

Leadership Behaviors and Other Factors Affecting the Motivation and Retention of Public School Teachers

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Abstract

This study addressed the alarming rate of public school teachers leaving the profession and the leadership factors influencing it. The research explored two questions: 1) What factors affect teachers' motivation to remain in the profession? and 2) What leadership behaviors impact this motivation? The research was guided by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Using a qualitative, phenomenological design, the study examined the lived experiences of 10 teachers from a Tennessee school district. Data were collected through one-on-one, semistructured Zoom interviews. Participants verified interviews before thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes. The findings provide insights for school leaders and teachers by clarifying how leadership behaviors and other factors influence teacher retention, which could have broader implications for public school districts.

Keywords

Leadership, Motivation, Retention, Educational Leadership, Leadership Behavior

1. Introduction

This study examined the high rate of teacher attrition and the role of school leadership in motivating retention, guided by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. It explored two questions: what factors affect teachers' motivation to remain in the profession and what leadership behaviors influence this motivation. Motivation, defined as the willingness to exert effort toward organizational goals (Franco et al., 2004), is vital to teacher effectiveness; low motivation contributes to absentee-

ism, poor performance, and weak teaching quality, while high motivation reflects effective leadership. Leadership is a prominent antecedent in organizations that facilitates individual and collective (team) efforts to accomplish shared objectives and improve performance (Rahmadani et al., 2020), as well as to adapt and innovate. Parveen et al. (2022) studied the connection between principals' leadership styles and teachers' job performance in public secondary schools in Faisalabad. In contrast, this qualitative phenomenological study used one-on-one semistructured Zoom interviews with U.S. Middle school teachers from one Eastern U.S. district to capture their lived experiences and perspectives of leadership behaviors and other factors that influence teachers' motivation to remain in the profession. This study focused on U.S. Middle school teachers because middle school is a critical transitional stage in students' academic and social development, where teachers face unique motivational and leadership challenges. Middle school teaching differs from elementary school, where foundational skills are introduced, and high school, where teachers and students collaborate more to ensure academic success.

2. Background

Trinh (2023) emphasized education and training as essential not only for economic development but also for sociopolitical stability and improvements in the human development index. This global perspective highlights how highly educated individuals shape future generations and drive progress at all levels of society. Murray (2023) outlined four purposes of education—enriching life, fostering equality and opportunity, liberating the mind, and promoting personal growth—explaining how these aims influence lifelong educational policy and practice. Arguably, while education delivers early economic benefits, it extends far beyond academics by equipping individuals with skills, values, agency, and cultural understanding. Ultimately, education empowers people with the freedom and autonomy to pursue happiness and well-being.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research primarily focused on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, while the theoretical framework was based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow (1954) developed his theory originally to address questions related to motivation, specifically whether individuals' career choices satisfy their personal needs. Maslow (1954) suggested that people were motivated by unmet, lower-level physiological and safety needs or by unmet higher-level needs, love, esteem, and self-actualization. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation correspond with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Based on these definitions, extrinsic motivation relates to physiological and safety needs, while intrinsic motivation relates to love, self-esteem, and self-actualization.

“Intrinsic motivation is a critical predictor of engagement across all domains of life to the extent that if people are intrinsically motivated, it predicts persistence and performance in the workplace, academics, health behaviors, and more”

(Fishbach & Woolley, 2022: p. 343). Ryan and Deci (2020) stated intrinsic motivation relates to activities done for their own sake or their inherent interest and enjoyment. Ryan and Deci stated that extrinsic motivation is a behavior for reasons other than inherent satisfaction. Ryan and Deci's definitions are relevant to the purpose of this study, given the emphasis on the behaviors of the employees. Layek and Koodamara (2024) explained that extrinsic motivation drives employees to avoid dissatisfaction with their work and encompasses factors such as security, fair treatment, opportunities, healthy relationships with superiors, and comfort. The central question is the effect of various factors, in particular leadership behaviors, on the motivation to remain a teacher.

