will be discussed in detail in the Results and Discussion sections of this paper.

The next section will explore and review literature related to this study's topic, including literature that focuses on the concepts of gender, leadership, and organization climate related to teacher-principal communication interactions in the K-12 school setting.

Literature Review

The prior research presented within this review of the literature supports the purpose of this study: The need for a qualitative examination of the communication interactions between teachers and principals, with a specific focus on the influence of gender on these communication interactions. As stated previously, this study examined specifically the way teachers and principals communicate with one another and identified the ways in which those communications succeeded or failed from the perspective of participants, as well as examining what factors participants believed influenced these successes or failures in teacher-principal communication interactions.

In almost every industry, a small amount of turnover is necessary for a healthy flow of incoming workers. However, the number of teacher retirements and resignations has increased significantly over the past 20 years. Multiple aspects of the current climate of schools including “...low salaries, high turnover, too many unprepared recruits entering the classrooms” (Berry, 2019, p. 50) have pushed more and more educators out of the classroom and into other opportunities outside of the field of education. One commonly cited factor in a teacher’s decision to leave is a “lack of administrative support” (Caver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. 4), leading to a diminished relationship between the staff and administration, a lack of quality in the school climate, and an overall feeling of a lack of commitment to the school on the part of the staff members.

Even though school administration is made up of several individuals, communication interactions between a teacher and a principal (the teacher’s direct supervisor) are significant when considering issues of administrative support. Price (2012) found “principals’ relationships with their staff significantly improve teacher satisfaction, cohesion, and commitment” (p. 66). It is then important to consider what role communication plays in the relationships between principals and teachers because often these conversations between ‘supervisor’ (principal) and ‘subordinate’ (teacher) are nuanced rather than straightforward, and these conversations can make or break relationships and, consequently, teacher motivation and morale. As McKenzie and Halstead (2017) argue, “organizational contexts add important dimensions to conversations and interactions. Conversations within the context of organizations are complicated” (p. 25). It is therefore important to consider “what is said, what is not said, who listens, who is listened to, who gains power, and who does not” (McKenzie &

Halstead, 2017, p. 26) to begin to pull apart the complexities of the communication interactions between principals and teachers, particularly related to gender communication, and to make determinations about the larger impact of those interactions on education as a whole.

Gender and Communication in Education

Before any other factor is introduced into an organizational communication setting, women are already at a disadvantage due to their gender. Helgesen (2017) explains that “women are more likely to be interrupted, questioned, and criticized; they are more apt to be ignored, or simply not heard” (p. 3) in professional communication settings, especially when they are in positions of leadership. Regardless of their skill as communicators or their level of preparedness when engaging in a communication situation, their ability to articulate their thoughts or message may have little to do with how they are perceived by their audience. Helgesen (2017) asserts that women, as a result of their gender alone, “speak before audiences predisposed to skepticism, or simply not willing or able to listen” (p. 4). Women can perfect their communication skills to make their message as clear as possible but despite this, the ways in which they are understood or perceived by their audiences could be predetermined because of gender bias. The question then becomes: Do communication challenges related to gender occur because of gender bias within historically masculine professional settings, and if so, is there a reprieve from these struggles in historically female professional settings?

Gender, “the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person’s biological sex” (American Psychological Association, 2019), undoubtedly adds a layer of complexity to every work environment and communication situation, but

the field of education is a markedly unique case. K-12 Educators have historically been predominantly female, especially at the elementary level. In the 2017-2018 school year, 76% of all public-school teachers in the United States were female but women accounted for 89% of all elementary school teachers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). When women enter a male-dominated field, they generally meet a metaphorical glass ceiling of invisible barriers related to their gender. Although one might speculate that men entering a female-dominated profession would face similar resistance, this is not the case. Williams (1992) studied the experiences men reported upon entering historically female-dominated professions such as nursing, social work, and education, and compared them to experiences of women in male-dominated professions. Men entering female-dominated professions felt “that there is a *preference* for hiring men” (p. 253) and in such professions as education, many men find that their gender works to provide them opportunities and advantages in hiring and promotions (p. 256). The study goes on to assert that “in several cases, the more female-dominated the specialty, the greater the apparent preference for men” (p. 256). Williams’ (1992) research is of particular importance when considering K-12 education because female dominance in education has conditioned society to view teaching as a ‘feminine occupation.’ By extension, then, Williams’ (1992) findings could indicate that despite female dominance in education, men in this profession may have significant opportunities and advantages in hiring and promotions in the field that women do not. Hiring and promotions are not the only advantages that men experience in typically female-dominated fields such as education. Men who were interviewed for William’s (1992) study reported being “tracked into practice areas within their profession which were considered more legitimate for men” (p.

256), like administrative roles. Those roles are typically better paid and viewed as more distinguished within education. Indeed, Williams (1992) found that men in education reported they had to work to stay in their roles as educators in the classroom because they often felt they were being pushed out of these roles and into administrative roles (p. 257).

More recent studies have expanded upon Williams' work. Hultin (2003) examined the idea of the glass escalator and the glass ceiling finding that men are more likely than women to be granted "internal promotions" (p. 44), similar to Williams' finding that men were tracked into roles that were considered more prestigious for men in female-dominated fields. Hultin (2003) also reported that "men's promotion chances increase steeply with job duration" (p. 46) and that women in female-dominated professions occupations actually "show[ed] the least favorable career pattern" out of any group studied (men and women in male-dominated fields, men and women in mixed fields, and men and women in female-dominated fields) (p. 47).

Williams (1992) also found that male supervisors were quicker to form closer bonds with male subordinates than with female subordinates. In education, for example, "it was not uncommon for the male principal to informally socialize with the male staff" (p. 259) both on the job and outside of the classroom and school. The exclusion of women from these intimate professional and personal relationships contributes to muted group theory. When women are excluded from these relationships, they are not given equal opportunity to "participate in the generation of ideas and communication" (McKenzie & Halstead, 2017, p. 32) that result from the conversations that happen in these relationships and are then ultimately silenced by the group who has excluded them—and in the case of education, this, as Williams (1992) found, is primarily men.

This implies that women are often denied ‘a seat at the decision and policymaking table,’ leaving women at a disadvantage because decisions were made without their voices being heard. Hultin (2003) speaks to this by suggesting that “there is reason to believe that gender-differentiated treatment within occupations is a more appropriate explanation for women’s shortcomings in female-dominated lines of work” than a lack of ambition or a lack of ability to communicate (p. 52) The system has been set up to favor men and work against anyone who does not identify as a man.

Where women tend to find that they are discriminated against due to their gender in predominantly male fields, the men in Williams’ (1992) study reported few, if any “instances of male supervisors discriminating against them, or refusing to accept them because they were male ... Indeed, these men were much more likely to report that their male bosses discriminated against the [women] in their professions,” (Williams, 1992, p. 259). Despite this, Williams (1992) found that women are quick to embrace men entering female-dominated professions and “several men noted that their female colleagues had facilitated their careers in various ways” (p. 260). Women, however, noticed and resented “the apparent ease with which men advance within these professions, sensing that men at the higher levels receive preferential treatment which closes off advancement opportunities for women” (Williams, 1992, p. 260). Hultin (2003) confirmed this career advancement ease for men, stating that “men who work in typically female occupations have substantially better internal promotion prospects than have their similarly qualified female counterparts” (p. 52). These two studies both found that the men are quickly embraced in female-dominated professions and also find ease in promotion in these fields. In addition to the ease of obtaining promotions, men also have advantages when it

comes to wages. Budig (2002) found in addition to being more likely to be promoted (p. 274), men are also consistently paid more and have more significant wage growth than women in “jobs of any gender composition” (p. 274) meaning that even in a female-dominated field such as education, men will not only see more of a push for promotion into administrative roles, but in circumstances where salary is negotiable, men will see higher wages than their equally-educated female counterparts.

