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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF LEADERSHIP TOOLS AND TRAITS THAT FOSTER EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN RURAL SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Education

By

Julie M. Boyer

May 2023
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF LEADERSHIP TOOLS AND TRAITS THAT FOSTER EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN RURAL SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

By

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ABSTRACT

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF LEADERSHIP TOOLS AND TRAITS THAT FOSTER EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN RURAL SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

By

Julie M. Boyer

May 2023

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Deborah Scigliano

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify leadership qualities and practices that nurture relationships in school settings. The central question framing this study was: What leadership tools and traits foster effective relationships in rural school communities? I conducted semi-structured interviews in a small Northwestern school district. Non-classroom leaders and classroom leaders, who will be referred to using pseudonyms, were recruited from the elementary, middle, and high schools based on recommendations from the district’s superintendent. Prior to conducting interviews, participants were provided with a framework based on Kouzes and Posner’s (2017) exemplary leadership practices and asked to choose five artifacts to share regarding their relevance to the framework. Interview questions were purposefully designed to gain insight to the participants’ lived experiences regarding leadership behaviors which impact relationships. Using the process of coding, I analyzed the data and developed a detailed description
of each participant’s responses. From these descriptions, I identified key themes for understanding the nexus of leadership and relationships. Themes included visionary, providing opportunities, reflective practices, and relationships. The findings of this study confirmed the significant influence that school leaders have on school culture and climate when relationships are prioritized. Findings correlated with the five exemplary leadership practices identified by Kouzes and Posner (2017).

*Keywords:* relationships, leadership, school culture, school climate
DEDICATION

I dedicate this Dissertation of Practice to my family. To my husband, Dan, his endless support and unconditional love have allowed me to accomplish every goal I’ve ever imaged. He has kept me grounded and focused throughout this journey. My children, Kristin and Matthew, may you always appreciate your God-given gifts and be inspired to go after your own dreams. To my sister, Lisa Forsyth, who has encouraged me to look beyond my “zip code” and never settle for mediocre. She has been a life-long inspiration to move mountains as a woman. To my dear friends, Chrissy Kuhar and Marcy Holt, for providing unwavering positivity and relentless reassurance that I would complete this process. I will forever be grateful for their love and support. Most especially, to my mother, Ellen Forsyth, who instilled perseverance, confidence, and grace to me. I am certain she is celebrating this moment in heaven!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Dr. Deborah Scigliano for chairing my dissertation committee and guiding me throughout my doctoral experience, to Dr. James Wortman, for providing insight and inspiration to succeed both academically and personally, and to Dr. Amy Olson, for sharing her expertise in methodology. I am hopeful that my work of serving others will continue to be impactful and productive as a result of all their efforts. It has been an honor to work with each of you.


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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
Attention Deficient Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
Center of Disease and Control Prevention (CDC)
Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS)
Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Positive School Leadership (PSL)
National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA)
Socioeconomic Status (SES)
Teacher-Student Relationships (TSR)
Trauma-Informed Integral Leadership (TIIL)
CHAPTER 1
RATIONAL AND INTRODUCTION

Social and Historical Context

“It takes a village to raise a child.” This African proverb is prominently displayed and vocalized throughout education. It refers to the united effort of many people to provide children with a safe and healthy environment. It is a place where students are provided opportunities to flourish emotionally, academically, and socially. Unfortunately, on March 13, 2019, an unprecedented pandemic interrupted the status quo transforming the role of school. Sidestepping an academic focus, a cumulative needs approach of all stakeholders became a priority. Families needed support with housing and food. Students were ripped of social connections. Teachers needed to pivot to a new way of instructing. Traditional learning became obsolete. Schools had to navigate a virtual world finding ways to personalize education from a distance. The importance of relationships surfaced as a vital component of life and learning (O’Toole & Simovska, 2022; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022).

Since the onset of the pandemic, extensive research has supported the influence of school relationships. As such, O’Toole and Simovska (2022) conducted a series of one on one interviews with 15 education professionals from Ireland to explore the impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of students, staff, and school communities. Their qualitative study highlighted the central role schools play in supporting local communities and the value teachers place on their relationships with students and families. Their work emphasized a need for schools to stay committed to safety, belonging, and social connection.

Likewise, Zhu et al. (2022) examined the roles of resilience, peer relationship, and teacher-student relationship on student mental health on student mental health difficulties during
COVID-19. Their quantitative study in China highlighted the protective roles of personal resilience and teacher relationships in students’ mental health. Findings exposed an increase in cyber victimization and mental health difficulties when students were learning online. Both intrapersonal and social contextual factors served as promotive and protective factors for students’ mental health. For elementary students, teacher-student relationships mitigated the impact of peer victimization and mental health difficulties.

Coming off the heels of the pandemic, the pressure for those working in schools has become more challenging than ever. Stability has been shaken. Castrellion et al. (2021) posit that schools become sites of collective healing rooted in love, hope, and solidarity. A need for unity and shared belief has emerged.

DeMatthews (2018) reports that principals are “in a conspicuous position to catalyze an authentic locally responsive learning process that can bring new possibilities and opportunities” (DeMatthews, 2018, p. 155). An examination of relationships as well as the leadership practices that foster relationships is necessary for moving schools forward. Ansari et al. (2020) state teacher-student relationships can be a promotive, protective, or a risk factor for students to develop the foundational skills and resources they need to succeed and thrive in school. Given our current context, I believe the power of relationships can heal and transform schools into communities that restore the mind, heart, and spirit of all.

Statistics from *American’s Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being* (2020) indicate the sense of urgency that exists. In 2018, 23% of rural children were living in poverty. This was even worse for Blacks and Hispanics, a staggering 47%. Maltreatment in rural areas was reported happening to 13 per 1,000 children. Neglect made up three fourths of all maltreatment. Food insecurities were also overwhelming with 11.2 million children (15% of
all children) living in households experiencing hunger. Schools that are committed to forming quality relationships can assist families and students with overcoming these deficiencies (Butler, et al., 2022; Lopez et al., 2021).

As such, Ryu et al. (2022) examined the impact of caring school leadership. Their exploratory study drew data from two schools. They conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers and leaders. According to their findings, caring leadership is accomplished when schools generate a set of needs and resources based on the interconnectivity of school and community contexts. Focusing on social capital (relationships), decisional capital (expert decision-making), and human capital (knowledge and skills) enhances professional capital. The act of caring impacts overall organizational growth, but simultaneously, it can positively affect all individual stakeholders.

Moreover, the necessity of caring and forming relationships is crucial from a national perspective. Recent statistics from the Center of Disease and Control Prevention (CDC) report that approximately 4.5 million students ages 3-17 have a diagnosed behavior problem. These behaviors influence adjustment, task completion, academic trajectories, emotional reactions, coping, and peer relationships (Collins et al., 2017). School leaders are privileged to assist students overcome barriers through thoughtful actions and responses.

Research has indicated that caring and relationships have an impact on specific students’ needs. Zendarski et al. (2020) studied the effects of high-quality teacher relationships with children diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Their sample size of 385 included students with and without the diagnosis. They reported that ADHD students frequently have weaker bonds with teachers, experience academic underachievement, and are rated below their peers behaviorally. From a social justice perspective, the formation of high-
quality relationships can assist leaders with understanding neurodevelopmental disorders and responding to them. Attention to interventions can assist with school engagement and improve long term outcomes for ADHD students (Rushton et al., 2019).

Although COVID-19 upset schools, there is an opportunity to respond to the disruption and more forward. There is a responsibility for educational leaders to create a new normal modeling perseverance. I believe this starts with identifying leadership tools and traits that foster relationships. This, with a concentration on community partnerships, will revive the slogan “It takes a village to raise a child.”

Local Context

For twenty-two years, I was honored to be employed as an elementary teacher. In 2015, I was fortunate to make the leap into administration. Moving to another district similar in size, I was hired to work alongside a dynamic, family-focused principal. Her brilliance, commitment, and grace allow her to lead in an exceptional manner. This style of leadership intrigued me. All of my previous administrators were authoritarian and rigid. I had never witnessed an administrator “go the extra mile” for staff, students, or families. I knew I was amidst something extraordinary.

There was a distinct ethos that could be felt as soon as one entered this new, elementary building. Everyone seemed to have a pep in their step. There was an overabundance of hugs and positivity. Parents were warmly welcomed. Community engagement was prioritized. There was purpose to every interaction and word spoken. Unified expectations and values permeated the atmosphere.

Five years after partnering with this amazing human, my administrative journey veered me to a promotion as middle school principal. This both terrified and excited me. Little did I
know, I had just entered unfamiliar territory. The environment was cold and tense. Colorless. Rules and punitive repercussions were expectations. Disconnectedness and uncertainty met me at the door. I could run or embrace the challenge. I chose to face the unknown and bravely step into this unknown space.

Having completed a year as the principal, I acknowledge that the middle school has endured numerous administrative changes. Over the past ten years, the staff has had three different principals, therefore, needing to adapt to new expectations and leadership styles. Initiatives have fluctuated. Demands have increased with regard to responsibilities, technology, curriculum, and classroom management. The previous principal, although very competent with daily operations, led with an authoritarian style. Decisions were made in a silo, and relationships were not prioritized. As a result, building capacity didn’t grow, and the climate of the school suffered.

Acting from the ethic of care, I sense security, support, and stability need to be revitalized. The pandemic upset student learning, but it also upended instructional delivery and practices from a teacher’s perspective. As their educational leader, I am committed to energizing and renewing their belief in themselves, the role they serve, and the vision of our system. I want to implement multiple voices in the decision-making process fueled by passion and hope. I want staff and stakeholders to feel comfortable questioning the system and processes so we can make equitable advancements towards teaching and learning.

From the ethic of critique, I see a need to bridge relationships left at the elementary level. Communication and family involvement at the middle school have been criticized. Teachers tend to work in departmentalized teams and display a lack of cohesiveness. Existing programs appear to be a result of a school centric epistemology causing students to be labeled as “his or hers” and
not “ours”. A shared belief in responsibility among all is lacking. Access and opportunity with regards to curriculum, clubs, and sports need addressed.

Complementary to the ethics of care and critique, I believe attention to the ethic of the profession must be considered. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) (2015) defines standard 2 as: *Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.* Relationships are prioritized within this standard. The leadership actions and attributes specified by NPBEA correlate directly to my study. Studying the nexus between leadership and relationships has allowed me to contribute to existing literature as well as devise a personal plan to assist rural leaders with fostering relationships to improve their learning environments.

**Leadership Perspective**

Over the span of twenty-eight years as an educator, I have witnessed a concerning paradigm shift within schools. From an administrative perspective, I’m observing new teachers being hired unprepared and hesitant to confront classroom challenges. I’m witnessing veteran teachers whose self-efficacy is wavering at meeting daily demands. Cipriano (2020) supports these observations revealing teachers having considerable feelings of being overwhelmed, anxiousness, sadness, fear, and worry. The pandemic exacerbated teachers’ confidence levels.

At a national level, similar concerns are being observed. Hill-Jackson et al. (2022) report that the number of people completing a teacher-education program has declined by almost a third since 2008-2009. Pay and working conditions were identified as contributing factors. Schools are feeling the impact of this statistic having difficulty filling positions and obtaining available substitute teachers.
Beyond pay and working conditions, an assortment of other factors are negatively impacting schools. Family units are more diversified and continue to question the role of schools (Vatterott, 2018). School interactions with families are becoming increasingly unpredictable and tense. Regardless of research supporting the positive relationship between parents' engagement in their children's education and student outcomes (Barger et al., 2019; Wilder, 2014), a large percentage of my staff feel parents don’t want to be involved in our school. Comparing parent involvement at elementary and middle schools, I do observe a decrease. However, I question if this is due to a reduction in parental opportunities among the two schools.

Additionally, students’ emotional and behavioral needs have intensified contributing to professional uneasiness. In 2016, the Centers of Disease Control reported about 16.5% of school-aged children had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder in the United States. This statistic reveals the need for schools to take a social justice approach to address mental health needs. With over 25% of my current middle school students receiving mental health services, I can affirm that COVID-19 has undoubtedly intensified this statistic.

These concerns and observations could influence leaders to give up. I look at them as an opportunity. Horne (2021) reported teacher-child relationships that are high in closeness have been linked to positive emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes for students. White (2020) affirmed that children in close teacher-child relationships participate in class more actively, exhibit better work habits, and tend to like school more. Lavy and Naama-Ghanayim (2020) stressed the importance of teacher-student relationships being core of the educational process. They report motivation, coping with challenges, and self-esteem were positively impacted and that these ultimately affected students’ overall achievement. I believe that educational leaders can leverage their position by fostering effective relationships.
Definitions

The definition of a leader is wide and vast. However, regardless of the definition, all leaders possess qualities and practice actions that define them as leaders. For the purpose of my research, I referred to these qualities and actions as “tools and traits”. These are the defining attributes and practices that allow leaders to effectively advance their organization.

The term leader was used interchangeably to include administration and teachers. Because I believe every stakeholder has the obligation and ability to lead, I focused on principal and teacher leaders. The behaviors and actions of these leaders were essential to my research question.

A comprehensive understanding of effective relationships is also warranted. For this, I referred to standard 2 of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015):

*Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.* Effective leaders do the following:

a) Act ethically and professionally in personal conduct, relationships with others, decision-making, stewardship of the school’s resources, and all aspects of school leadership.

b) Act according to and promote the professional norms of integrity, fairness, transparency, trust, collaboration, perseverance, learning, and continuous improvement.

c) Place children at the center of education and accept responsibility for each student’s academic success and well-being.

d) Safeguard and promote the values of democracy, individual freedom and responsibility, equity, social justice, community, and diversity.

e) Lead with interpersonal and communication skill, social-emotional insight, and understanding of all students’ and staff members’ backgrounds and cultures.

f) Provide moral direction for the school and promote ethical and professional behavior among faculty and staff.
School experiences are a series of interactions based on relationships. Studying relationships and questioning how these can be fostered furthered my research. Relationships included those between administrators, teachers, students, and families. The collaboration among these individuals is important for building capacity, therefore, all of these interactions were addressed.

**Fusing Leadership and Relationships**

The focus of my research question was learning what tools and traits are needed for leaders to foster effective relationships in school communities. Kouzes and Posner (2017) offer a framework for leaders. The framework outlines a system for leaders to act their best and create a unified environment. Five practices of exemplary leadership are identified: Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Using this framework, along with knowledge gained from my literature review, permitted me to complete a thorough investigation of effective leadership practices that cultivate relationships.