The Full Range Leadership Model (FRLM) was utilized. The model comprises three leadership styles: transactional, laissez-faire, and transformational. Ratnasih (2017) stated that transactional leadership behaviors focus on exchanges between leaders and followers. Laissez-faire leaders abdicate responsibility, delay decisions, lack interest in their followers' needs or providing feedback, and do not develop their followers. In contrast, transformational leaders seek to engage their followers to foster a leader-follower relationship that raises motivation and morale.

The leadership themes found in this study closely match the Full Range Leadership Model, which provides a helpful framework for understanding the behaviors teachers described. Many of the positive leadership behaviors highlighted by participants, including professionalism, relationship building, mutual respect, effective communication, and meaningful support, mirror transformational leadership traits. These behaviors foster trust, uphold ethical standards, and build a shared sense of purpose that boosts teacher motivation and commitment. On the other hand, negative leadership behaviors such as micromanagement, inconsistency, and overtasking are more aligned with transactional or laissez-faire leadership styles. Micromanagement and an emphasis on compliance reflect transactional tendencies that restrict teacher autonomy, while inconsistent or disengaged leadership aligns with laissez-faire practices that create uncertainty and decrease support. Using the Full Range Leadership Model to interpret these findings emphasizes how transformational leadership practices are more likely to improve teacher motivation and retention, while transactional and laissez-faire styles can weaken teachers' sense of stability and professional worth.

4. Method

This study examined the factors and leadership behaviors that influence teachers' motivation to remain in the profession. A qualitative phenomenological design was chosen to explore teachers' lived experiences, as qualitative research emphasizes relationships and interactions (Barroga & Matanguihan, 2022). Middle school teachers from one Eastern U.S. district served as the population, with 10 participants selected through volunteer sampling. The sampling approach for this research was non-probability volunteer sampling. Wolf et al. (2016) stated that volunteer sampling is a type of convenience sampling where the decision to partici-

pate strongly relies on respondents due to the non-individualized nature of invitations (e.g., general plea for participation appears in media, posters, leaflets, and web, etc.). This type of sampling strategy relies heavily on the willingness of potential participants to volunteer for the study. This approach was selected because it allowed for obtaining expert information directly from those most familiar with the issues, rather than relying on outsider perspectives. It should be noted that, as with all qualitative research methods, such a non-probabilistic sampling method may reduce the transferability of the study findings. The eligibility requirements for the study were at least four years of teaching experience in schools with similar demographics (40% - 50% African American, 40% - 50% Caucasian, and 8% - 10% Hispanic/other).

Data was collected through 60-minute, semistructured Zoom interviews using open-ended questions aligned with the research questions. Adams (2015) described semistructured interviews as best for studies that require in-depth answers to probing, open-ended questions based on the independent thoughts of each individual interviewed of their experiences with the study phenomenon. Participants provided informed consent, had the option to withdraw, and reviewed interview transcripts for accuracy (member checking). Data collection followed standard protocols, including IRB approval, site authorization, recruitment, bracketing, interviewing, transcribing, coding, and thematic analysis. In qualitative research, coding methods involve a process of analysis where the researcher identifies concepts and themes embedded in the collected data, groups those concepts and themes, and thematically categorizes data so the researcher can elicit, codify, and present meaning (Williams & Moser, 2019). Thematic analysis (Kiger & Varpio, 2020) was conducted using a coding process to identify patterns and themes until data saturation was reached. To ensure credibility, an audit trail documented research decisions, and bracketing was employed to reduce researcher bias (Thomas & Sohn, 2023).

5. Results (Tables 1-2)

Table 1. Teacher motivation themes.