Despite the fact that women face discriminatory practices in wages, promotions, and communication interactions, they are still typically welcoming of men into fields in which they dominate. This contradictory behavior is rooted in co-cultural communication theory. In situations where women experience microaggressions, McKenzie & Halstead (2017) note:

[Women may unintentionally] enact a reactionary communication approach rather than a strategic communication approach to cope with the discriminatory" by using the “approaches of non-assertive assimilation, “remaining silent and muting themselves to assimilate into the dominate culture”; nonassertive separation, “communicate in ways that distance them from the dominate culture”; or assertive accommodation, “modify their verbal communication style as well as their appearance and take on actions more aligned with commonly valued leadership traits. (p. 34)

This theory could explain why, despite Williams’ (1992) findings that women see and resent the ease with which their male colleagues come into *their* profession and advance into positions with more clout and higher pay, women continue to encourage men to join the profession. Women recognize the importance of gender representation in

every field but struggle to combat a system that works against their gender, so they continue to act in ways that go against their best interests.

Despite the challenges faced due to their gender, women continue to be predominant among K-12 teachers and have been found to be more satisfied with their jobs and less likely to leave the profession than men. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2021), the percentage of male teachers dropped from the 1999-2000 school year to the 2017-2018 school year from 25% of teachers being male in 1999-2000 to 24% in 2017-2018. Recruitment of male teachers continues to prove to be difficult and retaining them proves to be challenging for many reasons (Grissom et al., 2012). One reason mentioned earlier is that men are often pushed into administrative roles, even against their wishes. Another reason was identified in a study that found that male teachers with female principals reported being significantly less satisfied at their jobs than male teachers with male principals (Grissom et al., 2012). In all the groups studied by Grissom et al. (2012), having a gender-incongruent principal was the most significant factor in turnover rates for male teachers. The results of Grissom et al.'s (2012) study suggest that "workers [in general] are more satisfied when they are supervised by a manager of the same gender...it suggests that teachers who are gender congruent with their principals are marginally more satisfied in their jobs than teachers who are not congruent" (Grissom et al., 2012, p. 661). Gender congruence notwithstanding, Grissom et al. (2012) found that male teachers with female principals were the teachers with much higher predicted turnover rates.

Grissom et al.'s (2012) study did not delve into the possible reasons for these results, so considering relationships, leadership styles, and communication variations

between genders could help better explain why these particular results exist.

Additionally, the results of Grissom et al.'s (2012) study found that "teachers, on average, prefer working for male principals," which is "consistent with the body of theoretical work in gender and management that suggests that employees tend to favor characteristically 'masculine' leadership styles" (Grissom et al., 2012, p. 666). Again, examining communication interactions and variations between men and women could help explain why this is the case.

Leadership in Education

The leadership and administration of any organization can make or break morale and ultimately the entire climate of that organization. In an educational setting, although teachers are responsible for the management of their individual classrooms and students, the principals work closely with teachers on a daily basis, more so at times than in other organizational settings. Even though there may be one or more assistant principals in a building, the principal is still the immediate supervisor for the teachers in that building, and research suggests that his or her leadership is a key factor in the teachers' commitment to their school (Devos et al., 2014). Teachers are looking for principals who share similar goals and traits, are trustworthy, and are involved in the school. Devos et al.'s (2014) research implies that the perception teachers have "concerning the leadership of the principal" does impact "their commitment to the school" (p. 222), which in turn affects morale, productivity, quality of education, and ultimately, staff turnover rates. Lack of administrative support is one of the areas identified as an influencing factor by teachers leaving schools or leaving the profession altogether. It is clear that leadership must reflect a clear vision for the school, a clear direction for the staff, and provide

support for teachers to help lower teacher turnover rates (Devos et al., 2014). The impact of relationship building, empathic listening and emotional support, and leadership behavior within the leadership domain, will be explored in detail, next.

Relationship Building

Jingping (2004) argues:

The personal relationship between a principal and a teacher is another factor which influences teacher commitment. A good relationship increases teacher enjoyment and heightens the teacher's desire to make an extra effort and to remain a part of the school team, while a negative one decreases the teacher's commitment to school (p. 28).

The value of building strong, appropriate relationships between administration (principals, etc.) and staff (teachers, etc.) is a critical part of the cultivation of a positive school climate. When principals can build such relationships and therefore cultivate these positive spaces built on mutual trust and respect, "serious school improvement and success can occur" (Price, 2012, p. 42).

Research indicates that the relationships the principal builds with their staff become the foundation of the school's climate, for good or for bad. Jingping (2004), in interviews with 12 teachers about the influence of teacher-perceived leadership styles of principals on the teachers' commitment to their work, found that in all 12 cases, the teachers reported either positive or negative experiences with their principals. The researcher found "no occurrences of neutral relationships" (p. 25), meaning that however principals gained or lost favor with their staff members was some kind of "intrinsic part of the perception of the leadership styles" (p. 25) of those principals. Jingping (2004)

further suggests that understanding “the relationship between the follower and the leader is an essential element in the understanding of the concept of leadership” (p. 25).

This is especially true when studying the role communication plays in establishing these relationships to determine what works, what does not work, and why. Jingping (2004) mentions the importance of perception, and that is a point that cannot be overlooked in terms of communication interactions. A principal may intend to lead in a certain way through actions and words, but the manner in which they are perceived by staff is what ends up mattering the most. Jingping (2004) explains that if a teacher finds the principal’s behavior, values, and motives to be agreeable and if the teacher sees the principal as someone who is genuine and someone the teacher can understand and relate to, the teacher will have a more positive relationship with that principal. When building relationships, principals must acknowledge that intent matters a great deal, especially if the teachers perceive messages and actions from the principal in a completely different way than the principal intended. Ultimately, if a teacher perceives their views and motives to align with that of the principal, there is a high likelihood that the teacher is going to have a stronger relationship with the principal and will in turn be more motivated to work well with that principal.

Empathic Listening and Emotional Support

A principal’s ability to emotionally support teachers is a key leadership skill. Berkovich and Ori (2018) suggest that principals need to utilize a “repertoire of supportive communication strategies” (p. 874), but identify empathic listening as being a communication strategy most closely tied to strong emotional support. Empathic listening is the process of listening patiently, without judgment, to what the other person says to

understand what he or she is literally saying, what emotions are being expressed, and what he or she is not saying as well (Berkovich & Ori, 2018). Empathic listening provides the speaker with the chance to fully express their concerns or thoughts and know that they have been heard because the listener repeats back paraphrased versions of what was said, and then tries to develop a possible solution as a result of the conversation.