During my research, I sought to reveal the practices and behaviors implemented by educational leaders to foster relationships. The following framework guided me in identifying themes.
Central Research Question

1. What leadership tools and traits are needed to foster effective relationships in rural school communities?
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

School experiences are a series of interactions based on relationships. These interrelated connections can influence both the community inside and outside a school. As research shows, a leaders’ ability to influence positive relationships within an organization can have lasting effects for personal wellbeing, academic performance, social capital, school culture, and climate. Studying the nexus between leadership and relationships is valuable as school leaders navigate socio-political and economic challenges. In order to enhance social justice, school improvement, and student success, deliberation should be given to the practices and strategies that nurture student agency, teacher efficacy, and a sense of community (Gurr et al., 2021). Consideration to the traits and tools that enable leaders to foster effective relationships is therefore important for developing overall school improvement.

Kouzes and Posner (2017) offer a powerful framework for advancing educational organizations. They posit that leaders who Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) make extraordinary things happen in organizations. The first practice, Model the Way, requires leaders to identify their core values. When leaders can clarify their values, this enables them to share them outward. Leaders set an example when they practice what they value. Second, Inspire a Shared Vision means imagining possibilities. Kouzes and Posner claim, “This is the force that creates the future,” (Kouzes & Posner, 2017, p. 15). When a strengths-based approach is embraced, commitment is inspired, and everyone becomes part of the dream. In today’s current context, where challenges are abundant, collaborative efforts are invaluable. A leader’s
excitement and enthusiasm are key for promoting organization momentum. Third, Challenging the Process means questioning and listening for innovative ideas. It is easy for schools to support a status quo mindset. However, taking risks is essential for growth. Kouzes and Posner (2017) encourage leaders to recognize the benefits of failing forward. The fourth practice, Enable Others to Act, requires solid trust and enduring relationships. Empowering others is essential. Using and appreciating the expertise of colleagues stimulates possibilities. Lastly, when leaders Encourage the Heart, care, appreciation, and value are displayed. Recognition for efforts occurs through celebrations. A spirit of community transpires. This framework offers a platform in which leadership practices directly influence relationships. The interconnectedness of relationships and these actions will be a focal point throughout this literature review.

**Relationships**

Relationships are the connections between students, staff, and families that stimulate positive social interactions and establish a nurturing environment of trust and support in schools. Relationships are formed not only among students, but among everyone working within the organization. The interconnectivity of the working parts within school systems is important because of the vast number of individuals that school districts employ. Relationships are key to generating school improvement, and extensive research has supported the influence of positive relationships for teachers, students, and communities (Coyle et al., 2022; Flores & Kyere, 2021; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Keane & Evans, 2022; Kudlats & Brown, 2021; Liang et al., 2019; Liew et al., 2010; Longobardi et al.; 2019; McCormick & O’Connor, 2015; Parlar et al.; 2017; Sebastain & Allensworth, 2012; Smith et al., 2021; White, 2020). Therefore, identifying the roles within a school is important for understanding relational impacts.
A prominent role in schools is the building principal. Throughout the day they are privileged to interact with a wide variety of stakeholders including students, staff, families, and community members. Louis et al. (2016) argued for administrators to become less concerned with academic and managerial issues and focus on relationships. Kudlats and Brown (2021) conducted a qualitative narrative inquiry about the effect of principal-student relationships (PSR). Two high school and two middle school principals from the U.S. participated in the study. Through interviews, observations, and field notes the significance of this phenomenon was revealed. The results illustrated that supportive relationships not only led to job satisfaction but concurrently assisted principals with being more effective in their role by gaining a deeper understanding of students and the community. These caring principals’ enabled others to act demonstrating support for Kouzes and Posner’s framework.

In another study, Louis et al. (2016) investigated how the behavior of principals and other school leaders foster school environments that promote students’ sense of being cared for. In this study they used the definition of caring as a property of relationships. Drawing survey data from 2008 from 3,900 teachers in 134 schools in forty districts across nine states, they analyzed the correlation between principal caring, student success, and personal wellbeing. They utilized five primary survey-based measures: caring principal leadership, academic support for student learning, teacher collaboration, teacher de-privatized practice, and collective responsibility. Results supported their argument that caring is important in schools influentially impacting both students and teachers. Principals implemented Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, and Encourage the Heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) which exemplified the practices of effective leadership.
Although principals have more extensive interactions, including those with the entire student body, teachers, parents, and community members, there is substantial research supporting the influence of teacher relations. Studies have underscored that high-quality teacher-student relationships (high in closeness and low in conflict) are a predictor for academic achievement (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; McCormick & O’Connor, 2015) and socioemotional development (Heatly & Votruba-Druba, 2017; Lippard et al., 2018). These benefits, coupled with the attention being given to trauma-informed care and the effects of COVID-19, support a deeper understanding of teacher-student relationships.

Lavy and Naama-Ghanayim (2020) surveyed 676 students ages 12-16 from six different upper-level schools in northern Israel to examine teachers’ caring and its links with student outcomes. A positive correlation was found between students’ feelings that their teacher cares for them with students’ self-esteem, wellbeing, and school engagement. Findings suggest that students who have teachers who care deeply about them may have prominent effects on students’ core beliefs and attitudes about themselves and their lives. Previous research supports these findings identifying caring as a vital leadership trait impacting academic (Louis et al., 2016; White, 2020) as well as emotional (Greig et al., 2021; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022) trajectories. Given the challenges classroom teachers endure, caring may not be easy, but its effect is significant.

Similarly, a sense of caring was applicable to a study done by White (2020). She used qualitative methods and participant observations of 20 kindergarten children in an urban area to identify key strategies teachers use to promote greater closeness with individual children and build community. Teaching with intention, integrating relationship building into the curriculum, letting children take the lead, and capitalizing on small moments were prominent themes. These
caring approaches cultivated a positive culture of learning and independence which ultimately affected the school climate. Kouzes and Posner’s (2017) practice of Encourage the Heart continues to be exposed.

Furthermore, the effect of caring has extended impacts for students. Ansari et al. (2020) examined teacher-student relationships across the first seven years of education and adolescent outcomes. Multivariate regression analyses from 1364 ninth graders affirmed the importance of teacher-student relationships for students’ long-term development. Achievement, social-behavior, educational beliefs, and aspirations were studied. Warmth and communication characterized closeness, while negative interactions contributed to relationships of conflict. Their findings concur that while teachers are transient figures in students’ lives, the strength and influence of positive relationships can (and do) have lasting consequences relevant to personal development and academic achievement.

Specific to personal development, Lifshin et al. (2020) analyzed teacher’ attachment orientations and children’s school adjustment. This quantitative study employed 539 first-grade students and 58 teachers from 31 public schools in urban areas in central Israel. Findings revealed that teachers’ attachment insecurities interfered with their ability to provide care to students and negatively impacted students’ adjustment to school. Students need warmth, a sense of availability, and responsiveness from their teachers to successfully transition into the school setting. Results support that teachers’ behaviors and practices are vital for promoting smooth adjustments.

Consistent with personal development, the significance of positive teacher-student relationships with academics was revealed by Goldie and O’Connor (2021). In a quantitative study, using 22 qualifying low-income schools in a large metropolitan city, researchers
investigated whether teacher-student relationships mediate associations between gender and achievement. Schools were randomly assigned to either an early childhood temperament-based learning intervention (INSIGHTS) or an attention-control condition. Initial intervention and data collection were conducted when students were in kindergarten or first grade. Follow-up data was conducted when students were in sixth grade. 238 first-grade homeroom teachers completed surveys about their relationship with students. Findings support that teacher-student closeness and conflict mediated the association between gender and affected both reading and math achievement. Results exposed a commitment to cultivating relationships is especially significant for boys and underrepresented populations, specifically racially diverse students. Prior literature has demonstrated these groups experience more conflict and have lower academic achievement (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Roorda et al., 2017). Findings also have implications relevant to gender socialization theory which posits boys and girls are treated differently. As a result, relational behaviors are diverse. Goldie and O’Connor (2021) suggest mitigating prevalent societal norms surrounding gender has potential to improve the academic trajectories of boys. This research supported teachers Model the Way (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) exhibiting instructional practices which reflect core values.

In spite of the fact that academics remain a focal point in schools, the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on learning has gained momentum in both schools and within the community. Scholars have identified an adverse correlation between students experiencing neglect, abuse, mental illness, violence, divorce, and incarceration with academic success and community adjustment (Crouch et al., 2019; Metzler et al., 2017; Woods et al., 2018). Teacher-student relationships (TSR) can be a protective factor in healing for students. Keane and Evans (2022) posited that due to the time children spend in school, TSR can be a mechanism to build
resilience for students who have experienced ACEs. Their work, which explored the relationship between TSRs and ACEs interventions, highlighted the significance of intervention models and encouraged the implementation of trauma informed professional development. Despite intervention programs addressing ACE, a supportive relationship with at least one caring adult has been identified as the most important and strongest protective factor for students (Crouch et al., 2019). For students who have experienced multiple ACEs, school connectedness has been associated with decreased risk of suicide (Areba et al., 2021), risky sexual behaviors, teen pregnancy (Song & Qian, 2020), and overall psychological distresses (Clements-Nolle & Waddington, 2019). Given the research, teacher-student relationships are a promising opportunity to improve academic and personal development for students.

Moreover, in times of uncertainty, relationships bring comfort and reassurance. The significance of teacher-student relationships came to fruition during COVID-19. The unprecedented pandemic isolated students from schools, prohibiting their everyday social interactions and disrupted traditional learning. O’Toole and Simovska (2021) conducted a series of interviews with 15 educational professionals in Ireland to study the impact of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of school communities. Themes of rising to the challenge, adversity, marginalization, psychological distress among students, teaching and learning in a virtual classroom, lack of adequate governance, and silver linings were revealed. The study underscored that schools are a staple in their communities and offer a lifeline for many students. Besides providing a space for learning, schools are a place of safety, connection, predictability, and routine. Teachers displayed heroic qualities in their virtual classrooms. They pivoted immediately attempting to educate, maintain relationships, and provide reassurance to students living in uncertainty. Challenge the Process (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) was a necessity during
COVID-19. In times of national disasters, pandemics, and local catastrophes, the relationships leaders create are profound (Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016; Goswick et al., 2018; Sutherland, 2017; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022).

Whereas the relationships created among principals and teachers are important, it is imperative to study the relationships within the larger school organization. Collectively, families and schools are the basis upon which children build academic, behavioral, and social-emotional skills. Thus, engaging families in schools is essential for educational leaders. Strong relationships can forge school improvement relevant to equity in policies, practices, and curriculum.

Flores and Kyere (2021) investigated the role of school leadership in effective parent engagement practice from an equity lens. A qualitative methodology was employed with five urban principals who enacted social justice practices to engage and empower parents and/or families. Three themes emerged: the power of relationships, resistance toward deficit thinking of parents and/or families, and connecting their work with families to equity. All participants affirmed a trusting relationship with parents central to their efforts towards equity. Engaging in a human relationship with families synergized the school-home connection while simultaneously benefiting students and the educational organization. These leaders relied on an asset-based approach to promote parent empowerment.

Similarly, community relationships and engagement were reinforced in work done by Fletcher et al. (2020). The researchers employed 29 interviews with participants to examine the internal and external supports given to a low-income urban high school magnet career academy. The stakeholders attributed program success to the cultivation of a non-hierarchical governing structure that promoted investment from all levels. Building authentic partnerships between the
school and community were prioritized. This allowed for internal and external supports to not only be encouraged but expected upholding the phrase “it takes a village” to educate students. The findings indicated collaborative school and family relationships impacted student achievement and opportunity. Enable Others to Act (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) proved to be an effective leadership practice in this study.

In addition, Grover et al. (2021) examined whether schools are a place of community and if it matters. The use of longitudinal studies allowed the researchers to gain insight into how the sense of community impacts students’ educational, behavioral, and emotional competence as well as their physical and mental wellbeing. Encouraging warmth, facilitating family engagement, monitoring school climate and safety, avoiding inflexible discipline, promoting extracurricular activities, and promoting self-care were strategies leaders employed to community connectedness. These practices deter substance abuse, violence, gang involvement, and problem behaviors. Students’ self-concepts improved, and emotional distress decreased.

Undoubtedly the sense of belonging impacts personal development. However, it also significantly influences society.

Fostering relationships is not a program, but rather a way of operating schools which requires ongoing partnerships and dedication (Boberiene, 2013). Within schools, relationships are formed not only among students, but among everyone working within the organization. Research supports relationships having boundless effects. Through positive relationships students reap academic and personal developmental benefits, and family engagement stimulates organizational growth.
Leadership

Leadership is a phenomenon that is both practiced and experienced. It entails the responsibility for setting objectives, safeguarding harmony and solidarity, overseeing the organization based on shared values, creating opportunities, modeling practices, and supervising (Sergiovanni, 1992). In schools, principals are often referred to as the “leader”. The principal role is unequivocally influential. Principal behaviors and actions can have significant impacts on school climate. However, there are individuals behind closed doors that engage in similar administrative responsibilities, endure resistance, persevere against odds, and remain hope filled. Teachers. Teachers, also, possess effective leadership traits. Understanding the influence of the attributes and actions of all school leaders is important for organizational advancement.

Relevant to administration, Cansoy and Parlor (2017) examined the relationship between principals’ leadership behaviors, teacher efficacy, and collective teacher efficacy. This quantitative study consisted of 427 elementary, middle, and high school teachers in Istanbul. A positive correlation highlighted the following leadership behaviors: emphasizes common objectives, provides a variety of resources, flexibility in the classroom, high expectations, observation of colleagues, and stress reduction activities. The researchers found principal behaviors strengthened teacher efficacy by fostering cooperation.

In another study related to administration, Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) studied how teachers experience principal leadership. Their quantitative study in a suburban district in Minnesota surveyed teachers in 14 districts. Principal leadership behaviors, teacher-teacher relationships, and sense of efficacy fueled their research questions. Several effective leadership behaviors and actions were revealed: being immersed in the instructional work, creating a sense of trust, and sharing responsibility. Teacher-teacher relationships were stimulated through
reflective dialogue, shared norms, and de-privatized practices. Self-efficacy was dependent on context; however, trust and professional community variables were found to be positive influencers. All of the exemplary practices posited by Kouzes and Posner (2017) were prominent in this study.

In addition to influencing teacher efficacy, building leaders also serve as a protector factor for the wellbeing of teachers. Cann et al. (2020) focused on leadership actions that teachers identified as enhancing their wellbeing. Employing a mixed methodology with six participants from an urban area in New Zealand, three main themes emerged. First, leaders listened to and valued teachers. Second, leaders facilitated professional development. Third, leaders sought feedback about change. These identified practices adhere to the central idea of positive school leadership: the role of school leaders is to create an environment in which people can thrive (Murphy & Louis, 2018).