According to Berkovich et al. (2018):

Empathic listening [a structured listening and questioning technique] is said to promote reflective processing because the individual being supported is proactive in the interpretation of the message. By contrast, reframing messages may activate basic processing, as principals offer teachers a complete alternative interpretation of events, which they can accept or reject in a less conscious, reflex-like manner. (p. 874)

In other words, empathic listening not only helps the teacher feel heard by the principal, but it also presents the principal with a method of problem-solving that involves minimal confrontation, keeping what could potentially be a confrontational or volatile situation from becoming such. When people feel heard and as if their concerns are addressed in a meaningful way, they are going to feel more supported and will be more satisfied in their workplace. In one of the most frequently cited studies about organizational trust in schools, Tarter et al. (1989) argue that “principals who are helpful and genuinely concerned about the professional and personal welfare of their teachers are most likely to have the trust of their teachers” (p. 305). The idea of trust-building will be discussed further later but for this section, it is included conceptually because of its relationship to the idea that showing an authentic investment in staff members is a crucial

part of leadership, and trust is often built through empathic listening and emotional support.

Leadership Behavior

Principals are in a unique (and in some ways unfair) situation as educational administrators. They are the direct supervisors for their teaching staff and bear the responsibility of developing a pleasant and productive workplace environment, while also balancing all their responsibilities to other stakeholders like students and parents. However, principals hold little authority when it comes to staff compliance of district mandates (Price, 2012). Principals are authority figures but must answer to those above them who can easily override their decisions, so it can be challenging to serve as a leader when one's authority can be called into question at any moment.

Multiple studies point to the influence a principal's leadership has on teachers and their instruction in the classroom (Wahlstrom et al., 2008; Berkovich et al., 2018; Jingping, 2004; Devos et al., 2014; Tarter et al., 1989). In fact, Tarter et al. (1989) assert that the leadership behaviors of a principal are one of the strongest predictors of teachers' level of trust in their administrators (p. 305). Earlier it was stated that teachers are more likely to form a relationship with a principal if the teacher feels they have a belief set that aligns with that of the principal. It is also important to note that "leadership actions such as providing individual support and encouragement, intellectual stimulation, and excellent modeling can change elements of the teachers' values and understanding, which result in corresponding changes in teacher commitment" (Jingping, 2004, p. 27). This research suggests that even if the teacher and principal are not necessarily congruent in their motivation and values, there are ways that a principal can try to change the way the

teacher views them or understands them to help build a relationship of mutual understanding.

Understanding how to employ these leadership strategies through both actions and speech takes a savvy leader who is committed to this work. When a principal employs these leadership techniques to build authentic relationships with teachers, it is referred to as open principal behavior (Tarter et al., 1989, p. 297). In this model, “open organizational behavior is characterized by supportive and nondirective principal behavior and engaged and unfrustrated teacher behavior” (p. 296). In this environment, the principal “creates a work environment that is supportive and helpful (high supportiveness), encourages teacher initiative (low directiveness), and frees teachers from administrative trivia (low frustration) so that they can focus on the teaching-learning task” (p. 296). This is the ultimate work environment for both principals and teachers—where the principal serves as a facilitator, rather than a traditional boss, and creates an environment where teachers are supported and have room to work freely without a great deal of oversight and micromanagement. The hope is that when principals utilize this model of open organizational behavior that teachers will replicate this in their relationships and interactions with their students, their colleagues, and their principal.

Wahlstrom et al. (2008) found that principals at all levels have a direct and significant impact on instruction; however, “different behaviors may be more important in one setting than the other” (p. 479), meaning where elementary schools may need to focus on a particular kind of instruction, high school staff may need to focus on shared leadership to be successful. Several studies have pointed to the importance of shared leadership or the successful distribution of leadership tasks amongst the staff. Devos et al.

(2014) and Driscoll (1978) make several claims about the importance of distributed leadership, stating that their research shows distributed leadership--meaning the principal delegates responsibility and leadership roles to staff--is “strongly related to teachers’ commitment to the schools” (Devos et al., 2014, p. 225), because teachers feel both a “specific satisfaction with participation in the decision-making process” (Driscoll, 1978, p. 50). The success of the organization is directly related to “the extent to which the leadership team [comprised of teachers] share information, collaborate, and make decisions together” (Devos et al., 2014, p. 224). The success or failure of this distribution of leadership lies in the principal’s ability to facilitate these groupings and the distribution of the leadership tasks (Devos et al., 2014). Just as when teachers feel listened to and supported when principals utilize empathic listening, they feel listened to and supported when they are made to be an integral part of the decision-making process and when they have some control in the leadership process.

It is not just about teachers having a say in the leadership process, however. Logistically, principals are finding it harder to meet all that is required of them and teachers who have felt left out of these conversations for far too long are happy to step forward and take on these new challenges and roles (Driscoll, 1978). Berry (2019) found that teachers “improve their practice at greater rates when they work in schools with better quality collaboration” (p. 50), so principals who embrace these opportunities for authentic collaboration and shared leadership will experience benefits in multiple areas of the school climate.

Organizational Climate in Education

In a school setting, the organizational climate is defined as the teachers' "perceptions of the work environment of the school" (Tarter et al., 1989, p. 296), and other characteristics that make one school unique from another. The organizational climate is the personality of the school that sets the tone for everything that occurs in the building. This school climate, however, extends beyond teachers to students and their parents, and therefore to the entire school community. Driscoll (1978) explained that people who are satisfied with an organization are more likely to willingly participate in that organization in a meaningful way. In the case of schools, the development of trust is a key factor in satisfaction among participants in the organizational climate. Consequently, although actively participating in decision-making is an important factor in an employee's overall satisfaction with an organization, organizational trust is a stronger predictor of an employee's satisfaction with the organization.

Trust development is multifaceted. The emotional bonds developed between principals and teachers are an important part of trust development and Price (2012) found that "individual relationships embedded in trust are strongly linked to the positive climate outcomes of higher job satisfaction, cohesion, and commitment to the organization" (p. 42-43). Focusing only on these relationships, however, does not paint the full picture of trust development. Driscoll (1978) points to organizational trust being a product of the teachers' "assessment of the particular decision-making system" (p. 54), which considers the entire system created by leadership. Along with positive leadership strategies, trust can also be established by building a professional community that "includes shared values, a common focus on student learning, collaboration in the development of

curriculum and instruction, the sharing of practices, and reflective dialogue” (Wahlstrom et al., 2008, p. 463). Therefore, staff members like teachers will feel more committed to an organization that they feel is invested in them as professionals and as individuals. Principals who can create this organizational climate of trust can create real change in their school and in the school community (Price, 2012).

Summary

As the research presented herein shows, there are multiple layers of complexity regarding communication interactions between teachers and principals in the K-12 environment worth examining. As teacher turnover increases leading to teacher shortages, causes of the shortages and solutions to these problems must be identified. Previous research identified lack of administrative support as a key factor in teachers’ decisions to leave a district or to leave the profession altogether. This, despite efforts at relationship-building and trust-building to establish a solid organizational climate. Sometimes a principal’s intent and a teacher’s perception of that intent are not always congruent. Therefore, the relationship between these factors and the impact they have on communication interactions between teachers and principals, particularly when the gender of the two people within the interaction is incongruent, is worthy of further study.

Research Questions

As explained in the research above, multiple factors influence a teacher’s perception of communication interactions with their principal. Due to this, there are often misunderstandings or discrepancies between the principal’s intent and the teacher’s perception in a communication interaction. Given this, this study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: When examining participants' descriptions of communication interactions between teachers and principals, what themes emerge from the data that represent

- a. 'positive' interactions, and
- b. 'negative' interactions?

RQ2: When examining participants' descriptions of communication interactions between teachers and principals, does gender have an impact or influence on communication interactions between teachers and principals when

- a. the gender roles are congruent (e.g., female teacher/female principal and male teacher/male principal) and
- b. the gender roles are not congruent (e.g., female teacher/male principal, male teacher/female principal)?

The review of the literature examined previous research in three key areas related to the complexities of communication interactions between teachers and principals. The areas of gender, leadership, and organizational climate in education are crucial components to consider when examining teacher-principal communication interactions. The literature presented supports the need to examine how these three areas impact these communication interactions. The next section will cover the study's method.

Method

This qualitative study examined the complexity of communication interactions between teachers and principals in K-12 educational settings. In particular, the study investigated 1) whether common themes emerged from the data that represented 'positive' or 'negative' interactions between teachers and principals, and 2) whether gender impacts or influences communication interactions in gender-congruent and

gender-incongruent dyads in teacher-principal communication interactions. The adjectives “male” and “female” were used to descriptors “when appropriate and relevant” as instructed by the AP Style Guide to describe gender. Additionally, participants were asked for their gender-identification and were referred to by their chosen identification (American Psychological Association, 2019).

To respond to the study’s research questions, as put forth in the Literature Review section in this paper, qualitative data was collected from participants addressing their recounting of the intent behind principals’ messages, teachers’ perception of those messages, and the complex factors that influence intent versus perception, as these elements relate to ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ interactions, with a secondary focus on the influence of congruent and incongruent gender roles on teacher-principal communication interactions.

Data for the study was collected by conducting interviews with male and female K-12 teachers and asking them questions related to communication interactions with their principals. Collected data were then analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis methods to respond to the study’s research questions. Prior research suggests that although many studies rely on quantitative research methodology to collect data about feelings of satisfaction in school climates and with leadership,

Qualitative methods are the best approach to understanding how leadership is defined and implemented, for studying how leaders are shaped by their backgrounds and beliefs, and to uncover characteristics of leaderships that are difficult to detect through surveys and quantitative methods (Jingping, 2004, p. 19).

Therefore, I determined that using qualitative methodology as this study's research approach would allow me to really capture the lived experience of participants' communication interactions within the teacher-principal dyad, in both congruent and incongruent gender pairings during these interactions, and to begin to understand the nuances of how participants described 'positive' versus 'negative' communication interactions within the teacher-principal dyad.

This section contains information about the study's participants, the methodological procedure for the study, the instrumentation used for data collection and the qualitative approach to data analysis. The methods used in this study are supported by comparable studies within this area of research by Jingping (2004) and Williams (1992).

Sample

I used the non-probability sampling methods of convenience and snowball sampling to recruit 11 teachers who had taught at least one full year prior to being interviewed. I posted a request to social media (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter), asking for recommendations for participants. I also asked friends who are teachers and school administrators for recommendations for participants. Because I was particularly interested in the difference in perspectives based on gender congruence and incongruence of teacher and principal pairings, I endeavored to have an equitable, yet representative, mix of male and female teachers (Curnalia et al., 2017). I also planned to provide an equitable representation of male and female principals, however, I contacted 25 principals and was unable to recruit any participants. Therefore, participants in this study are limited to teachers only.

Out of the 11 teachers interviewed, all of them had at least five years of previous teaching experience. Three of the teachers had spent their careers in one district. The teacher participants represented a variety of content areas and grade levels in terms of their teaching assignments, with one identifying as an elementary teacher, six identifying as middle school teachers, and the remaining four as high school teachers. Participants' teaching content areas include English, music, social studies, special education, and science. Three of the participants identified as cisgender men (male presenting), one participant identified as a transgender woman (female presenting), and seven identified as cisgender women (female presenting). All 11 participants were white. Seven participants were teachers in Ohio, two were in Texas, one in Utah, and one in Oklahoma.

Procedure

Once research participants were identified and confirmed, I scheduled interviews with participants via email and interviews were conducted virtually via Webex and Zoom. Prior to each interview, I emailed all confirmed participants the study's Informed Consent Form (see Appendix A) and asked them to sign and return the form to me, agreeing to a) participate in the study, and b) have their participation recorded for the purposes of accuracy in transcription.

Instrumentation

Data were collected from semi-structured interviews conducted with the study's participants. Interviews were conducted and recorded via Webex and Zoom due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant scheduling concerns of participants. In addition to the planned semi-structured interview questions in the original interview questionnaire (see Appendix B), more open-ended questions and probing questions were

used during each interview based on participants' responses to gather accurate self-reporting data from participants.

The research instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview questionnaire (see Appendix B). The questionnaire begins with demographic questions. Participants were asked a series of questions, beginning with general questions about their relationship with school administrators. The questions then became more specific to focus on the participant's current principal and focus on areas such as gender communication, support, school climate, and teacher retention (Grissom et al., 2012; Wahlstrom et al., 2008). A separate questionnaire was created for potential principal participants but was not utilized due to a lack of principal participants in this study. These semi-structured interviews align with the work of Jingping's (2004) qualitative approach to studying relationships between teachers and principals to give participants an opportunity to fully explain their lived experiences regarding their communication interactions. Again, although I intended to provide a clear picture of both the experiences of teacher and principals, I was unable to recruit principal participants so data collected and analyzed in this study are limited to the data gathered from teacher participants.

All participants were asked their permission to be recorded via the Informed Consent Form sent to them via email prior to conducting the interview. I confirmed the consent of each participant to record their interviews in Webex or Zoom on the record prior to beginning the interview. Webex and Zoom video recordings were used for the purpose of recording participants' verbal and non-verbal communications and the transcription feature was used to assist in transcribing the entire interview after it concluded so that transcripts could be used in addition to researcher notes taken during

the interview to ensure accuracy in data collection. Where necessary, follow-up questions were asked of some participants to clarify or expand upon their thoughts and where appropriate, those follow-up questions were labeled and recorded within each interview. Data were recorded in a codebook by participant response and then recorded by question for coding. The triangulation of these accuracy affirming methods improves the overall trustworthiness of the reporting of analysis results in the study (Curnalia et al., 2017).

Analysis

I analyzed the collected data using thematic qualitative analysis methods. Thematic qualitative analysis allowed the research to discover and identify patterns across the lived experience reported by the participants related to their communications interactions in their school setting and is recommended for situations where there is “not an existing theory or framework to guide the analysis” (Curnalia et al., 2017). Most of the research in this area of study is quantitative, so I used data analysis methods similar to those used by Jingping (2004) in my qualitative study. I also looked for patterns in the data related to relevant theories such as co-cultural theory and muted group theory (McKenzie & Halstead, 2017). I identified common themes of Organizational Climate in Education, Leadership and Communication Related to Gender, and Motivating Factors for Job Commitment throughout the data and developed categories based on those commonalities.

The [codebook](#) contains the entire thematic analysis process of collected data. In total, I completed 11 interviews that were recorded via Cisco WebEx and Zoom. Participant responses were transcribed and then recorded in transcript sheets by question in an Excel file. I determined that each response would serve as a unit of analysis. I then

coded the data to reflect keywords, phrases, thoughts, and direct quotations as related to the categories identified in the research question. This process of conducting thematic analysis is in line with guidance provided in Curnalia et al. (2017).

Results

An analysis of the data collected from 11 participant interviews revealed several themes about participants' lived experiences and their feelings regarding their communication with their principals. Participants shared experiences relating to issues such as trust, relationship building, traits of teachers and principals, and positive and negative communications with principals. Presented next is the study's Analysis Report.

Analysis Report

This report is organized into four sections. The first three sections represent the study's three emergent themes following analysis: Organizational Climate in Education, Leadership and Communication Related to Gender, and Motivating Factors for Job Commitment. The final section in the report listed before the conclusion responds to the study's research questions.