Furthermore, leaders use their influence to produce beneficial, systematic changes by creating and promoting a space for all students to thrive. Banwo et al. (2022) explored the connection between Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) and Positive School Leadership (PSL) in their multi-year case study of an equity leader in a suburban district in the U.S. They examined how social justice leadership can build long-term trusting relationships within the school system and marginalized communities. After following a district-level leader for three years, they identified qualities that embraced both PSL and CRSL. Effective leaders embraced people and programs with efficacy, trust, zest, and resiliency. They also showed a commitment to anti-oppressive and culturally responsive education. Changing hearts and dispositions as well as policies and practices assisted the leader with making equitable
improvements. Yet again, Kouzes and Posner’s (2017) five exemplary leadership practices were visible exhibiting significant results.

Similar to principals, teachers possess valuable leadership qualities that yield significant results. Gordon et al. (2021) surveyed educators in PK-12 schools to gain insight about informal teacher leaders. Using perceptions from the surveys, they identified who they are, what they do, and how they impact teaching and learning. Coding categorized leadership activities, personal and professional characteristics, knowledge and skills, relationships with other educators, and their impact. The study revealed informal teacher leaders engage in mentoring, facilitate team development, and share instructional and classroom management strategies. They construct ideas for school improvement, continuously volunteer, and support students beyond the classroom level. Personal and professional characteristics identified included being passionate, caring, efficient, persistent, and open to others. Knowledge and skill results centered around teacher leaders being competent with content and being able to consider multiple viewpoints. Teacher leaders’ relational characteristics reflected respect, socioemotional relationships, trust, and working relationships. Lastly, their behaviors had school-wide impacts. Within the classroom, they were student-centered creating classroom communities. Professionally, they empowered colleagues and modeled culturally responsive teaching behaviors. A dedication to continuous school improvement impacted the overall organization. This study exemplified the overarching influence of teacher leaders.

Another essential leadership trait that teachers possess is the ability to provide emotional and behavioral supports to students. Trang and Hansen (2021) examined the roles of teacher expectations and school composition on teacher-child relationship quality. Using a subsample from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort 2010-2011, the researchers
used data to fit two-level, multivariate regression models. A positive correlation was found between teacher-child relationships displaying warmth and support and closeness (in comparison to conflict). Findings support that teachers committed to fostering interpersonal relationships, creating a safe classroom environment, and communicating appropriate expectations for students contribute to emotional and behavioral development.

Scholars have identified the behaviors and actions of educational leaders that have profound impact on school organizations (Banwo et al., 2020; Cann et al., 2020; Cansoy & Parlor, 2017; Gordon et al., 2021; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Trang & Hanson, 2021; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Creating a sense of trust, emphasizing common objectives, sharing responsibility, providing resources and professional development, and committing to interpersonal relationships stimulate an environment of growth and sustainability. These leadership attributes and actions promote unity and collective harmony which benefit not only the school but the community at large.

In effective organizations, leadership is a verb not a noun. The tools and traits of leading can be performed by anyone committed to making a difference. In schools, principals and teachers are privileged to make long lasting impacts through the relationships they forge. Research supports the collaboration of leadership and the concept of relationships leading to remarkable outcomes.

**Leadership and Relationships**

School leaders are considered a leveraging factor in flourishing schools (Cann et al., 2021; Louis & Murphy, 2018). Research has shown that a leader’s ability to foster relations between teachers, students, and families has lasting outcomes to teacher efficacy and wellbeing (Cann et al., 2020; Cansoy & Parlor, 2017; Louis et al., 2016; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008),
students’ self-esteem and wellbeing (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Kudlats & Brown, 2021; Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020), and efforts towards school improvement (Fisher, 2021; Flores & Kyere, 2020; Smith et al, 2021). Fusing what is known about relationships and leaders’ ability to foster these allows schools to make continual systemic enhancements.

A meta-analysis by St-Amand et al. (2017) defined attributes, determinants, and sustaining strategies for educational leaders to enhance a sense of belonging. Through a comparative analysis of three main quantitative instruments for measuring the sense of belonging at school, they underscored belonging as a major factor that contributes positively to an individual’s psychological development. It is a basic need that leads people to build social bonds. Their work prompted six recommendations for leaders. First, they should provide professional development to assist teachers with understanding students’ emotional wellbeing. Second, teachers should adopt the roles of personal and academic support to effectively influence learning. Third, teaching strategies should encourage social relationships, such as teamwork or cooperative learning. Fourth, leaders should implement social competence programs to foster students’ sense of belonging and ability to interact with others. Fifth, the importance of harmonization was stressed as this promotes students’ ability to work collaboratively around common interests. Lastly, findings support extracurricular activities being offered to positively influence school belonging. Cumulatively, the recommendations provided in this literature review assist leaders with developing relationships to promote and sustain personal and academic success.

Consistent with creating a sense of belonging, Turan & Bektas (2013) studied the relationships between school administrators’ leadership practices and school culture. The participants were 349 primary teachers working in 15 schools from the central districts of the
province of Erzurum in Turkey. Using a correlational research design, a positive and significant relationship between primary school teachers’ perceptions of school culture and the leadership practices of school principals was found. Principals who displayed the dimensions of guidance, creating a vision, questioning the process, and encouraging stakeholders predicted an optimistic school culture. Findings support the role of the principal as a guiding leader who reinforces organizational growth.

Narrowing in on the impact of principals, Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) examined the influence of principal leadership on classroom instruction and student learning. Data used for this study included teacher surveys which were administered to high school teachers in Chicago Public Schools in the 2006-2007 school year. Using the framework of essential supports (Bryk et al., 2010), they evaluated the relationships among leadership, mediating factors, instruction, and student learning. Although the relationships of principal leadership with instruction and learning were indirect and small, support for principal leadership influencing school climate was significant. This makes sense given the association with principals leading professional development, encouraging effective pedagogical practices, and the adoption of programs.

Similarly, educators must become change agents looking for ways to meet the specific needs of their students. DeMatthews et al. (2019) used an exploratory approach to review U.S. policy-related and empirical literature on school leadership for effective inclusive schools. Drawing on Hitt and Tucker’s (2016) framework for leadership principles, five domains were revealed. These domains include establishing and conveying a vision, facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students, building professional capacity, creating a supportive organization for learning, and connecting with external partners assisted leaders with
effectiveness. Their study highlights the need for collaborative relationships to exist with educational leaders. Together they can advocate for inclusiveness and confront policy challenges. These findings are consistent with Kouzes and Posner’s (2017) framework for effective leadership.

Additionally, collaboration with families is essential for student belonging. A growing body of evidence suggests that principals influence family engagement through their work in shaping school climate (Povey et al., 2016). Smith et al. (2021) devoted efforts into examining the correlation between principal leadership and family engagement across elementary and middle schools. They employed an advanced statistical methodology to explore specific aspects of principal leadership and family engagement in 18 schools in an urban area of Midwest United States. Through teacher and student responses, they confirmed a positive association. They identified the following leadership traits significant to promoting family engagement: communicates expectations, sets definite standards of performance, conducts meaningful evaluations, discusses classroom issues with the teacher, and looks out for the personal welfare of the teacher. As leaders seek to improve school climate, attention to parent involvement should be given.

Specifically, parent engagement in low income urban neighborhoods is essential. Due to the context of these environments, family relationships benefit greatly. Fletcher et al. (2021) studied the relationship between stakeholders in a low-income urban community. The findings of their qualitative case study correlated with previous research supporting the impact relationships have on social capital. Engaged principals who cultivated a non-hierarchical governing structure that promoted investment from all levels were deemed effective. Coordinating efforts to build support from internal and external partners assisted with building
successful organizations which promoted student success. These findings reinforced the “soft skills” employed by the leaders assisted with bridging families, businesses, and students together. Leadership practices of Inspire a Shared Vision, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) were prominent in this study.

Research has supported that the devotion to “soft skills” is beneficial for low-income urban environments experiencing trauma. Greig et al. (2021) studied how systems can become constituted around trauma and adversely impact the way neighborhoods, communities, schools, and families interact together. They conducted a systematic literature review revealing four themes: view of leadership, support and safety, organizational learning, and school culture. They used this research to create the Trauma-Informed Integral Leadership (TIIL) framework. This framework encourages leaders to lead with a humanistic lens viewing a school community as a system nested within systems to support practices. Emphasis is given to creating community space for people to be heard and challenges to be explored. People are inspired to take ownership and share responsibility for their concerns and contributions. Combining actions with a commitment to understanding schools locally, contextually, and holistically empower leaders to truly make a difference by addressing complexities within their communities and responding compassionately and effectively.

The need for community hope, resilience, and care is evidenced by statistics from the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (Bitsko et al., 2022) as well as Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (Bethell et al., 2017). Mental health, disorders, and adverse childhood experiences negatively impact all economic and ethnic populations. Students experiencing these issues have difficulty with adjustment, social interactions, and academic
performance (Keane & Evans, 2022). These alarming mental health statistics suggest the urgency for teacher student relationships.

Previous literature reinforces the importance of teacher-student relationships. Coyle et al. (2022) surveyed 310 ninth graders across eight different high schools in one urban school district in the greater New York area to investigate whether perceived support from teachers and peers would change the association between victimization and students’ perceptions of safety and equity at school. Victimization and social support were found to be contributing factors in understanding how youth perceive school with regards to equity. Findings support that teachers are central and important resources for bullied youth. When this support is lacking, students perceive schools as unsafe and unfair. This attribute is especially important for students of low socioeconomic status (SES) since research identifies these students experiencing more incidents of bullying (Winnaar et al., 2018) and less likely to have a role model at home in which they can confide in when victimized (Ahmadi et al., 2020).

In addition, Liang et al. (2019) studied the impact of teacher-student relationships (TSR) with urban students. Using a sample of 125 students from a basketball league for urban youth, their qualitative study explored how boys of color conceptualized and experienced school as well as their relationships with teachers and peers. Findings reveal an awareness of systemic and interpersonal challenges plagued with discrimination from teachers. Teacher-student relationships were illustrated as important for how the participants experienced respect. They recognized the need for caring teachers to help them grow. Culturally responsive teaching was deemed vital for promoting their academic, behavioral, and emotional progress. The key findings from this study found that teacher leaders can improve relations with this population through reciprocity, addressing bias, and removing barriers to academic success. Challenge the
Process and Encourage the Heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) were prominently displayed as effective practices.

Likewise, support for teacher-student relationships was evidenced in work done by Collins et al. (2017) studying the developmental trajectories of low-income urban boys in Northeast U.S. Quantitative data was gathered from 310 families. Findings revealed that levels of closeness among teachers and students decreased and levels of conflict increased from first to sixth grade. Researchers contributed an increase in internalizing and externalizing behaviors to a decrease in closeness. The results from this study emphasized that positive teacher-student relationships act as a protective factor for reducing negative behaviors, advancing peer relations, and improving self-regulation.

Moreover, Longobardi et al. (2019) examined teacher-student relationships in their quantitative study of students’ psychological adjustment as they transition from kindergarten to high school. 459 kindergarten, primary, and middle school students and their teachers from Northern Italy participated in the study. Results highlighted the importance of stable, low conflict teacher-student relationships (TSR) as a protective factor from increased internalizing and externalizing symptoms during transitions. Teachers are positive relational models who offer support which assists students with adjusting to new school contexts. This promotes academic outcomes as well as improving psychological, emotional, and relational wellbeing.

Consistent with psychological adjustment, teacher-student relationships are especially influential with at risk students. Liew et al. (2010) examined whether positive teacher-student relationships would moderate the relation between effortful control and future achievement. Participants were 761 first graders in Central and Southeast Texas who were identified as at risk for reading and math. Quantitative results indicated that aspects of child effortful control and
positive teacher-student relationships operate jointly to contribute to future academic achievement. Findings suggest that teachers play a compensatory role for students with self-regulatory difficulties by creating a low conflict learning environment. Classroom management was a significant mediating factor for promoting student achievement. As a marginalized population, strong teacher-student relationships offer academic opportunities for at-risk students. Leaders committed to Model the Way (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) can make significant impacts.

Scholars have identified the significance of leaders fostering relationships (Cann et al., 2020; Cansoy & Parlor, 2017; DeMatthews et al., 2019; Fisher, 2021; Flores & Kyere, 2020; Kudlats & Brown, 2021; Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020; Louis et al., 2016; Smith et al, 2021; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Guidance, conveying a vision, building professional capacity, facilitating high-quality learning experiences, collaboration with families, and leading with a humanistic lens are contributing factors that assist leaders with the formation of authentic relationships. Educational leaders can impact emotional, behavioral, and academic realms producing lasting effects. Fusing what is known about relationships and leaders’ ability to foster these allows schools to make continual systemic enhancements.

**School Culture and Climate**

Culture and climate are integrally important to all schools. They are often used interchangeably, however, these two concepts are distinctly different. Since leadership and relationships are at the forefront for influencing culture and climate, a clear understanding of these terms is necessary to assist educators with knowing where to put forth energy to make worthwhile advancements. Research supports that specific actions contribute to the development of positive school culture which in turn can impact climate (Fletcher et al., 2020; Gordon et al., 2021; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Moran & Moran, 2011; Turan & Bektas, 2013; White, 2020;).
The field of education lacks a clear and consistent definition of school culture. However, Gruenert & Whitaker (2015) refer to culture as “a social narcotic to which practically all of us are addicted” because we feel good when we belong to a group. Peterson & Deal (2011) refer to culture as the symbolic glue that holds school together and the patterns of behaviors that distinguish us from them. Bayar & Karaduman (2021) posit culture is formed because of life experiences and sharing among people. Although complex in nature, culture can be broken down into two simple dimensions: behavioral and operational functions. The behavioral aspects include the deep patterns of values, beliefs, rules, and traditions of the organization.

Operational features describe how things are executed throughout the day. This includes how students enter the building, how things are communicated, and what schedules look like. This system of meaning influences how people think and act.

In contrast, climate is the ethos of the building. Although not written, it is what people feel and perceive. It is a measurable quality defining perceptions of shared beliefs and values, relationships, safety, teaching and instruction, leadership, and the physical environment (Rudasill et al., 2018). It is the observable form of culture. Climate affects the attendance rate, the behaviors within the classroom, and even the success of the students (Buckman et al., 2021; Hoy, 1990; Liang et al., 2020). In 2014 the U.S. Department of Education recognized the importance of school climate creating guidelines on the need to foster climates that are positive, respectful, and safe (US Department of Education, 2014). Officials acknowledged that great schools and successful students cannot exist with safety being prioritized.

Research has supported the impact of positive school culture. Bayar and Karaduman (2021) examined the effects school culture has on the academic achievements of students. A qualitative study was employed using 12 high school students in the Ministry of National
Education. Participants responded to a) what is school culture, b) what are the effects of school culture on academic achievement, and c) what should be done at school to create a strong and positive culture. Perceptions of school culture revealed responses centered around social interactions, relationships, behaviors, traditions, and school achievements. Impacts of school culture on academic achievement included themes of motivation, a sense of competition, and developments in all respects. Participants suggested school culture could be strengthened through social activities, field trips, site improvements (such as laboratories and library needs), and an enhancement of relationships and attitudes. This study is important for leaders as they search for ways to create a sense of unity, motivation, and achievement.

Likewise, a literature review by Simpson (2021) posits that fostering teacher leadership improves school culture as well as benefitting students and teachers. Analyzing 30 articles from 2000-2020, she reported that teacher leadership cultivated a positive school culture through shared decision making and collaboration. A supportive environment promoted teacher confidence levels and job satisfaction. Students performance and achievement benefited since teachers were more cognizant of student needs, utilized research-based instructional practices, and remained student centered. Trust and parent involvement were also identified factors. Teacher leaders championed for their students advocating equity and showed commitment towards professional learning communities. As leaders seek to build professional capacity in their spaces, attention to these details should be granted.

Consistent with research, a quantitative study done by Parlar et al. (2017) revealed significant, positive relationships between teacher leadership culture and teacher professionalism. Participants were 254 teachers working in primary and secondary schools in Istanbul. Using a relational model, findings indicated that professional cooperation,
administrator’s support, and a supportive working environment impacted teacher professionalism. Shared leadership, encouraging participation, and providing opportunities for teacher leadership roles were found to be significant. Consequently, these variables increase teacher efficacy (Bandura, 1994) which assists with transforming schools into effective learning environments.

In addition, Aldridge and Fraser (2016) examined the relationship between school climate, teachers’ self-efficacy, and job satisfaction. Participants in this quantitative study included 781 Western Australian high-school teachers in 29 schools. Results support significant positive relationships between leadership style and teachers’ self-efficacy and job satisfaction. When leaders created a supportive community, where teachers can obtain assistance, advice, encouragement, and feel accepted, teachers’ sense of freedom and goal consensus increased. As a result, job satisfaction and teacher self-efficacy improved. These findings are important as administrators strive to retain teachers and strengthen school environments.

Congruent with leadership affecting culture, research also supports the impact leadership and relationships have on climate. Hoy & Hannum (1997) conducted a quantitative study in New Jersey with 86 middle schools to examine the relation between organizational health and student achievement. The Organizational Health Inventory for middle schools (OHI-RM) was employed. The dimensions studied included academic emphasis, teacher affiliation, collegial leadership, resource support, principal influence, and institutional integrity. The organizational health variables of academic emphasis, teacher affiliation, and resource support revealed a positive correlation. This was not surprising given that these aspects promote a school atmosphere focused on achievement and effectiveness. The other three variables, collegial leadership, principal influence, and institutional integrity, although deemed important, did not
reveal themselves as impacting climate. This study manifests the value of organizational health in schools. Middle school is a crucial time for students’ social and emotional development. Although academic achievement is one aspect of school effectiveness, it should not be the sole predictor in which to evaluate success.

In addition, Buckman et al. (2021) investigated the relationships between school climate and graduation rates for 470 public high schools in the state of Georgia. This quantitative study revealed a significant correlation among school climate and student achievement. Findings underscore that school leaders highly influence the academic, community, safety, and institutional environment constructs of school climate through organizational, instructional, and social interactions. Individual and environmental factors mutually shape each other. Therefore, collaborative efforts should be employed to strengthen school climate.

Furthermore, Coyle et al. (2022) studied the protective role of supportive teachers and peers in reducing the negative influence of victimization on student perceptions of safety and equity. Using a diverse and predominately low socioeconomic status (SES) sample of 310 ninth-grade students across eight schools in the greater New York City area, their quantitative study reinforced social support as being fundamental to promoting safe and equitable schools. A positive correlation was revealed between teacher support and perceptions of safety among victimized students. When teacher support was lacking, perceptions of the school being both safe and fair suffered. Research has indicated that low SES youth are more likely to have less involved parents, therefore the influence of supportive teachers is crucial to these students.

In addition, Liang et al. (2020) revealed the importance of school climate among boys of color. Their qualitative study included eight focus groups involving 23 middle school and 99 high school-aged boys of color participating in a community-driven basketball program. Five
themes emerged from their interviews: (a) school climate, (b) respect and disrespect, (c) encounters of discrimination, (d) hopes, wants, needs, and facilitative conditions, and (e) barriers to academic success. Teacher-student relationships were central to outcomes. The researchers stressed the importance of helping educators understand race, racism, and masculinity in an effort to improve students’ experiences and success. They suggest doing so will assist with creating healthier school climates.

Similarly, findings by White (2020) supported a sense of caring that cultivated a positive culture of learning and independence affecting school climate. Her qualitative study using participant observations allowed her to examine how kindergarten teachers can make time for relationship building and what strategies teachers can use to promote greater closeness with children. Participants were 20 kindergarten students in an urban area of the southeastern United States. Identified themes were teaching with intention, integrating relationship building into the curriculum, letting children take the lead, and capitalizing on small moments. Although the results represented just one classroom, the implication to generalize the importance of creating a culture of learning is important and has valuable impacts on climate.

Moreover, Smith et al. (2021) explored the link between principal leadership and family engagement across elementary and middle schools. They employed an advanced statistical methodology to explore specific aspects of principal leadership and family engagement in 18 schools in an urban area of Midwest United States. Through teacher and student responses, they confirmed a positive association. Leaders promoted family engagement by communicating expectations, setting definite standards of performance, conducting meaningful evaluations, discussing classroom issues with the teacher, and looking out for the personal welfare of the teacher. These findings support previous research which suggest that when families and school
work together and families are engaged in the educational process, students profit academically, behaviorally, and socially (Reinke et al., 2019).

Identifying leadership practices were the essence for Kouzes and Posner (2017). Analyzing an abundance of case studies and survey responses since 1982 allowed Kouzes and Posner to create The Five Practices framework for organizational leaders. They suggest that when leaders are at their personal best, the following actions and behaviors are exhibited: Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. Modeling the Way involves clarifying values and aligning actions with shared values. Inspiring others consists of imagining possibilities and attracting others to share these aspirations. When leaders Challenge the Process, innovation is kindled. Experimentation and taking risks are embraced. Enabling Others to Act promotes collaboration and facilitates relationships. Leaders take a strengths-based approach to improve programs and processes. Lastly, the act of Encourage the Heart reflects a leader’s appreciation for others. This action, which celebrates victories, creates a spirit of community within an organization. As a result of these practices, school culture and climate are strengthened.

The interactions and relationships within a school can influence both the community inside and outside a school. The positive relationships formed by leaders can have lasting effects for personal wellbeing, academic performance, social capital, and school culture and climate. As change agents promoting social justice, school improvement, and student success, the nexus between leadership and relationships is essential. Consideration to the traits and tools that enable leaders to foster effective relationships is important for advancing school improvement.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

Overview and Purpose

In this chapter, I will discuss how my professional role influences the research. An overview of the study, research design, and timeline for data collection and analysis is provided. Trustworthiness is addressed. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the leadership tools and traits that foster effective relationships. Continued research in the areas of school leadership and relationships is necessary because of its impact on organizational advancement. Research supports that a leader’s ability to stimulate relations between teachers, students, and families has lasting outcomes to teacher efficacy and wellbeing (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008; Cansoy & Parlor, 2017; Louis et al., 2016; Cann et al., 2020), students’ self-esteem and wellbeing (Kudlats & Brown, 2021; DeMatthews et al., 2019; Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020), and efforts towards school improvement (Flores & Kyere, 2020; Fisher, 2021; Smith et al., 2021).

Research Question

The study centers around the following research question:

*What leadership tools and traits are needed to foster effective relationships in rural school communities?*

Positionality Statement

As a middle school principal, I experience the difficulty school leaders face navigating socio-political and economic challenges. I realize that promoting social justice, school enhancement, and student success cannot be achieved alone. Gulsen & Gulevay (2014) posit that deliberate consideration to the practices and strategies that foster student agency, teacher
efficacy, and a sense of community are necessary to promote school climate. Consideration of the traits and tools that enable principals and teachers to cultivate effective relationships is important for stimulating school improvement in my own rural district. This study furthered existing literature with regards to increasing leadership capacity and relational impacts.

**Research Design**

A qualitative study was conducted in a small, rural district located in Northwest Pennsylvania. Kozleski (2017) favors qualitative methodologies since they shape and advance important questions of educational practice and policy. Through the superintendent’s recommendations, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 5 participants, including both administrators and teachers. Spanning 60-90 minutes, I gained insight into the practices and behaviors that leaders utilize to foster relationships in rural school communities. Leithwood, Sun, & Schumacker (2020) support a leaders’ ability to orchestrate positive relationships within an organization can have lasting effects for personal wellbeing, academic performance, social capital, and school climate. Face to face interviews allowed me to delve deeply into the participants’ shared, lived experiences. Information acquired assisted me with devising a personal improvement plan for leaders in my own rural school system.

**Recruitment of Participants**

Before conducting my study, I obtained permission from the district’s superintendent. Next, I completed the process to obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Duquesne University. Once IRB approval was received and site permission was granted, I sought ten participant recommendations from the superintendent. Participants were recruited from a small, rural district located in Northwest Pennsylvania. Recruitment was based on participants’ willingness to partake. Gathering information from these employees provided a
thorough view of leadership and relationships from the lens of administration and teachers.

“Change and sustained improvement are impossible without good educational leadership…” and “educational leadership and coordination…are not the sole responsibility of school principals; They can and should be exercised at all levels of the organizations” (Fullan et al., 2006, p. 95).

**Procedures**

Before conducting this study, a comprehensive review of the literature was completed. I prepared interview questions, received site permission, and secured IRB approval. Once IRB approval was received, I sought out participants by asking the district’s superintendent for a list of potential participants. Via email, I sent out an invitation to proposed participants to partake in the study. Details of the study, purpose, and confidentiality were addressed in the invitation. Participants had two weeks to consider partaking in the study. Upon receiving confirmation of participation, I set up dates to interview those partaking in my study. These individuals were provided a framework, the interview process, and questions. Interviews spanned over two weeks. I allotted 60-90 minutes for each interview. Two interviews were conducted via Zoom, and three were done face to face. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using Google.
Interview Process and Questions

Prior to the interview, participants were requested to choose 5 artifacts relating to each box of the framework. Using a story-telling technique, I asked participants to tell me about these. My goal was to learn about leadership qualities and how these impact relationships within their rural school environment. Probing questions followed allowing me a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences.

1. How do the core values you shared about this artifact relate to relationships?

2. Explain the inspirational qualities this artifact has for you or others.
3. Give examples of how this artifact exemplifies relational challenges, risks, or innovation.

4. Describe how the expertise of others is communicated and utilized throughout your building.

5. How does it make you or others feel?

The Issue of Trustworthiness

The issue of trustworthiness is critical to qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). In order for readers to determine the quality of the research, sufficient information should be provided. Trustworthiness can be established by examining the following four criteria: credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability.

Credibility

First, I established credibility using triangulation. Interviewing a variety of stakeholders provided a rich consensus of leadership traits that effectively foster relationships. The implementation of member checks ensured the accuracy of participants’ responses and added validity to the study. Interviews were videotaped. Recording responses added to the accuracy of responses and assisted with data collection.

Dependability

Dependability occurred by reporting and disclosing the design of the research details to participants. I used a pseudonym for the school from which I collected responses, and participant names were not disclosed. Participants were made aware that there were no risks associated with this study. A secure location was utilized to store notes, and a password-protected personal computer was used to hold electronic information. Access to this data was limited to myself.

Conformability
Confirmability aids to ensuring objectivity of the research study. To achieve confirmability, Moon et al. (2016) state, “Researchers must demonstrate that the results are clearly linked to the conclusions in a way that can be followed and, as a process, replicated” (p. 2). Thorough descriptions documenting the research design, data choices, and themes would promote corroboration by others interested in studying leadership and relationships.

Transferability

Transferability is another means to establish trustworthiness. This study explored the nexus of leadership and relationships. All schools are powered by human relationships, and leadership occurs through interpersonal interactions. Thus, despite demographics, transferability to other school organizations was achieved.

Data Analysis

After participants submitted responses, I analyzed the data using coding. Coding is a process by which the researcher categories data and assigns labels to each code. (Saldana, 2021). Arranging the data in a systematic order permitted me to identify themes. Although some researchers utilize computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) to assist with coding, I did not use this since I still needed to analyze responses. I compared the detected themes to the leadership traits recognized by Kouzes and Posner (2017). Their framework identifies five practices of exemplary leadership which directly relates to relationship building. They posit that leaders who Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) make extraordinary things happen in organizations. These relational attributes and actions strongly correlate to the tools and traits identified in my literature review.
This qualitative analysis calculated meaning to my research. Through coding, I was able to effectively identify themes from data, compare themes to identified tools and traits which foster relationships, and make suggestions for improving leadership in my rural district.

Deliberate consideration to leadership practices and strategies foster student agency, teacher efficacy, and a sense of community (Gurr et al., 2021). Thus, consideration to the traits and tools that enable leaders to foster effective relationships is valuable for making multi-faceted impacts in school communities.
CHAPTER IV
DESCRIPTION OF FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the leadership tools and traits that foster relationships in rural school communities. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with non-classroom leaders and classroom leaders in a rural school district located in Northwestern Pennsylvania. After collecting data, I explored themes related to the five exemplary practices identified by Kouzes and Posner (2017) which served as the theoretical framework for this study. The central research question guiding this case study was: What leadership tools and traits are needed to foster effective relationships in rural school communities?

Participants

Recruitment of participants was based on recommendations from the district’s superintendent. Six individuals, with experience ranging from elementary to high school, were invited to participate in the study. All six agreed to participate initially. Due to a family emergency, one withdrew before the interview process began.

Participants included three non-classroom leaders and two classroom leaders. The roles of these participants provided a comprehensive view of the district for this study. All identified as white. The span of rural school experience among the participants was 6 to 26 years. Non-gender specific pseudonyms were used to protect the participants’ identities. Pronouns were not self-identified. They were identified by me for the purpose of de-identification.

Before meeting with each participant, an email was sent revealing my framework and a list of questions. Participants were asked in advance to choose artifacts to speak about relevant
to the questions. The incorporation of artifacts into the interview process was selected in an effort to add richness to participant responses.

Upon the request of participants, three of the five interviews were conducted face-to-face. Two were carried out via Zoom. All were transcribed using Google and voice recorded to ensure validity with responses.

Table 4.1

Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Range of Experience</th>
<th>Demographic Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Non-classroom</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jess</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Non-classroom</td>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>Urban and Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avery</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Non-classroom</td>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>Suburban and Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wren</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chris

Chris holds a non-classroom position in the district. They have a high range of experience in rural education. The majority of their artifacts were hand-made or professionally-made wall hangings displaying quotes. Chris’ responses reflected leadership behaviors and actions rooted in teamwork, communication, growth, and care. Our Zoom interview lasted 72 minutes 18 seconds.