Organizational Climate in Education

The theme of organizational climate includes participants' perceptions of their relationships with administration in general, feelings of support from the principal, and the trust that is or is not built through this support or lack thereof. The way that teacher participants perceive their relationships with and the trust they have in their principals are built through their communications with their principals, and these perceived (trust) relationships have a significant influence on the work environment/climate in a school.

This theme emerged during data analysis and emblemizes participants' recounting of both positive and negative communications interactions with their principals.

In terms of their overall relationship with school administrators, including assistant principals, principals, and superintendents, most participants expressed they had good experiences in this area in general throughout their careers. Common descriptors like *collaborative, open, professional, and mutually respectful* were used by both men and women participants in their responses. One participant said that his most recent administrators have begun working in “a leadership style that it's like a collaborative style.” Another participant explained that her relationship with administrators is generally “professional in the sense of recognizing that both parties have informed backgrounds and are coming from a, a place of expertise, whether it's in the classroom or outside of the classroom.” Although most participants noted positive relationships with their school administrators, three participants stated that they attempt to “fly under the radar” and keep their thoughts and opinions to themselves in communication interactions with school administrators. Another participant noted that despite having some positive relationships with school administrators in the past, her current situation was particularly contentious where “none of our [the teachers'] ideas or opinions are valued [by school administrators]”.

When looking specifically at the relationship between teachers and their principal, four participants identified their overall relationships with their most recent principals as negative. Of these, all four participants were women, two of whom had male principals and two of whom had female principals. These participants cited negative communication as a major contributing factor to these overall negative relationships; described a lack of

communication with their principals ‘because the principals refused to listen,’ ‘the principals ushered in change without feedback,’ or that participants had a complete lack of trust in their principals. One participant said of her principal (who is a man), that there is a complete communication disconnect between them: “There's no relationship there, there's no sense of trust. I don't believe in his ability to make good decisions for the students of our district.” Of the seven participants who reported a good or positive relationship, most described feelings of support and of being listened to by their principals. Specifically, participants described a collaborative, open communication relationship between themselves and their principals that although not perfect, created a positive working environment for participants.

Administrative support and the trust (or lack thereof) resulting from the level of support participants receive from their principals was reflected clearly in participants’ responses. When participants were asked what a principal had to do to gain a teacher’s trust, their responses were closely related to participant responses given when they were asked what made them feel heard and supported by their principals. Participants most frequently cited ‘genuine listening’ as the most important thing a principal could do to make a teacher feel supported and to gain a teacher’s trust. Participants stated that aside from non-verbal indicators that a principal is willing to have open communication with a teacher, that a principal’s actions, such as including teachers in the decision-making process and then following through on these decisions after conversations with teachers, was the clearest indicator to participants of genuine listening by principals. Many responses echoed the sentiments of one participant:

I think asking how [a principal] can help is a huge way to gain my trust...just being there for [me] and saying, ‘Hey, my door’s open. Let me know if you need help with anything or let me know how I can help with this.’

Additionally, participants cited being treated like a professional in their field and having the support of the principal when challenges were presented from students, parents, or the community as crucial factors toward establishing overall feelings of trust in receiving administrative support from principals.

These findings relate to the research problem under investigation in this study by suggesting that teachers have a desire to feel valued as professionals in their schools and although they are not ‘equals’ with school administrators in terms of their roles, they nonetheless want to be treated by school administrators as the professionals they are. Perhaps principals do not realize that what they view as having adequate communications with teachers to run a school on a daily basis do not suffice in providing teachers with the kind of supportive relationships teachers need to trust that their principals have the best interests of all school staff and students in mind.

Leadership and Communication Related to Gender

The theme of Leadership and Communication Related to Gender represents the feedback participants gave regarding participants’ thoughts on the ways the gender of their principals impacted their leadership styles, their overall communication with teachers, and the ways that teachers communicate with their principals based on the principal’s gender, and their thoughts on the way that gender congruence affects communication between participants and their principals. Participant discussions on these

elements include examples of both positive and negative communication interactions between participants and their principals.

Out of the 11 participants, seven of them noted at least one negative interaction with a principal while the other four stated that they, as one participant succinctly stated, have had relatively “positive and professional” communication interactions with their principals, regardless of the gender of the principal or the participant. One participant even noted that his principal will come in during a class and offer teachers a “20 - 30-minute break to go get coffee or run copies.” All four participants who described positive interactions with their principals also described their principals as approachable and professional.

In terms of the negative communication interactions with principals described by participants, several participants pointed to principals’ lack of follow-through after the conclusion of a conversation with a teacher as a common occurrence related to their negative communication interactions. Another commonly stated issue related to negative communication interactions was principals failing to relay important information to teachers, or principals’ lack of knowledge of critical information about what was happening in the schools. One participant noted that her principal is active in the community but does not create an environment at the school where “all of our students and our building necessarily feel like it's a safe in a welcoming place.” This participant related that they believe this is due to their principal catering to parents and questioning what happens in a teacher’s classroom where students do feel welcome and safe. Another participant described having been attacked by a student who was not in an appropriate

classroom setting for his needs and how their principal was completely unaware of this student's violent tendencies, despite other teachers knowing about it.

When participants were asked what role they believe gender plays in positive and negative communication interactions between themselves and principals and in communications in general, many of the participants' characterizations of principals were negative despite positive responses about their principals provided earlier in the interviews. Specifically, male and female participants alike were harsh when it came to their characterization of female principals. Several participants referred to female principals using negative terms and phrases such as *cold*, *unapproachable*, *grumpy*, *micromanager*, and *controlled*, or were viewed negatively by female participants for talking about their families or their roles as mothers. However, two female participants expressed the view that female principals are easier to work with and that their leadership styles focus more on the whole child rather than "just money and test scores." A third participant noted that although she had mixed experiences with women as her principals, that one female principal did foster the participant's growth and learning, and encouraged the participant to complete a master's degree.

When describing men as principals, several stereotypes were mentioned by both male and female participants. Several female participants noted that when they have had men as principals, the male principals made friends with other men or other male coaches, showing an indifference to female coaches. One participant commented that there seems to be a "coach to principal pipeline," which she said has had a negative impact of gaining quality administrators. The same participant noted that a male principal will generally send text messages to the men on the teaching staff to provide them with

notifications and information about the building or the district, while the female teachers will maybe receive an email from the male principal, if anything, as “an afterthought.”

Male participants, however, described their communications with male principals as relatively positive, noting only what they considered to be small flaws in communication in their responses, stating things like ‘lack of follow-through’ or ‘issuing blanket statements in email rather than addressing individual staff members’ as examples. The transgender female participant commented that when she came out as transgender, she was very supported by her administration, despite the school’s location in a relatively conservative district. The participant noted that although she now identifies as a woman, she has not noticed a difference in how the principal communicates with her when she compares her current experience to her previous experiences when she identified as a man.

Given the above, it appears that regardless of gender congruence in teacher-principal dyads, both male and female participants were harsher on female principals than male principals, and that flaws in the communication of male principals noted by participants were viewed as less problematic by both male and female participants than when participants noted those same flaws in women. Interestingly, both male and female participants revealed gender-based stereotypes attributed to both male and female principals in their responses, but did not necessarily recognize these things as ‘gender stereotypical.’ For example, one participant, in response to being asked what role they believe gender plays in positive and negative communication interactions between themselves and principals, said “It seems like personality impacts communication relationships more than gender.” Based on the harsher stereotyping characteristics

applied to female principals provided by male and female participants, it is fair to surmise that as more women become principals, they will still need to navigate harsher treatment from all teachers based on their gender. However, participant responses also revealed a shift in thinking about principals in general, as some participants stated they look more toward the leadership traits they want to see in a principal than the gender of the principal when considering effectiveness of a principal.