Jess

Jess is in the moderate range of experience as an educator in this rural district. They have both middle and high school experience. Currently, they fulfill both non-classroom and classroom roles. They are actively involved with professional development and extra-curricular activities. For our 43 minute 15 second face-to-face interview, we met in their classroom which was adorned with flags, posters, and incorporated flexible seating. Their artifacts included
physical objects as well as curricular initiatives. Jess’ responses centered around leaders showing acceptance, collaboration, and appreciation.

Avery

Avery is in the low range of experience in rural education. Although they have classroom experience, they serve as a non-classroom leader currently. Their physical artifacts signified progression and proactive efforts to avert crisis. Avery framed leadership as caring, collaborative, and forward-thinking. This Zoom interview lasted 25 minutes 57 seconds.

Dallas

Dallas is in the low range of experience in rural education teaching at both the middle and high school level. Their artifacts included physical objects and professional development programs. Leadership tools and traits identified by Dallas included encouragement, care, engagement, and a fail-forward attitude. Our face-to-face interview lasted for 41 minutes 23 seconds.

Wren

Wren is in the high range of experience as a classroom leader. They assist with numerous extra-curricular activities and curriculum writing. Wren’s artifacts were physical objects, curricular initiatives, and people. Their responses focused on leadership behaviors and actions exemplifying vision, risk-taking, relationships, and providing opportunities. This face-to-face interview lasted for 48 minutes 14 seconds.
Results

I will present the results of this study by answering each interview question in tabular and narrative form. Results were established through the development of themes related to each of the five interview questions. Credibility and validity were achieved by triangulating participants’ artifacts and responses. Interviews were transcribed and voice recorded to ensure accuracy.

Interview Question Responses

In advance of the interview process, participants were given a framework describing exemplary leadership practices (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) as well as the list of questions I would be asking them. I requested participants pre-select five artifacts to share. These would correlate to the five interview questions. The combination of these artifacts and participant responses allowed for themes and connections to appear. For my research, I focused on investigating “What leadership tools and traits are needed to foster effective relationships in rural school communities?” I used the five tenets (Model the Way, Inspire a Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart) from Kouzes and Posner (2017) to develop interview questions.

Interview question one. During my interviews, the first question I asked participants was “How do the core values you shared about this artifact relate to relationships?” This question correlates to Model the Way (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). When leaders Model the Way, they affirm their values and gain credibility by doing what they say they will do.
Table 4.2

*Interview Question 1, Artifacts, and Participant Quotes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Artifact</th>
<th>Participant Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do the core values you shared about this artifact relate to relationships?</td>
<td>• Quote: Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much. (Chris)</td>
<td>• I don’t have all the answers and therefore leads from a team perspective encouraging collaboration to achieve goals and progress (Chris).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Flags (Jess)</td>
<td>• They need to gain insight and have the capacity to communicate with others beyond their zip code (Jess).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rest area (Avery)</td>
<td>• They realize that if they give an hour nap, they get five hours of solid work as opposed to a three hour melt down with assistance (Avery).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sierpinski Triangle (Dallas)</td>
<td>• Students put their own personal spin on creating something while also learning math (Dallas).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Poster: Look closely at the present you are constructing. It should look like the one you are dreaming. (Wren)</td>
<td>• Traditional school doesn’t necessarily complement the future they are dreaming (Wren).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chris**

The response from Chris, a non-classroom leader, centered around leading from a “team perspective” and the benefit of collective efforts. They shared a quote admitting, “My leadership role has never been about me or what I can do. I don’t have all the answers and therefore lead from a team perspective encouraging collaboration to achieve goals and progress.”

“Connectedness and collaboration” were verbalized as core values.

As one person I can only guide and I can’t do it alone. So, we need to be together. If each person stays in their classroom and does their thing, hopefully they’re doing it well. But if we expand across departments or grade levels or to the other schools, we can create even more and better things.
Jess

Categorized as a non-classroom leader, Jess’ responses centered around relationships and learning from others. Pointing to the flags hanging in their classroom, Jess stated how travel experiences are used to improve their pedagogy and promote cultural awareness. “Traveling allows me to teach authentically impressing the value of other nationalities.” With the district being rural, this is especially important since a majority of these students lack cultural exposure and experiences. “My area needs more models teaching cultural awareness and the importance of learning another language. They need to gain insight and have the capacity to communicate with others beyond their zip code.”

Avery

Avery’s responses were deeply rooted in forming relationships as a means to helping students, families, and colleagues. They talked about creating an alternative place for students to rest. This artifact represents a student-centered approach to serving children. The idea of providing a place to rest was motivated by a student needing a comfortable place to sleep so they could function throughout the day. Since being created, it has become a safe place for other students to take a break, “pour their hearts out”, and rest. Avery communicated that classroom teachers have embraced this solution since its implementation.

For the high-needs kiddos, like the emotional support kiddos, the teachers recognize the concept of giving and taking. They realize that if they give an hour nap, they get five hours of solid work as opposed to a three hour melt down with assistance. For the other kids, it took me a long time for me to build my reputation and have the teachers be welcoming of me and not intrusive. Now that it’s established, they realize it’s just me meeting with kids.
Dallas

Dallas, a classroom leader, verbalized a commitment to designing lessons that engage students and promote communication. Sharing a lesson on the Sierpinski triangle as an artifact, they explained how students incorporate likes and dislikes into creating 2D and 3D projects. “Students put their own personal spin on creating something while also learning.” Using a gallery walk, students learn about each other and become aware of commonalities. Dallas feels this positively affects the learning environment promoting communication.

In class I share a project made by a former student. She was super into Looney Toons. Using only a compass, she created a colorful design which included all sorts of characters from Looney Toons in each of the triangles. It was constructed perfectly! Keeping this model and sharing it with other classes has prompted really great conversation causing students to wonder, how did she do this?

Wren

Wren, another classroom leader, chose a variety of motivational posters to exemplify their core values. They spoke in detail about “Look closely at the present you are constructing. It should look like the one you are dreaming”. For non-traditional students, Wren realized that “school doesn’t necessarily complement the future they are dreaming”. Therefore, they designed project-based units centered on students’ needs and interests. Working collaboratively with other departments and administration, a class has been generated that aligns with these students’ dreams and prepares them for the future. They design brochures, make projects, and do presentations relevant to aspired career paths.

Interview question two. The second question I asked participants was “Explain the inspirational qualities of this artifact for you or others.” This question is aligned to the practice

Table 4.3

*Interview Question 2, Artifacts, and Participant Quotes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Artifact</th>
<th>Participant Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explain the inspirational qualities of this artifact for you or others.</td>
<td>• Wall hanging: Teachers who inspire realize there will always be rocks in the road. (Chris)</td>
<td>• We can use these challenges as opportunities. We need to work with them not against them (Chris).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Student chairs (Jess)</td>
<td>• Students don’t need to be in rows to learn (Jess).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Curricular Program (Avery)</td>
<td>• It is so much more than the concepts they’re learning (Avery).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mission statement (Dallas)</td>
<td>• My personal mission is to reduce math anxiety and make students comfortable by encouraging a growth mindset to become persistent life-long problem solvers (Dallas).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Student canvas (Wren)</td>
<td>• Opportunity is not a lengthy visitor (Wren).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chris**

Inspired to use stumbling blocks to their advantage, Chris shared the quote, “Teachers who inspire realize there will always be rocks in the road.” To this they spoke about how we don’t live in a perfect, educational society. “We’re in the people business, so there’s going to be issues. We can use these challenges as opportunities. We need to work with them, not against them.” They use supports like a mental health team, resource officer, and tutor team to move students, teachers, and families forward. “There’s no denying it, it’s how we handle challenges and use the support that’s around us.”
Jess

Artifact two for Jess were student chairs. Incorporating flexible seating aligns to their vision to “create a classroom different from what I experienced. The chairs symbolize a proficiency-based model where any student can achieve.” Focus is placed on students “acquiring language over learning language”. The chairs represent change and possibility. “Students don’t need to be in rows to learn. Flexibility promotes interaction and communication.” When probed how to branch this idea out to others within the building, they shared that “pockets of possibilities” are already being seen. Continued collaboration and sharing at faculty meetings will encourage change.

Avery

Avery spoke about a curricular program they spearhead for question two. A community event is hosted each spring allowing students to invite a role model. “It is so much more than just the concepts they’re learning. The conversations that come out of it and hearing grown adults say, I wish I would have had someone tell me this when I was this age.” The program’s goal is to promote confidence and positive decision making. “We don’t judge anyone for what they don’t know. You enter every situation making the best choices with the knowledge you have that day.”

Dallas

Dallas shared a personal mission statement for artifact two. Recognizing that certain subjects cause stress to students, their goal is to help reduce anxiety. When students see this, Dallas said sometimes jokes are made. Students question if they “really believe this”. Their response is “yes”. Dallas hopes to transcend this positive belief onto others.
Wren

When interviewed, Wren pointed to a canvas as an artifact. It displayed a quote about opportunity. It was a gift given by students in appreciation of Wren reminding them to live for the moment because you may not have this opportunity again. Wren promotes opportunities being embraced because “you don’t know where they will take you, and you may never have the moment again.”

Interview question three. Interview question three was “Give examples of how this artifact exemplifies relational challenges, risks, or innovation.”. This connects to Challenge the Process (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Challenge the Process means looking for opportunities and innovative ways to make improvements. Experimentation is embraced. Taking risks and learning from mistakes are common behaviors.

Table 4.4

*Interview Question 3, Artifacts, and Participant Quotes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Artifact</th>
<th>Participant Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Give examples of how this artifact exemplifies relational challenges, risks, or innovation. | • Eureka Math/social emotional poster (Chris)  
• Curricular opportunities (Jess)  
• Care documents (Avery)  
• Professional Development Model (Dallas)  
• Project-based units (Wren) | • But it’s hard to trust the process when you’re used to doing the same thing (Chris).  
• I’ve gained an awareness of inclusion which strengthens me as a professional (Jess).  
• We are trying to save our school system from a crisis response (Avery)  
• Like if we can take that model and work as a team to determine what needs to be done moving forward here, great things can happen (Dallas).  
• I didn’t know what would happen so I just took the idea and ran to see what would happen (Wren). |
Chris

Chris identified two separate artifacts for question three: Eureka Math and social emotional learning. From a curricular perspective, they shared the district’s implementation of a new math series. They verbalized that this initiative has either been “supported or met with resistance”. For those welcoming it, Chris asserts that it boils down to vision and mindset.

Those with an open mind set are embracing the change. They are trusting the process. Growth is being seen. But it’s hard to trust the process when you’re used to doing the same thing. If you do what you’ve always done, you’re going to get the same results. The teachers are seeing the fruits of their labor and recognizing the strength of the program even though it’s different from what they’re accustomed to doing.

For social emotional learning, they pointed to a large sheet of paper under a table. The words written on it say, “I feel _____ when you _____ because _____. I want you to _______. I hope you can forgive me.” Their goal is to be purposeful with office referrals. In recent district surveys, students mentioned self-regulation and conflict resolutions as focal points. They believe the action of completing this sheet with students encourages teachers to implement a similar process within the classroom.

For behavioral issues, students need to have their voices heard and certainly be held accountable for their actions. But they need to be taught how to become active listeners hearing how their actions negatively impact others. Being able to generate restorative behaviors is essential. It’s a learning process that has a huge return on investment not just for school but for society.

Chris believes this generation hasn’t developed skills as soundly as previous generations “perhaps due to COVID and/or social media”. They contend that this process promotes healthy relationships and communication.

Jess

Jess spoke of curricular change as an artifact for question three “Give examples of how this artifact exemplifies relational challenges, risks, or innovation.” Prior to this year, in order to
take certain classes, students needed to be identified as gifted or highly recommended. In doing so, they never experienced inclusion as a classroom teacher. This year, administration offered specific curricular opportunities to anyone. Although class loads have increased to capacity, Jess noted the students are “flourishing”. This change has benefited not only the students, but Jess’ non-classroom role. “I’ve gained an awareness of inclusion which strengthens me as a professional. My role has become more comprehensive because now I see, oh, you have trouble with that student. Or hey, this strategy works best with this kid.”

Avery

Avery shared care documents. They explained, “These are innovative because they never existed. They are self-designed, one-page cheat sheets specifying the needs of high-risk students.” The behaviors of these students can be challenging for teachers, so Avery uses their expertise to create a document which portrays students’ pictures, academic needs, and strategies that do and don’t work for them. These are included in substitute plans and used during transition meetings for when students leave the elementary setting. Avery views them as beneficial for avoiding crisis situations. “We are trying to save our entire school system from a crisis response, and that starts with how you interact with a student.”

Dallas

Dallas spoke of the district’s Professional Development Model when interviewed. They appreciate that it’s “decentralized and teacher-led”. Teachers have flexibility to try things that haven’t been tried. They related this to a previous district’s Collective Efficacy Model. “My department created a spiral curriculum based on core content that eliminated fluff. Although it was test focused, it was grounded in really good stuff.” He felt the model was significant due to “staff buy-in”. The groundwork inspired Dallas to envision professional possibilities in their
new district. “Like if we can take that model and work as a team to determine what needs to be done moving forward here, great things can happen.”

**Wren**

Wren mentioned non-traditional students as an artifact for question three “Give examples of how this artifact exemplifies relational challenges, risks, or innovation.” Wren acknowledged pre-existing classes did not meet these students’ needs and were not interesting to them. As a result, these students became a distraction for peers and a behavioral challenge. Wren posed the idea of creating a project-based learning class to the administrative team. With approval, they began researching other programs and corresponding with other districts. The birth of a new class, specific to this group of students, occurred. “I didn’t know what would happen. So, I just took the idea and ran to see what would happen.” The program continues to grow and improve. Students are getting off-site experience from local businesses for a full semester, and administration is regularly involved.

**Interview question four.** The fourth question asked to my interview participants was “Describe how the expertise of others is communicated and utilized throughout your building.”. Kouzes and Posner (2017) categorize Enable Others to Act as an exemplary practice employed by leaders. Fostering collaboration, facilitating relationships, and using the strengths of others develop competencies. They state, “You become more powerful when you give your power away.” (Kouzes & Posner, 2017, p. 221).
Table 4.5

*Interview Question 4, Artifacts, and Participant Quotes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Artifact</th>
<th>Participant Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Describe how the expertise of others is communicated and utilized throughout your building.</td>
<td>• Plaques: Be Brave, Reach Live Fly (Chris)</td>
<td>• As a leader, I give them permission, support, validation, and let them know it’s ok to make mistakes (Chris).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Padlet (Jess)</td>
<td>• the implementation of the Padlet continues to permit employees to be genuine and fail forward safely (Jess).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Faculty Meetings (Avery)</td>
<td>• But you can’t help but form relationships when you’re working this close with others (Avery).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Growth mindset posters (Dallas)</td>
<td>• It’s important to communicate 1% percent gains (Dallas).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Colleagues (Wren)</td>
<td>• We use each other’s strengths to build our program (Wren).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chris**

When asked question four, Chris pointed to a variety of wall hangings. The first said, “I get by with a little help from my friends.” An association to relationship building was made.

If you stay siloed, you’re going to keep doing what you’ve always done. But if you open your space to collaboration and team execution, you realize you can’t do this alone. You realize we’re all in this together. As a leader, I give them permission, support, validation, and let them know it’s ok to make mistakes. It’s about being non-judgmental and learning from mistakes.

The next two plaques displayed “Be brave” and “Reach, live, fly”. Inner excitement rises when teachers propose new ideas to Chris.

I’m like yeah! Go for it. If it works, great. We’re all better for it. If it doesn’t, identify why, what can we do differently, what can we learn from it, what benefits us, and what can we do to enhance it. Knowing your staff and tapping into aspiring teacher leaders and giving them permission to fly strengthens our building.

**Jess**

Jess referred to the district’s Padlet when asked question four. First, they gave an explanation about the district’s professional learning event which had occurred over the summer.
Using district volunteers, a summer event was hosted over the course of three days to engage and explore instructional systems, inclusive practices, and social emotional learning. Participants followed a framework rooted in identification, investigation, selection, implementation, and reflection. Individual action learning plans were developed by participants with the intent to create a district rooted in collective efficacy. The Padlet used a 3, 2, 1 framework. Participants posted three take-aways, listed two colleagues who can support efforts moving forward, and wrote one declarative statement about their action learning journey.

Jess commented that this event was “innovative and purposeful”. They believed “since nothing was forced upon staff, the implementation of the Padlet continues to permit employees to be genuine and fail forward safely”.

Avery

When asked question four, “Describe how the expertise of others is communicated and utilized throughout your building”, Avery mentioned faculty meetings becoming “an open forum to highlight strengths”. Staff also uses this time to share ideas and suggestions for improving the school community. A monthly email asks staff if they have information to be added to the meeting’s agenda. Avery has taken advantage of this opportunity to convey tips for improving emotional health. “The outcome has promoted a positive school-family community”. Surprisingly, creating a school community was initially a challenge for Avery. “My mindset was that I didn’t come to school to make friends. This is work. I’m not here to make friends. But you can’t help but form relationships when you’re working this close with others.”

Dallas

Dallas directed my attention to growth mindset posters displayed on the classroom walls. During the interview, they commented how an emphasis on progress over perfection is communicated to students. “It’s important to communicate 1% percent gains.” Dallas stated although the posters are for students’ benefit, they also serve as professional reminders.
Everyone gets bogged down. Education is exhausting. But it’s important to realize you’re not the only one going through this. Due to departmentalization, I like to visit other classes to see what they’re doing and learn from them. Otherwise, you start to develop impostor syndrome and doubt yourself. So, I try to be mindful of what I’ve picked up from others and remind myself that everything doesn’t have to be accomplished in one year.

**Wren**

Wren spoke about the interactions with colleagues for artifact four. Pictures of their annual summer outings were shared. These include going golfing, ax throwing, and kayaking.

Wren explained how their cohesiveness as a team strengthens their department.

On any given day, you can see us standing in the hallways, sharing ideas and strategies, collaborating on content, and planning together. We like to see what others do so we can add to our department. We use each other’s strengths to build our program. It’s really weird how we just fell into this.

**Interview question five.** The fifth question I posed to participants was “How does artifact five make you or others feel?” It corresponds to the fifth tenant identified by Kouzes and Posner (2017), Encourage the Heart. Contributions are recognized, appreciation is shown, and celebrations occur. A spirit of community ensues as a result of collective efforts and accomplishing common goals. Personal involvement, feedback, and gratitude are essential components.
Table 4.6

Interview Question 5, Artifacts, and Participant Quotes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Artifact</th>
<th>Participant Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Find an artifact and describe how it makes her or others feel.</td>
<td>• Thank you for helping me grow.  (Chris)</td>
<td>• True leaders just lead with their heart (Chris).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Photograph (Jess)</td>
<td>• Appreciation matters. I can’t show you an actual artifact. It’s just a feeling (Jess).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Card game; jug (Avery)</td>
<td>• The kids know my story by the things in my office (Avery).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• School climate (Dallas)</td>
<td>• There is a general attitude shift among teachers and day to day interactions add up to more than anything I’ve ever felt (Dallas).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Soup (Wren)</td>
<td>• It boils down to relationships. It’s pretty special (Wren).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chris

When I asked Chris interview question five, they paused, looked around, and became tearful. Several artifacts were pointed out (e.g. You have left a permanent mark on me.).

I get choked up because it has nothing to do with me personally. I didn’t teach them. I didn’t make somebody’s test score go up. I didn’t improve somebody’s teaching. God tapped me on the shoulder and put me in a place to create an environment and put me in this role. It’s so humbling.

When asked to interpret the African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child.”, Chris responded with tears running down their cheeks.

I’m leading this village and everyone’s working. I just happen to be the chief. And, the perspective that the village could suffer as a result of the tone I set…why can’t all chiefs set a tone grounded in love and care and support? Why don’t all have a belief in others and inspire them to do this important work? Why do I have to be the exception? I’m just genuine. I believe what I say. When you enter this building, you will be loved, supported, and happy. This is not just a job or career. It’s a way of being. It’s authenticity. True leaders just lead with their heart.

Jess

Jess chose a photograph for artifact five. They explained feeling “proud for allowing them to grow in their new role”. Being the most experienced coach, Jess has had to bite their
tongue to permit new ways of doing things to develop the program. They wiped a tear off their cheek sharing, “It wasn’t easy. But it’s more than a program. And I know they will outlast me. I have to be a patient leader. I have to let it grow beyond what I think it should be.” Jess continued to expand on the question and stated the word “appreciation”. When asked why they mentioned that word, they continued:

It’s what gets you to work. It boils down to paying it forward with actions not necessarily things. Cards are nice, and I display them. But it’s like when students see teachers coming into each other’s rooms and witness collaboration and communication. We’re here to help each other. In this building, there is an all-in atmosphere. You know that someone will be there to catch you if you fall. Relationships are genuine. Appreciation matters. I can’t show you an actual artifact. It’s just a feeling.

Avery

Avery’s artifact was Think Sheets. “We were having a really challenging time with some kiddos. And I needed to find a way to help them grow instead of staying in the negative place they were in.” They are used with students when they’re having a difficult time. They noted that because these are simplistic in nature (circle the picture), significant growth in students’ ability to reflect on their actions and feelings. “It is so inspiring to see these kids reflect on what was happening.” The impact of the Think Sheets has inspired them to share these with staff members permitting uncomfortable situations to become opportunities of growth. They shared, “Instead of being in a negative place, everyone is just growing.”.

I proceeded to ask Avery to disclose how they know when their purpose is being accomplished. Avery said they often use the words “when you think of me”. To this they talked about a pack of playing cards given from a student. Coming from a family with few resources, Avery was impressed that the mother of this student was trying to instill the value of doing chores, learning responsibility, and compassion for others. The student saved their
allowance and purchased cards noting they wanted to play this card game, and Avery didn’t have it.

It’s funny how things just come with you through life. Like I have a drawing from the first kid I ever worked with. And kids come into my office, look at it, and I get to tell them about that student. And that jug. The kids know my story by the things in my office.

Dallas

For the final interview question, Dallas talked about school climate. They reflected on the positive change in the school’s atmosphere comparing it to when they attended this school as a child. Dallas attributed this to “generational change and a palpable commitment to meet students’ needs. There is a general attitude shift among teachers and day-to-day interactions add up to more than anything I’ve ever felt.” When prompted to share an artifact that Dallas received from someone, they chose a hand-painted, orange rock with the word “iconic” written on it. They explained it came from a student several years ago when instructing at the Governor’s School Program.

They painted it orange knowing it was my favorite color. And they painted the word iconic on it. I thought that was a very interesting way to describe myself. I never had anyone do this before or thought of myself this way. But as a teacher, I realize that I do a lot of unique things as a math teacher. And, I’ve tried to give that rock up over the years. But I find myself…I just can’t give it up.

Wren

Wren pulled a frame off their desk during our interview. Inside the frame was a picture of soup. Two years ago, a student gave this to them. Wren described this student as being “unmotivated”. The student’s parents warned them that they only cared about baseball. However, shortly after school started, the parents sent an email exclaiming, “They love school. They love everything you’ve done.” Wren shared that they’d stand out by the garbage can with staff while classes transitioned chatting. One day the student jokes, “Have you ever talked to
someone and they’re so dumb that you say I could eat alphabet soup and crap out a better answer than you?” COVID struck the following week. Wren was devastated and explained that they’d “set up Google meets and eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches” with this particular student. They were “that kid.” When prompted to reflect on what they did to cause this student to come to school, Wren attributed success to

I’m not an open book teacher reading bell to bell. I start with a daily warm up question or caption. Sometimes we just laugh. I get bored reading the same text three times a day just like they do having to only read it once. For me, it’s about the interaction and the communication. It boils down to relationships. It’s pretty special.

**Theme Development**

Kouzes and Posner (2017) posit that leadership is not a position but rather a collection of practices and behaviors. They identified five exemplary leadership practices: Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. For the development of interview questions, I utilized the tenets from Kouzes and Posner (2017) to explore the tools and traits leaders exercise to foster relationships in rural school communities.

**Theoretical Framework and Identified Themes**

When interviewed, participants gave responses which reflected their roles. Their experience provided a lens of leadership which allowed me to correlate responses to the five exemplary practices identified by Kouzes and Posner (2017).

To analyze data, an initial coding, or free coding, system was employed. This system breaks down qualitative data into discrete parts, allows for examination, and compares the parts for similarities and differences (Saldana, 2021; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After each interview, I listened to the recording, read through the transcribed conversation, and reviewed my personal notes. Corrections and additions to the transcriptions were made. Member checks were
conducted to guarantee accuracy with individual participant’s responses. I continued to listen to the recordings and read through the transcripts a third time noting occurring patterns.

When exploring the data, identifiable themes related to Kouzes and Posner (2017) theoretical framework became evident. Artifacts and participants’ responses were categorized. I created a list of codes for each theme using a tabular format. Themes were highlighted using different colors. In reviewing the transcripts for a fourth time, I was able to associate quotes with the codes. I continued to assess the data multiple times offering me a greater understanding of the tools and traits that the leaders interviewed employed to foster relationships in their rural school setting. Artifacts and responses from semi-structured interviews revealed the following themes: visionary, providing opportunities, reflective practices, and relationships.

**Theme: Visionary**

Table 4.7 demonstrates the codes connected to the first theme of having a vision. These leaders displayed a commitment to thinking differently when challenges arise. They were attentive to individual students’ needs as well as systemic challenges. Having a comprehensive view of organizational needs prompted leaders to take responsive action overcoming obstacles.
The theme of having a vision emerged from codes in which participants envisioned a future which offers new opportunities through innovation and inspiration. Giving individual students what they need and uniting to address systemic challenges were notable codes. A school climate of limitless possibilities was communicated. Their actions reflect a dedication to transcending lives.

**Code: Addressing student needs.** All five participants addressed the weight of mental health issues. Their empathy and professionalism led them to prioritize emotional needs and generate solutions for providing support and comfort. Chris fosters active
listening skills and identifying restorative behaviors during office referrals. Avery described creating a safe place to sleep, “pour their hearts out”, and talk freely. Dallas shared a personal mission statement to reduce student anxiety emphasizing progress over perfection. They also design unique lessons which are relevant and relatable to students, reducing anxiety. Wren spoke candidly about non-traditional students saying, “They don’t need to read Shakespeare as a senior. They need to be focused on things that get them prepared to go where they want to go and what they want to do.” Lacking motivation, these students became a distraction to the learning environment. Therefore, Wren became committed to researching alternative learning opportunities, conversed with administration, and designed project-based units to compliment these students’ future aspirations.

**Code: Addressing systemic challenges.** Educators are met with roadblocks consistently. Chris pointed out

> We’re in the people business. We’re all dealing with different things in our lives, therefore, that will create issues. We need to use these challenges as opportunities. We need to work with them not against. And we need to use the supports we have to move forward.

Maximizing resources and support on campus allows Chris to assist students, teachers, and families. Jess referenced the chairs in their room. Choosing not to have desks reflects a desire to create a classroom different from what they experienced. Using a proficiency model, Jess’ desire is to generate a space where any student can achieve. Their focus is on students “acquiring, not learning language” declaring, “Students don’t need to be in rows to learn.” Jess also recognized the need to “bite” their tongue in her coaching role. When new coaches joined, they verbalized, “It wasn’t easy. But it’s more than a program. And I know they will outlast me. I have to be a patient leader. I have to let it grow beyond what I think it should be.” Wren acknowledged the
behaviors of non-traditional students were a result of their needs not being met. Their reaction was to design project-based units correlated to career goals. As a result, students are creating brochures, projects, and presentations that match their interests and future careers.

**Theme: Providing Opportunities**

Table 4.8 depicts the codes associated with the theme of providing opportunities. Codes connected to the theme of providing opportunities were based on the leaders’ actions. These include making curricular changes, mentoring, and using professional development to strengthen their own practices in an effort to improve others. Leaders appeared excited to embrace the unknown.
Table 4.8

*Theme: Providing Opportunities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Explanation of Code</th>
<th>Associated Behavior(s)</th>
<th>Sample Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Adapting              | Thinking/teaching differently            | Creating something new                                                                  | Designing new math lessons  
Project-based units  
Curricular opportunities for all  
Permission to try something new  
“Trust the process”  
“I didn’t know what would happen, so I just took the idea and ran to see what would happen.” |
| Mentoring             | coach/director                           | giving advice                                                                           | Coaching  
Director  
Curriculum advisor  
“Opportunity is not a lengthy visitor.” |
| Professional Development | collaborating, learning, and supporting others | using own people for professional development                                             | summer event  
Induction Plan  
Faculty meetings  
Induction Plan  
“If you stay siloed, you’re going to keep getting what you’ve always done.” |

The theme of providing opportunities developed from codes that were associated with ways in which school leaders clarified their values and aligned their own actions with these values. Administrators giving permission for curricular changes, teachers willing to stray from traditional teaching, staff using mentoring as a means to promote opportunity, and professional development rooted in innovation, support, and action were noted as codes. As a result, a
positive school culture has been created illuminating the professional strengths of others, advancing programs and processes, and encouraging risk taking.

**Code: Adapting Curriculum.** Participants consistently shared evidence of altering curriculum. Chris encourages staff to try new ideas and make curricular adaptations.