Motivating Factors for Job Commitment

The theme of Motivating Factors for Job Commitment relates to findings analyzed from responses to questions asked of participants about what motivates them to stay in their current positions. Participants were also asked to talk about reasons why they left previous teaching positions, and what was most influential in keeping them in their current positions.

Five of the participants, when asked what was most influential in their commitment to their school, said their students and the relationship with those students ranked at the top of the influences. Other important influences participants provided were the treatment they received from their principal including feeling valued and being given autonomy and feeling happiness and satisfaction at their jobs on a daily basis. When asked to provide reasons participants might possibly consider leaving their current positions, or when asked to provide reasons they left positions prior to their current positions, six of the participants described having left a previous position due to a toxic work environment or had considered leaving their current positions due to disliking the current principal. One participant noted that she left a previous position because a principal threatened her with a knife and although he lost his job because of this, the

situation created a hostile environment between the participant and other administrators. Another participant stated she left a position in the middle of the year due to a lack of COVID-19 safety protocols at her school and because a school administrator laughed in her face when she expressed concerns about the lack of safety protocols.

In terms of comparing findings related to this theme to the study's research problem, it is fair to state that the study's participants felt freedom to leave a position (previous or current) when a work environment became too toxic for them to stay. Specifically, participants stated they are looking for their basic needs to be met in their workplaces. Some participants did describe being stuck in a current position because of salary restrictions – consequently, it is fair to assume that some teacher turnover is prevented by the teacher salary scale. In many states, teachers receive credit for each year of teaching service and receive their raises based on their years of experience. The problem in most states is that schools are only required to recognize up to 5-10 years of service, so once a teacher surpasses the ten-year mark, they are not guaranteed a pay that reflects more than those ten years of service. Many teachers are forced to stay in a school even if they are unhappy because they would take a significant pay cut if they left.

Responding to the Research Questions

The research questions posed in this study asked:

RQ1: When examining participants' descriptions of communication interactions between teachers and principals, what themes emerge from the data that represent

- a. 'positive' interactions, and
- b. 'negative' interactions?

RQ2: When examining participants' descriptions of communication interactions between teachers and principals, does gender have an impact or influence on communication interactions between teachers and principals when

- a. the gender roles are congruent (e.g., female teacher/female principal and male teacher/male principal) and
- b. the gender roles are not congruent (e.g., female teacher/male principal, male teacher/female principal)?

Based on the themes that emerged from the data analysis process, specifically: Organizational Climate, Leadership and Communication Related to Gender, and Motivating Factors for Job Commitment, study findings suggest that the themes that emerged from positive and negative communication interactions are interrelated and speak to larger issues in the development of trust and the overall school climate. Teacher participants noted several aspects of communication interactions with their principals that clearly influenced their perception of their school climate and their ability to trust their principals. The research also suggests that congruency or incongruency of gender does not have a significant impact or influence on participants' descriptions of communication interactions between teachers and principals. Specific responses to each of the study's research questions are next.

Responding to Research Question 1

When examining participants' descriptions of communication interactions between teachers and principals; in terms of positive and negative communication interactions, participants' characterizations of the interactions were based primarily on how well the participants perceived their principals to be communicating with them.

Criteria for participants making these judgements included the ability to listen and respond (both appropriately and in a timely fashion), approachability, valuing of teacher, and respect for teacher, both as a human and as a professional. Participants also judged negative interactions primarily by these characteristics. One common theme that came out of the responses was that if teachers do not feel valued as professionals and people, and if principals have not tried to build genuine relationships with their teachers, then the communication interactions between teachers and principals are more likely to be viewed as negative by participants.

Responding to Research Question 2

When looking at the impact or influence of gender on communication interactions between teachers and principals, the congruency or incongruency of the gender of the teacher and the principal in a communication interaction does not seem to have an impact or influence on the participant's description of the teacher-principal communication relationship. Although two female participants described feeling more comfortable talking to a female principal, and one male participant did describe a close relationship with his male principal, overall, it did not appear that participants judged their ability to communicate effectively with their principals based on the gender of either party. Interestingly, both male and female participants were harsher when discussing female principals and seemed to view the flaws of more principals as more significant and negative than when discussing the same flaws in a male principal. For example, one female participant talked about how male principals seem to be "more patriarchal" and "very much about being in charge," but that did not seem to be presented as a negative from this participant's perspective. However, several male and female participants

described female principals who tried to be in charge as “micromanagers” who were “grumpy” and “unapproachable.”

The summary and implications of these findings is discussed in the Discussion section. Following the discussion of the findings is a discussion of the limitations of the study and directions for future research.

Discussion

The following section contains a summary of the research study and its findings, an examination of the study’s limitations, and a discussion about directions for future research on communication interactions in the K-12 school setting.

Summary

Findings from this research study show that evidence exists to support the conclusion that there is a breakdown in communication between teachers and principals. Although it is unclear if this is caused by a disconnect between intent and perception on the part of one or both parties or a genuine lack of effective communication skills on the part of teachers or principals, this study’s findings do highlight the characteristics of effective communication and the outcomes teacher participants are looking for in their principals, and what they believe does and does not work when it comes to fostering positive communication interactions between both parties. When asked specifically about their relationships with their principals and positive and negative communication interactions with those principals, most participants cited a need to feel heard and valued as key in feeling that their communication interactions with their principals were successful or ‘positive.’ Most participants also stated that having an open, honest, and collaborative communication policy and relationship with their principals where their

opinions were heard and acted upon by their principals was key to successful or positive communication interactions between the parties. This aligns with previous research from Wahlstrom et al. (2008), who stated that “Professional community is more than just support; it includes shared values, a common focus on student learning, collaboration in the development of curriculum and instruction, the sharing of practices, and reflective dialogue” (p. 463). Teachers feel a sense of mutual respect and value when their voices are heard and when their opinions do influence decisions that are made in the school.

Although several participants noted they understood their priorities were not the same as those of their principals all the time, one participant characterized her relationship with her principal as “frustrating” and said that due to her principal’s complete disregard of teacher input, “There's no relationship there, there's no sense of trust. I don't believe in his ability to make good decisions for the students of our district.” This appears to be an extreme case when compared to the responses of other participants but is telling, as it provides insight into how teachers may feel when they believe their voices are never heard by school administrators. Again, this sentiment is supported in previous research by Price (2012), who found that “in workplace organizational studies, individual relationships embedded in trust are strongly linked to the positive climate outcomes of higher job satisfaction, cohesion, and commitment to the organization” (pp. 42-3). When genuine relationships are formed and trust is built between teachers and principals, all stakeholders can move forward in a positive direction, but when these relationships are not genuine or when they are not formed and trust is not built between teachers and principals, the entire relationship structure can cave in.