When teachers come in with ideas, I’m like yeah! Go for it. If it works, great—we’re all the better for it. If it doesn’t, identify why, what can we do differently, what can we learn from it, what benefits us, and what can we do to enhance it (Chris).

Designing project-based units was supported by the administration of Wren. They took a risk creating outcomes that would benefit non-traditional students. Wren commented, “I didn’t know what would happen, so I just took the idea and ran to see what would happen.” Dallas strives to design engaging math lessons to promote communication and a community of learners causing students to question how others do things.

Chris also noted that curricular changes are inevitable in education. They shared the value of “trusting the process” with the implementation of Eureka math.

Those with an open mindset are embracing the change. They are trusting the process. Growth is being seen. But it’s hard to trust the process when you’re used to doing the same thing. If you do what you’ve always done, you’re going to get the same results. Most of the teachers are seeing the fruits of their labor and recognizing the strength of the program even though it’s different from what they’re accustomed to doing (Chris).

**Code: Mentoring.** Being an advisor, director, and curricular facilitator affords Jess, Avery, and Wren the unique opportunity to mentor youth. They all spoke about providing inspiration and skills to students. Jess’ mentoring assists a new group of coaches to develop a better extra-curricular program. Avery is inspiring students to become confident and courageous in a curricular program. The impact of Wren’s mentorship was acknowledged when a cast presented them with a canvas displaying “Opportunity is not a lengthy visitor.” Wren
consistently communicates to students, “You never know where an opportunity is going to take you nor do you know if you’ll have the opportunity again. Embrace the moment.”

**Code: Professional Development.** Chris, Jess, Avery and Dallas made positive references to their district utilizing staff for professional development opportunities. A summer event, Induction Program, and faculty meetings provide the opportunity for staff to learn through reciprocity. All commented that using district personnel strengthens collective efficacy.

Relevant to building professional capacity, Chris said, “If you stay siloed, you’re going to keep getting what you’ve always done.”

**Theme: Reflective Practices**

Table 4.9 portrays the codes related to the theme of reflective practices. Those interviewed were devoted to reflecting on their practices in an effort to make personal improvements as well as organizational advancements. They accomplished this through teamwork, a commitment to perseverance, and by being flexible. Visiting each other’s classrooms, posting on the Padlet, and developing care documents exemplified a commitment to advancement. Their responses reflect a school culture welcoming failures and viewing mistakes as learning opportunities.
### Table 4.9

**Theme: Reflective Practices**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Explanation of Code</th>
<th>Associated Behavior(s)</th>
<th>Sample Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teamwork</strong></td>
<td>sharing with colleagues</td>
<td>willingly sharing expertise</td>
<td>classroom visits, faculty meetings, Padlet care document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Connectedness and collaboration support my leadership role.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“The Padlet allows employees to be genuine and fail forward safely.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“We are trying to save the entire school from a crisis response, and that starts with how you interact with a student.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perseverance</strong></td>
<td>not giving up</td>
<td>focus on progress over perfection</td>
<td>1% gains, Classroom posters, Project-based units, Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“As a leader, I give them permission to, support, validation, and let them know it’s ok to make mistakes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flexibility</strong></td>
<td>able to adapt to changes</td>
<td>straying from status quo</td>
<td>curriculum, Safe place to rest, Coaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I’m proud of myself because I learned to be a patient leader. It wasn’t easy, but I knew it was more than a program.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The theme of reflective practices surfaced from codes in which participants actively considered ways to improve professional practices as well as their educational setting. Teamwork, perseverance, and flexibility served as foundational elements when considering how to strengthen competencies.

**Code: Teamwork.** Interviews reflected the influence of others as essential for growing organizational capacity. Chris shared a Helen Keller quote, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” They expanded on a cultural commitment acknowledging that they don’t have all the answers and added, “Connectedness and collaboration support my leadership role.” Jess spoke about the Padlet from a summer event promoting collaboration. “The Padlet used a 3, 2, 1 framework. Participants posted three take-aways, listed two colleagues who can support efforts moving forward, and wrote one declarative statement about their action learning journey.” Avery noted their self-created care documents. These cheat sheets provide staff with strategies to promote success with at-risk students. “We are trying to save our entire school system from a crisis response, and that starts with how you interact with a student.” They also serve beneficial as the students transition to middle school.

**Code: Perseverance.** The code of perseverance was prevalent during interviews. Artifacts included inspirational classroom posters, a mission statement, and mentoring positions. These serve as positive reminders for students to forge forward when presented with hardships. Wren shared a poster about strength: “A river cuts through a rock not because of its power but its persistence”. Students are surprised when “they expect a worksheet and find out that’s not how I teach.” Dallas communicated how they live by their mission statement and consistently emphasized 1% gains of progress over
perfection. Dallas believes this encourages students to chunk goals towards success. Jess teaches the power of perseverance when facilitating a curricular program. Students are given positive affirmations, reminded of their self-worth, and taught strategies to become strong and confident. “We encourage them to learn from mistakes and become better prepared for the future. No one is ever judged. It’s about not giving up.”

**Code: Flexibility.** Avery is able to successfully address students’ emotional needs by providing a special place to rest. The flexibility of this space permits students to feel safe and loved. Wren strayed from the traditional curriculum to develop engaging units for students commenting, “They don’t need to read Shakespeare as a senior. They need to be focused on things that get them prepared to go where they want to go and what they want to do.” Jess showed patience allowing new coaches to develop a program unique to their style.

**Theme: Relationships**

Table 4.10 reveals the codes associated with the theme of relationships. As I met with all the participants, this area prevailed. All expressed the vitality of relationships for what they do and how they execute actions. As participants spoke about relationships, I noted emotional responses. Several wiped away tears. Physical artifacts such as shoes, photographs, playing cards, a jug, jewelry, wall hangings, and a rock were shared. Curricular programs, professional development events, and extra-curricular activities aided participants to address mental health issues. Relationship building was central to making gains with students and promoting organizational capacity.
Table 4.10

*Theme: Relationships*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Explanation of Code</th>
<th>Associated Behavior(s)</th>
<th>Sample Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Relationship building | making relationships| bonds with others        | Google meet lunches  
Care  
Time spent  
“We’d set up Google  
meets and eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.”  
True leaders just lead with their heart.” |
| Sources of support    | colleagues, agencies, experts | accessing expertise | Tutors  
School-based team  
Interactions  
Instructional coaches  
“I can’t do all of it, so we need to be together.” |
| Trust                 | the belief in others; opening yourself up to others | demonstrating and building trust | Padlet  
Classroom visits  
Promoting risks  
“It boils down to relationships. It’s pretty special.”  
“We’ve got each other’s backs and that makes us stronger as a team.”  
“As a leader, I give them permission” |
| Appreciation          | verbal or tangible  | things given “just” because | playing cards  
jug  
soup  
Orange rock  
Bracelet and drawings  
“The students know my story by the things in my office.” |
The theme of relationships appeared from codes as participants engaged in collaboration and sought out support. As they fostered bonds, trust was built, and strong relationships were facilitated. Appreciation resonated. It was noted that the support of others strengthens people, situations, and programs.

**Code: Relationship building.** Bonds with students were obvious. Wren told the story of a student who initially hated school. As the year progressed, they learned to enjoy school and became “that kid”. When COVID forced online learning, Wren would “set up Google meets and eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches” with them because they didn’t want momentum to be lost. At the conclusion of the year, they gave Wren a framed picture of soup reminiscing about a joke told in the hallway. Becoming tearful, Wren said, “That soup became pretty special.”

When talking about their role, Chris declared, “True leaders just lead with their heart.” They believe creating a space where students feel “loved, supported, and happy” is essential in school. Humility resonated among these participants acknowledging they didn’t do anything special. They just “cared”.

**Code: Sources of Support.** Chris acknowledged the benefit of using school-wide support proclaiming, “I can’t do it all, so we need to be together.” They spoke of creating a culture of unity and using everyone’s talents to strengthen the organization. Instructional coaches, tutors, and school-based supports were recognized as being significant to the school’s success. Dallas also expressed the importance of collective efficacy when conversing about the curriculum from a previous school. “In this district it was the norm to work as a team. Together they worked to develop a spiral curriculum from scratch. I value this groundwork and would like to do something like that here.” Jess shared how allowing students to take specific classes has grown her as an instructional coach. Now that she experiences inclusion, her role has
become “comprehensive”. Dallas also spoke about awareness with supportive colleagues.

“Since I’ve come, I’ve noticed that the day to day interactions among others are genuine.” They communicated that they can go across the hall for support and enjoy joking with colleagues.

Wren highlighted their department team’s efforts.

On any given day, you can see us standing in the hallways, sharing ideas and strategies, collaborating on content, and planning together. We like to see what others do so we can add to our department. We use each other’s strengths to build our program (Wren).

**Code: Trust.** Trust was a widespread code. Teachers welcoming others into their space for observation appeared common. Jess and Dallas both mentioned the benefit of classroom observations saying “it allows for a greater understanding of inclusion, behaviors, and instructional practices”. Likewise, the use of the Padlet from a summer event, fostered a platform of trust.

It encouraged teachers to post three things learned, identify two colleagues who can help further learning, and list one idea for devising an action learning plan of their own. This interactive platform promotes a learning community since colleagues can freely comment and offer help (Jess).

Wren acknowledged that project-based units would not have succeeded without the support and trust of colleagues. They depend on the expertise of others to make engaging cross-curricular activities and develop appropriate learning outcomes. “Administration is so on board with this. They come in regularly and go table to table listening to students pitch ideas. Projects are revamped as a result.”

Openness and trust were also displayed by Wren with students. Disclosing their obsession with shoes and how they never wear the same pair during a semester, Wren was challenged to prove this fact. During COVID, Wren’s students received a virtual tour of the shoe
“They didn’t believe I really owned that many shoes. When we were online, they challenged me to prove it. So, I got up and gave them a tour of my closet.”

**Code: Appreciation.** A variety of gifts, verbal communication or tangible items, were given to the participants over the course of their careers. All had an emotional connection. Chris shared a paperclip bracelet that a child had made and pointed to a wall plastered with drawings.

I get choked up because it has nothing to do with me personally. I didn’t teach them. I didn’t make somebody’s test score go up. I didn’t improve somebody’s teaching. God tapped me on the shoulder and put me in a place to create an environment and in this role. I contribute and self-reflect, and it’s so humbling (Chris).

Playing cards and a jug were gifts given to Avery. Displaying these in their space allows students to know Avery’s story. When sharing an orange rock, Dallas stated, “I’ve tried to give that rock up over the years. But I find myself…I just can’t.” Similarly, a picture of soup took on a new meaning for Wren as a result of her commitment to spending time with a student.

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the leadership tools and traits that foster relationships in rural school communities. The central research question guiding this case study was: *What leadership tools and traits are needed to foster effective relationships in rural school communities?* Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants’ identities. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with non-classroom leaders and classroom leaders in a rural school district located in Northwestern Pennsylvania. After collecting data, I explored themes related to the five exemplary practices identified by Kouzes and Posner (2017). The tenets of Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart served as the theoretical framework for this study.
Chapter V

Discussion of Findings and Recommended Actions

Introduction

This study was conducted in a rural school district located in Northwestern Pennsylvania and was guided by the research question: What leadership tools and traits are needed to foster effective relationships in rural school communities? Participants were recommended by the district’s superintendent. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five individuals including both classroom leaders and non-classroom leaders. An initial coding system was employed to analyze qualitative data. When exploring the data, themes related to the five exemplary practices identified by Kouzes and Posner (2017) became evident. Leaders exhibited examples of Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). These actions and behaviors, which literature has supported (Coyle et al., 2022; Flores & Kyere, 2021; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Keane & Evans, 2022; Kudlats & Brown, 2021; Liang et al., 2019; Liew et al., 2010; Longobardi et al.; 2019; McCormick & O’Connor, 2015; Parlar et al.; 2017; Sebastain & Allensworth, 2012; Smith et al., 2021; White, 2020), fostered relationships. Findings will be discussed drawing upon the theoretical framework designed for this study.
Discussion of Findings

Research has shown a leader’s ability to influence positive relationships within an organization can have lasting effects for personal wellbeing, academic performance, social capital, school culture, and climate. Studying the nexus between leadership and relationships is valuable as school leaders navigate socio-political and economic challenges. In order to enhance social justice, school improvement, and student success, deliberation should be given to the practices and strategies that nurture student agency, teacher efficacy, and a sense of community (Gurr et al., 2021).
Kouzes and Posner (2017) offer a powerful framework for advancing educational organizations. They posit that leaders who Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) make extraordinary things happen in organizations. The first practice, Model the Way, requires leaders to identify their core values. When leaders can clarify their values, this enables them to share them outward. Leaders set an example when they practice what they value. Second, Inspire a Shared Vision means imagining possibilities. Kouzes and Posner claim, “This is the force that creates the future,” (Kouzes & Posner, 2017, p. 15). When a strengths-based approach is embraced, commitment is inspired, and everyone becomes part of the dream. In today’s current context, where challenges are abundant, collaborative efforts are invaluable. A leader’s excitement and enthusiasm are key for promoting organizational momentum. Third, Challenge the Process means questioning and listening for innovative ideas. It is easy for schools to support complacency. However, taking risks is essential for growth. Kouzes and Posner (2017) encourage leaders to recognize the benefits of failing forward. The fourth practice, Enable Others to act, requires solid trust and enduring relationships. Empowering others is essential. Using and appreciating the expertise of colleagues stimulates possibilities. Lastly, when leaders Encourage the Heart, care, appreciation, and value are displayed. Recognition for efforts occurs through celebrations. A spirit of community transpires. This framework offers a platform in which leadership practices directly influence relationships.

In discussing the findings of this study, I will use the traits described by Kouzes and Posner (2017). Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) were all exemplified by the participants. The theme of relationships was consistently embedded in their answers.
Model the Way

In my study, participants Model the Way by providing opportunities and fostering relationships. Leaders created an environment in which people could thrive. Leading from a team perspective and providing a safe place for students to rest empowered others to grow and perform their best. Chris stated, “I don’t have all the answers and therefore lead from a team perspective encouraging collaboration to achieve goals and progress.” Values centering around cultural awareness, engagement, and communication cultivated environments of acceptance and learning for students. Wren realized that school didn’t necessarily complement the future students were dreaming of and therefore made a commitment to designing a program that satisfied students’ needs.

Inspire a Shared Vision

Leaders imagined possibilities by sharing their visions. Instead of looking at challenges as obstacles, emphasis was given to nurturing relationships and utilizing school-wide supports to assist with academic and behavioral demands. Leaders used their roles as teachers, coaches, and mentors to instill persistence, perseverance, and confidence. Jess created a non-traditional classroom getting rid of desks stating, “Students don’t need to be in rows to learn. Flexibility promotes interaction and communication.” Likewise, Avery facilitated a program promoting self-confidence realizing, “It is so much more than just the concepts they’re learning.” Dallas’ commitment to reducing anxiety and Wren’s creation of a non-traditional classroom were examples of the “force that creates the future” (Kouzes & Posner, 2017, p.15). These leaders’ actions were student-centered reflecting a devotion to meeting emotional, academic, and behavioral needs.
Challenge the Process

Both the non-classroom leaders and classroom leaders pursued innovation during my study. Taking risks and learning from mistakes were valued. Chris used office referrals as learning opportunities for students to make better choices and improve communication skills. Curricular initiatives were encouraged and viewed as an opportunity to grow individual and organizational capacity. Creating care documents to assist at-risk students allowed Avery to promote safe learning environments for all stakeholders. Communicating from a growth mindset, complacency wasn’t accepted by these leaders.

Enable Others to Act

Trust and relationships were key factors exemplified by the participants. Jess and Dallas spoke about a commitment to professional development which was decentralized and teacher-led. Teacher-teacher relationships were stimulated through reflective dialogue and shared norms. Collaboration and communication with colleagues improved pedagogy and curriculum. Implementation of Padlet advanced instructional systems, inclusive practices, and social emotional learning. The leaders valued the expertise of others and welcomed support from colleagues.

Encourage the Heart

This identified exemplary practice was overwhelmingly prevalent during my interviews. Their practices, as evidenced through artifacts, genuinely influenced students. Chris’ act of promoting a school culture rooted in support and love affected students to design paperclip bracelets and draw pictures. A photograph symbolized Jess being a patient leader. This leadership action grew an after-school program and strengthened other leaders. Avery’s decision to display gifts of appreciation from former students amidst their office allowed their story to be
seen. Eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches during Google meets maintained relationships that could have vanished during the COVID lockdown. These leaders didn’t communicate doing anything special. They just “cared”.

**Contributions to the Field of Educational Leadership**

Findings of this study built on previous research efforts included in the review of the literature. Although the themes of being visionary, providing opportunities, and reflective practices were important, the theme of relationships resonated throughout all the leaders’ behaviors and actions. Findings support that leaders can effectively lead with their hearts. As the literature has supported, the benefits of fostering authentic relationships are vital and have lasting impacts.

Using the theoretical framework based on the five exemplary practices identified by Kouzes and Posner (2017) prompted me to uncover specific tools and traits displayed by leaders in a rural school environment that fostered relationships. Caring, taking a genuine interest in the needs of students, and acting intentionally to overcome obstacles proved beneficial to creating a school culture and climate committed to the wellbeing of students. The leaders’ actions underscored the fact that schools should place emphasis on employing “soft skills”. Ansari et al. (2020) gave support that while teachers are transient figures in students’ lives, the strength and influence of positive relationships can (and do) have lasting consequences relevant to personal development and academic achievement.

Findings, although specific to a rural school community, hold promise across all demographic school settings. Literature supports that the practices of Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) benefit professional capital. Significant correlations between positive
relationships and students’ sense of being cared for, adjustment, stability, and independence have been shown (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020; Lifshin et al., 2020, O’Tooole & Simovaska, 2020, White, 2020). Engaging in these actions benefits not only individual students but also assists in creating a positive school climate and culture.

**Recommendations and Implications for Educational Leadership for Social Justice**

From a social justice perspective, it is essential that leaders foster relationships. Ryu et al. (2022) support the notion of caring leadership. It is accomplished when schools generate a set of needs and resources based on the interconnectivity of school and community contexts. Focusing on social capital (relationships), decisional capital (expert decision-making), and human capital (knowledge and skills) enhances professional capital. The act of caring impacts overall organizational growth but simultaneously, it can positively affect all individual stakeholders.

Statistics from *American’s Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being* (2020) indicate that the sense of urgency that exists. In 2018, 23% of rural children were living in poverty. This was even worse for Black and Hispanics, a staggering 47%. Maltreatment in rural areas was reported happening to 13 per 1,000 children. Neglect made up three fourths of all maltreatment. Food insecurities were also overwhelming with 11.2 million children (15% of all children) living in households experiencing hunger. Leaders who are committed to forming quality relationships can assist families and students with overcoming these deficiencies (Butler et al., 2022; Lopez et al., 2021) by providing agency support and resources.

Similarly, statistics from the Center of Disease and Control Prevention (CDC) report that approximately 4.5 million students ages 3-17 have a diagnosed behavior problem. These behaviors influence adjustment, task completion, academic trajectories, emotional reactions,
coping, and peer relationships (Collins et al., 2017). School leaders are privileged to assist students overcome barriers through thoughtful actions and responses.

In such, Zendarski et al. (2020) studied the effects of high-quality teacher relationships with children diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADHD). They reported that ADHD students frequently have weaker bonds with teachers, experience academic underachievement, and are rated below their peers behaviorally. From a social justice perspective, the formation of high-quality relationships can assist leaders with understanding neurodevelopmental disorders and responding to them. Attention to interventions can assist with school engagement and improve long term outcomes for ADHD students (Rushton et al., 2019).

Consistent with personal development, the significance of positive teacher-student relationships with academics was revealed by Goldie and O’Connor (2021). Researchers investigated whether teacher-student relationships mediate associations between gender and achievement. Findings support that teacher-student closeness and conflict mediated the association between gender and affected both reading and math achievement. Results exposed a commitment to cultivating relationships is especially significant for boys and underrepresented populations, specifically racially diverse students. Findings also have implications relevant to gender socialization theory which posits boys and girls are treated differently. As a result, relational behaviors are diverse. Goldie and O’Connor (2021) suggest mitigating prevalent societal norms surrounding gender has potential to improve the academic trajectories of boys.

Strong relationships also forge school improvement relevant to equity in politics, practices, and curriculum. Flores and Kyere (2021) investigated the role of school leadership in effective parent engagement practice from an equity lens. A qualitative methodology was employed with five urban principals enacting social justice practices to engage and empower
parents and/or families, and connecting their work with families to equity. All participants affirmed a trusting relationship with parents central to their efforts towards equity. Engaging in a human relationship with families synergized the school-home connection while simultaneously benefiting students and the educational organization. These leaders relied on an asset-based approach to promote parent empowerment.

Likewise, community relationships and engagement were reinforced in work done by Fletcher et al. (2020). The researchers examined the internal and external supports given to a low-income urban high school magnet career academy. The stakeholders attributed program success to the cultivation of a non-hierarchical governing structure that promoted investment from all levels. Building authentic partnerships between the school and community were prioritized. This allowed for internal and external support to not only be encouraged, but expected, upholding the phrase “it takes a village” to educate students. The findings indicate collaborative school and family relationships impacted student achievement and opportunity. Enable Others to Act (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) proved to be an effective leadership practice in this study.

In addition, Grover et al. (2021) examined whether schools are a place of community and if it matters. The use of longitudinal studies allowed the researchers to gain insight into how the sense of community impacts students’ educational, behavioral, and emotional competence as well as their physical and mental well-being. Encouraging warmth, facilitating family engagement, monitoring school climate and safety, avoiding inflexible discipline, promoting extracurricular activities, and promoting self-care were strategies leaders employed to achieve community connectedness. These practices deter substance abuse, violence, gang involvement, and problem behaviors. Students’ self-concepts improved, and emotional distress decreased.
Undoubtedly the sense of belonging impacts personal development. However, it also significantly influences society.

Fostering relationships is not a program, but rather a way of operating schools which requires ongoing partnerships and dedication (Boberiene, 2013). Within schools, relationships are formed not only among students but among everyone working within the organization. Literature supports relationships having bondless effects benefitting all stakeholders.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. First, the sample size was small. Gathering and analyzing qualitative data requires extensive time. This was the beginning of my research journey; therefore, a small sample size was selected.

Second, all of the participants identified as white. Their behaviors and actions could be assumed as benefiting the majority of the student body which is also predominantly white. Unfortunately, at the time of this study, no racial minorities are employed at this rural school district.

Third was the acknowledgment that relationships take time. When comparing the time spent with participants, there is a significant difference between the time spent with Chris and Avery. Chris appeared to trust me more thus giving more depth to their responses when interviewed. In comparison, Avery’s responses, although appropriate and helpful to the study, lacked the detail to which Chris spoke.

Fourth, related to the interview with Avery, it was done via Zoom. This could have negatively affected the comfortability level leading to shorter responses. I noticed a sense of ease when face-to-face interviews were conducted. This may not have been achieved via Zoom with this particular participant.
Fifth is the fact that the district’s superintendent recommended participants. There may have been voices unintentionally left out which may have provided a different perspective of the district from which the study was conducted.

**Implications for My Leadership Agenda and Growth**

Through this process, I gained valuable knowledge about the leadership tools and traits which foster relationships. The impact of these behaviors and actions positively influence my leadership agenda as a middle school principal. As a social justice leader, I have inquired an awareness and understanding of how to promote and implement specific actions and behaviors in my space. I have learned that anyone, regardless of title, has the ability and obligation to foster relationships. I believe focusing on social capital will positively impact school climate and culture.

I am committed to providing professional development which is decentralized and teacher-led to promote collective efficacy in my district. Using a strength-based approach is necessary to grow leaders in my building. This will lead to improvements in instructional practices and action learning plans.

I also see implications for hiring future staff members. Designing interview questions that focus on relationships will aid my administrative team in hiring quality individuals devoted to school climate and culture.

Similar to the concern of hiring, attention should be given to retaining current teachers. Boyce & Morton (2023) speak in depth about addressing Pennsylvania’s teacher shortage crisis. They cite four systemic root causes of this dilemma: final value proposition, declining interest in the field, lack of preparation and induction experiences, and stressful and isolated workplace conditions. The findings from this study support a need for improved professional development.
and induction plans, commitment to building teacher efficacy and a sense of caring displayed by leaders. These specific practices can assist schools in retaining valuable educators.

Most importantly, the execution and findings of this study have granted me the ability to realize that leaders need to be given the opportunity to recognize and verbalize their own accomplishments. More attention should be given to celebrating the amazing feats being done by leaders. As Dallas noted, “Education is exhausting.” I believe this is a result of the relentless efforts educators put forth on a daily basis. Through my interviews I witnessed the humility these leaders possessed. They became uncomfortable and emotional when reflecting on their impact stating they did nothing special. They just “cared”. Participants exemplified that effective leadership is leading with their heart.

**Future Recommendations**

Literature has supported the influence of high-quality relationships with a variety of stakeholders. The findings in this study underscore how leadership actions impacted relationships with students and colleagues. Leaders who Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) used their interactions with others to make organizational advancements. Continued research regarding leadership tools and traits is necessary for progressing school environments.

Unfortunately, findings from this study did not reveal how leadership practices affect families and the community at large. Literature supports the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders benefiting equity, policies, and programs. Therefore, future research should concentrate on how leaders promote relations with these entities as well as the implication these relationships have on school climate and culture.
References


https://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/index.asp


The Urban Review, 53, 681-707.


APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

Attachments:
• 2022-12-10 Consent Stamped.pdf
• Exemption Notification - IRB ID: 2022/12/10.pdf

Institutional Review Board
DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY

Duquesne University IRB Protocol Exemption Notification

To: Julie Boyer
From: David Delmonico, IRB Chair
Subject: Protocol #2022/12/10
Date: 12/12/2022

The protocol 2022/12/10. A Qualitative Study of Leadership Tools and Traits that Foster Relationships in Rural School Communities has been verified by the Institutional Review Board as Exempt according to 45CFR46.101(b)(1): (1) Educational Research on 12/12/2022.

If applicable, the consent form and/or recruitment flier have been stamped and are attached to this email or are accessible via Mentor. Please use these stamped versions to distribute or display.

Exempt status means there is no specific expiration date, and you are not required to file annual reviews or termination reports. However, any unanticipated problems, adverse effects on subjects, or protocol deviations must be immediately reported to the IRB Chair before proceeding with the study.

Further, any changes to your study requires the filing of an amendment and is subject to the approval of the IRB Chair. You must wait for approval before implementing any changes to the original protocol. Changes to your protocol may affect the exempt status of your research.

Please contact me if you have any questions regarding this study.

Best wishes in your research,

David Delmonico, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board, Chair
irb@duq.edu
Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Email Template for Recruitment of Participants

December 2022

Dear Superintendent,

I am a doctorate student of Duquesne University seeking participants for my research study. I will be conducting semi-structured interviews studying the leadership tools and traits that foster relationships in rural school communities. Gaining perspectives from those living and experiencing leadership in a rural environment will benefit my research greatly. Interviews are anticipated to last between 60-90 minutes. I have attached a copy of the consent to participate to review for your convenience.

I am asking if you could recommend 10 individuals from your district to whom I can contact to consider partaking in this study. These can include both administrators and teachers who reflect strong leadership skills. Scheduled interviews will occur once I have gathered responses. These will not occur during school hours. I look forward to hearing from you!

Respectfully,

Julie Boyer
Email Template for Recruitment to Participate

December 2022

Dear _________________________,

I am a doctorate student of Duquesne University seeking participants for my research study. I will be conducting semi-structured interviews studying the leadership tools and traits that foster relationships in rural school communities. Gaining perspectives from those living and experiencing leadership in a rural environment will benefit my research greatly. Interviews are anticipated to last between 60-90 minutes, and they will be recorded. I have attached a copy of the consent to participate to review for your convenience.

If you are interested in partaking, kindly email with your response within 2 weeks of receiving this. Scheduled interviews will occur once I have gathered responses. These will not occur during school hours. I look forward to hearing from you!

Respectfully,

Julie Boyer
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE: A Qualitative Study of Leadership Tools and Traits that Foster Relationships in Rural School Communities

INVESTIGATOR: Julie Boyer
205 Maple St.
Kane, PA 16735
814-558-6449

ADVISOR: (if applicable:) Dr. Deborah Scigliano
Duquesne University
412-396-6114

Dr. Amy Olson
Duquesne University
(412) 396-6000

SOURCE OF SUPPORT: This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in Educational Leadership at Duquesne University.

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate the leadership tools and traits needed to foster effective relationships in rural school communities. In addition, you will be asked to allow me to interview you. The interviews will be taped and transcribed.
These are the only requests that will be made of you.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** There are no risks greater than those encountered in everyday life.

**COMPENSATION:** Participants will not be compensated, and participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Your name will never appear on any survey or research instruments. No identity will be made in the data analysis. All written materials and consent forms will be stored in a locked file in the researcher's home. Your response(s) will only appear in statistical data summaries. All materials will be destroyed at the completion of the research.

**RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:** You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time.

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS:** A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT:** I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call Julie Boyer, 814-558-6449 and/or Dr. Scigliano 412-396-6114 and/or Dr. Amy Olson 412-396-6000 and/or Dr. David Delmonico, the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board 412-396-6326.

_________________________________________  __________________
Participant's Signature                       Date

_________________________________________  __________________
Researcher's Signature                       Date