In terms of the perceived impact or influence of gender on communication interactions between teachers and principals by participants, study findings did not reveal a clear connection between gender and communication interactions from the perspective of participants, but there were some interesting findings in the area of gender and participant perceptions overall. First, previous research by Grissom et al. (2012) found that "teachers, on average, prefer working for male principals...this finding is consistent with the body of theoretical work in gender and management that suggests that employees tend to favor characteristically 'masculine' leadership styles" (p. 666). Although no participant specifically stated that he or she preferred to work for a male principal, and only two female participants mentioned that they preferred a woman as their principal, participants generally viewed female principals more negatively in the role than male principals who exhibited comparable traits and flaws. These findings do align with Grissom et al.'s (2012) finding that all teachers tend to prefer male principals. Ryan and Haslam (2007) suggest this is a result of "perceived incompatibility between beliefs about what it means to be a good leader and what it means to be a good female" (p. 550). In other words, the stereotype that associates leadership with men is a deeply engrained misogynistic belief shared by men and women in society (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Consequently, even if study findings showed no clear impact or influence on communication interactions between teachers and principals based on gender congruence or incongruence within those interactions, findings did reveal that most participants do in fact tend to prefer stereotypically "masculine" styles of leadership - but only from male principals.

The preference for a male administrator and the negative views of female principals expressed by both male and female teacher participants in this study also aligns with previous research from Visser (2002) and Weiner & Bruton (2016). When studying the existence and degree of prototypes of gender, “culturally and socially determined gender perceptions [that are] reflected in gender roles, which in turn reinforce communally and unconsciously held perceptions of gender” (Visser, 2002, p. 529), Visser (2002) found the “communally held conceptions of gender, according to which *family-oriented* is particularly feminine and *career-oriented* is particularly—even prototypically—masculine” (p. 537), meaning that despite gains for women in professional careers, they are still faced with a gender double bind situation in the workplace. In a gender double bind, women are “punished for breaking gender stereotypes and taking on a more masculine leadership orientation or by failing to do so and the enacting leadership in ways misaligned with expectations” (Weiner & Burton, 2016, p. 340). This double bind was reflected in this study’s findings when teacher participants expressed disapproval of female principals’ references to family or a personality that was deemed cold. Many teacher participants expected stereotypical male behavior in an administrator, but rejected both this behavior and stereotypical female traits in female principals, leaving female administrators in a no-win situation. This finding is supported by the findings of Weiner & Burton’s (2016) study where female principal participants “reported program leaders [in their training programs] often gave them negative feedback on how they presented themselves...and the potential messages it would send to the audience...although it was never explicitly stated, the message that it would be necessary for women leaders to lessen discomfort they might cause when

exerting their leadership was picked up by female participants” (p. 352). The study also found that female principals were told to “tone down behaviors often ascribed to female gender roles in favor of appearing more ‘controlled’ or neutral,” (p. 359) but women were also warned more masculine behaviors would make them less likable and less likely to be hired (p. 359), a point evidenced by the teacher participants’ views of female principals as expressed in this study.

Another gender-related finding was the male participants who reported positive interactions with administration in general related to their career advancement. The only two participants who talked about career advancement in terms of going into administration were men. Although both male participants noted negative interactions with administrators at some point, both also talked about their positive interactions with administration being related to the support and encouragement they received to go into administration. This finding was not truly surprising, as this push to leave the classroom and go into administration is clearly presented in Williams (1992), Budig (2002), Hultin (2003), and Weiner & Burton’s (2016) studies, which all concluded that men in women-dominated professions are often encouraged to move into more prestigious positions within the profession, including administration.

During the interviews, participants provided some possible reasons for the breakdown in communications between teachers and principals in general. Three participants cited inexperience of principals as a factor. One participant noted that sometimes principals only teach for three to five years before moving into an administrative position, which does not provide principals with enough classroom experience to be able to handle the variety of issues they will encounter as administrators

or to understand all of the situations teachers may face. Two participants shared their thoughts on the perceived attitude of female principals by teachers. Both participants suggested that perhaps because it is so difficult for women to become and then work as principals because it is still an area of education that is dominated by men, and that it might make female principals less willing to develop relationships with staff members, or more likely to be strict with and shut off from their staff members.

Overall, teacher participants in this study expressed a desire to feel supported and respected by their principal in order to build and foster positive relationships with their principal. The majority of teacher participants noted that open, honest, and collaborative communication was the most important step towards feeling heard and valued by their principal. This study also found that although gender congruency or incongruency did not have a clear impact on communication interactions, stereotypes about gender-roles related to leadership still exist and make it difficult for the teacher participants in this study to be as accepting of a female principal as a male principal. Despite important findings in this study, the next section will detail the limitations of the study.

Limitations of the Study

All of the participants in this study identified as white, despite my best efforts to recruit racially and ethnically diverse participants. Therefore, study findings are limited by the lack of diverse participant representation. Although in the 2017-2018 school year only 21% of teachers in the United States identified as nonwhite (U.S Department of Education, 2020), I still wanted to have a sample representative of the current national statistics. Also, there was not an equal representation of gender in the participant pool, as there were more women than men who participated in the study (three cisgender male

participants, and seven cisgender female participants, and one transgender woman [female-presenting]). Study findings are limited by the lack of gender representation in participants, and a range of genders in participants may have produced findings that provided a better sense of how gender impacts or influences communication interactions between teachers and principals, in both gender congruent and gender incongruent pairings.

One issue that may have kept teachers from wanting to participate in this study was the use of online platforms to conduct interviews. Some teachers who later chose not to participate explained they did not feel comfortable putting themselves into situations where their responses about their principals and other school administrators would be recorded, despite my assurances that participant identities were confidential, that recordings of interviews would not be shared beyond myself and the study's principal investigator, and that study findings would be presented in such a way that no participant would be personally identifiable in the study. Perhaps an in-person interview or a non-recorded virtual interview would elicit a greater number of participants.

As stated previously in this thesis, it was my intention to include both teachers and principals as participants in this study. However, despite my best and multi-faceted recruitment efforts, the study did not include any principals as participants, and I believe this was the study's most significant limitation. I directly contacted more than 25 principals over the course of two months and could not recruit any of them to participate in this study. Most explained their primary reason for not participating was the stress that has been put on them (principals) due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Many principals still work over the summer, but they found themselves with even more work

than usual the summer of 2021, due to their pandemic-related additional responsibilities. Once the school year began, a substitute teacher shortage, coupled with staff members becoming ill (with COVID or other illnesses) and subsequently calling off work, left many principals serving as classroom teachers in addition to still being responsible for their own work. Including the voices of principals on this topic is necessary, and future researchers should do what they can to find ways to work within principals' limitations so that their voices can be included.

Directions for Future Research

There is still a great deal to learn regarding the communication interactions between teachers and principals. Study findings make clear there are some gender-related stereotypes about leadership impacting communication interactions between male and female teachers and principals, and it would be worthwhile to continue to explore the complexity of those issues in more depth by including principals and greater gender diversity in participants in a future study, particularly because the lack of inclusion of principals is something that is a considerable limitation in past research on this topic, as well. Additionally, studying gender-based communication related to generational differences would add an interesting layer to the field of research that was not explored in this study.

Another area within this research topic to be explored is the intersection of gender and race in communication interactions between teachers and principals. Although it appears that the struggles teachers face, and what teachers feel they need in order to have successful communication interactions with their principals, seems to be similarly related by many teachers across the board (including by participants in this study), it would be

worthwhile to see the intersectional roles race and gender play in this, and how teachers of color view their communication interactions with their principals, especially in terms of race-congruent and race-incongruent teacher-principal dyads.

Conclusion

This study elaborated on previous studies about communication interactions between teachers and principals by focusing on the lived experiences of teacher participants and their communication with their principals and how those experiences related to organizational climate, leadership and communication related to gender, and job commitment.

One key finding of this study is that both male and female teacher participants expect a more stereotypically masculine leadership style, regardless of the gender-identification of the principal. Notably, female participants used language in response to questions about leadership roles and styles of principals that came across as particularly unforgiving and misogynistic when describing their perceptions of female principals. Because women are already underrepresented in school administration (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), this finding suggests that even when women do become administrators or take on leadership roles in K-12 educational settings, they may face additional obstacles from male and female teachers who harbor perceived, deeply rooted misogynistic ideas in terms of their expectations from leaders, which could then affect school culture in general.

Another key finding from this study is that participants who identified feeling that their voices were heard as a result of open, honest, and collaborative communication

interactions believed this was one of the most important factors in effective communication interactions with their principals and, ultimately, in participants' ability to build trust with their principals. This finding suggests that in order to improve communication interactions and strengthen relationships with teachers and consequently, build more positive school climates, principals need to be attentive to the ideas, concerns, and opinions expressed by their teachers and not simply dismiss these communication interactions after the conversation is complete.

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Appendix A

YSU Institutional Review Board Informed Consent

Dear Participant:

I am a graduate student from Youngstown State University. I am conducting a study with qualitative methods to investigate communication interactions between teachers and principals in the K-12 educational setting.

In this study, you will be asked to answer questions in a one-on-one recorded virtual interview with a researcher. I will also need to collect information to describe you such as years in the field of education, gender, and race. You will meet with me for one interview and your session should take about 30 minutes.

You may be at risk of psychological or emotional harm due to the research because the interview questions will ask about potential negative emotional feelings you have in regards to your experiences at work. However, the likelihood you will be harmed is minimized because you can stop the interview at any time, or you can choose not to answer any questions I may ask of you. Potential benefits to you from your participation are higher self-awareness of your interactions with your administrator and an opportunity to describe your lived experience.

Your privacy is important and I will handle all information collected about you in a confidential manner. I will report the results of the project in a way that will not identify you personally or your specific responses. I plan to present the results of the study in a defense of my thesis and might also submit this study for publication.

As a participant in this study, you can choose to withdraw at any time with no consequence to you. You do not have to be in this study. If you don't want to, you can

say no without losing any benefits that you are entitled to. If you do agree, you can stop participating at any time. If you wish to withdraw just tell me. Participants can withdraw from the study at any time. This includes during the interview process. No negative consequences will be inflicted or come to any individual who withdraws from the study. Any questions the participant may have can be directed to student investigator Jackie Mercer via email at jmercer01@ysu.edu or by phone at 330-941-3241 or to Dr. Shelley Blundell, faculty advisor by email at sblundell@ysu.edu or by phone at 330.941.1839. Questions can be asked by the participant at any time during the interview process as well.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research project, you may contact the Office of Grants and Sponsored Programs at YSU (330-941-2377) or at YSUIRB@ysu.edu

I understand the study described above and have been given a copy of this consent document. I am 18 years of age or older and I agree to participate.

Signature of Participant

Date

I consent to allowing the researchers in this study to audio and/or video record my participation for the purposes of accuracy in data collection, and I understand that these recordings will be confidential and accessible only by those directly involved in the research study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Questionnaire

TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Demographic Questions

1. Where are you from?
2. What is your racial identification?
3. What is your gender identification?
4. How old are you?
5. What grade level and content do you teach?
6. How many years have you been in education?
7. How many different school districts have you been in as a teacher?
8. How many years have you been in the classroom?

Interview Questions

9. How would you characterize your relationship with school administrators?
10. What communications have you had, positive or negative, with school administrators in the past that stand out in your mind?
 - a. Why does that (or do those) stand out?
11. How would you characterize your relationship with your school's principal?
12. What communications have you had, positive or negative, with your school's current principal that stand out in your mind?
 - b. Why does that (or do those) stand out?
13. Have you had principals of different genders?

- c. If so, have you noticed similarities or differences in your communications between male and female principals?
 - d. If so, what are they?
- 14. What similarities or differences do you notice in the way your principal communicates with men versus women in your building?
 - e. Could you provide some examples?
- 15. What do you view as the traits that make someone an effective principal?
 - f. Can you provide some examples?
- 16. What does a principal have to do to gain your trust as an administrator?
- 17. What does a principal have to do to help you feel supported as a staff member?
 - g. Can you provide examples?
- 18. How do you feel that your voice is heard or not heard as a staff member?
 - h. Can you provide some examples?
- 19. How often do you have conversations with your principal about education issues?
- 20. What factor is most influential on your commitment to your school?
- 21. Have you left a school previous to the one you teach at now?
 - i. If so, do you mind sharing what made you leave?
- 22. Have you ever considered leaving your current school?
 - j. If so, do you mind sharing why?
 - k. What made you decide to stay?

Follow-Up for Participants

- 23. Do you have any questions for me?
- 24. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me that I haven't asked about?

25. If necessary, would it be OK if I reached out to you with follow-up questions?

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Demographic Questions

- 26. Where are you from?
- 27. What is your racial identification?
- 28. What is your gender identification?
- 29. How old are you?
- 30. How many years have you been in education?
- 31. How many years were you in the classroom prior to becoming a principal?
- 32. How many school districts have you been in as a teacher?
- 33. How many school districts have you been in as a principal?
- 34. How many years have you been a principal?

Interview Questions

- 35. How would you characterize your relationship with teachers?
- 36. What communications have you had, positive or negative, with teachers in the past that stand out in your mind?
 - l. Why does that (or do those) stand out?
- 37. How would you characterize your relationship with your staff members?
- 38. What communications have you had, positive or negative, with your current staff members that stand out in your mind?
 - m. Why does that (or do those) stand out?

39. Have you noticed similarities or differences in your communications between male and female teachers?
- n. If so, what are they?
40. Have you experienced a time where the way a teacher perceived your communication was not the way you intended it?
- o. Could you provide an example?
41. What do you view as the traits that make someone an effective principal?
- p. Can you provide some examples?
42. What does a principal have to do to develop a culture of trust amongst a teaching staff?
43. What strategies do you use to develop relationships with your staff members?
44. How do you incorporate staff feedback in decision-making situations?
45. What strategies do you use to let your staff members know their voices are heard?
- q. Can you provide some examples?
46. What strategies have you utilized to retain teachers on your staff?
- r. Can you provide examples?
47. What strategies do you utilize to support your staff?
- s. Can you provide examples?

Follow-Up for Participants

48. Do you have any questions for me?
49. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me that I haven't asked about?
50. If necessary, would it be OK if I reached out to you with follow-up questions?

Appendix C

IRB Approval

From: do-not-reply@cayuse.com
Sent: Thursday, July 1, 2021 4:47 PM
To: Jackie Mercer; Shelley Blundell
Subject: 2021-131 - Initial: Initial - Exempt



Jul 1, 2021 4:47:12 PM EDT

Shelley Blundell
Communication, Languages 140707

Re: Exempt - Initial - 2021-131 Examining the Complexities of the Teacher-Principal Communication Relationship in a K-12 Educational Setting

Dear Dr. Shelley Blundell:

Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board has rendered the decision below for Examining the Complexities of the Teacher-Principal Communication Relationship in a K-12 Educational Setting.

Decision: Exempt

Selected Category: Category 3.(i)(A). Research involving benign behavioral interventions in conjunction with the collection of information from an adult subject through verbal or written responses (including data entry) or audiovisual recording if the subject prospectively agrees to the intervention and information collection.
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly reported to the IRB.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,
Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board