Study themes	Participant %
1: Leadership support	90
2: Career purpose	60
3: Money/Benefits	50
4: Strong team collaboration	40
4: Students' behavior	40
6: Leadership micromanagement	30
7: Work/Societal pressure	20
8: Parents' behavior	10

Note. The eight themes that emerged from the data analysis are listed in **Table 1** in order of the percentage of participants who mentioned each. In the discussion section, each of these themes is described based on participants' data and the literature.

Table 2. Leadership themes.

Study themes	Participant %
1: Being professional	80
2: Building strong relationships	70
2: Showing mutual respect	70
4: Communicating effectively	60
4: Providing support	60
6: Overtasking/Micromanaging	40
7: Being inconsistent	20
7: Evaluating fairly	20
7: Holding themselves accountable	20

Note. The nine themes that emerged from the data analysis are listed in **Table 2** in order of the percentage of participants who mentioned each. In the discussion section, each of these themes is described based on participants' data and the literature.

6. Discussion

This study examined the alarming rate of public school teacher attrition and the leadership factors influencing it. The research centered on two questions: 1) What factors affect teachers' motivation to remain in the profession? and 2) What leadership behaviors impact that motivation? This chapter presents a summary of the thematic analysis findings, an interpretation of the results, recommendations for future research, and an overall conclusion.

Beyond examining each theme separately, the findings reveal important connections among the factors that influence teacher motivation. Leadership support acts as a mediating force that can either diminish or enhance the effects of negative influences such as challenging student behavior, heavy workloads, or societal pressure. Teachers who experienced strong, supportive, and communicative leadership felt more capable of managing difficult student behaviors and handling work-related stress. When leadership support was lacking or characterized by micromanagement or inconsistency, these stressors felt more intense, leading to frustration and decreased motivation. Strong team collaboration, alongside supportive leadership, helped establish a school environment where teachers felt valued and capable, even under high external pressures. These relationships demonstrate that leadership interacts with and shapes other aspects of teachers' experiences and plays a key role in promoting motivation and retention.

7. Factors Affecting Motivation

Teachers emphasized intrinsic motivation—such as reconnecting with their career purpose—as well as extrinsic factors like pay and benefits. Leadership support, professional growth opportunities, and collaboration enhanced motivation, while student misbehavior, lack of parental support, heavy workload, and societal

scrutiny undermined it. Research aligns with these findings, linking compensation, teacher self-efficacy, and team belonging with stronger motivation, while stress, burnout, and poor student behavior reduce retention (Nwoko et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2023; Schaack et al., 2021).

Theme 1: Leadership Support

Ninety percent of participants emphasized leadership support as the most critical factor for teacher motivation. Supportive leaders who involve teachers in decision-making, provide professional growth opportunities, and recognize effort help sustain morale. In contrast, lack of support left teachers feeling undervalued, demoralized, and questioning their ability to remain in the profession. Participants agreed that supportive leadership can be the difference between retention and attrition.

Theme 2: Career Purpose

Sixty percent of participants identified career purpose as a driving factor in motivation. Teachers explained that reconnecting with their “why” sustains them during challenging times. While some felt the phrase “remember your why” could be used dismissively, most agreed that genuine passion for teaching and students helps educators persevere and seek professional growth opportunities.

Theme 3: Money/Benefits

Half of the participants pointed to salary and benefits as a primary motivator. Although pay was often viewed as inadequate, health insurance, retirement, and schedule flexibility were highly valued. Teachers also noted that summer breaks and time off provided balance, though many supplemented their incomes with second jobs. Benefits such as stability and health coverage were particularly critical for sustaining motivation.

Theme 4: Strong Team Collaboration

Participants described teamwork as a powerful motivator that creates a positive school culture. Collaborative teams reduce stress, build trust, and provide a sense of belonging. Teachers emphasized that collaborating with supportive colleagues enhances their professional practice and positively impacts students through consistency and shared expectations.

Theme 5: Student Behavior

Four participants stressed that student behavior profoundly influences teacher motivation. Positive student engagement, trust, and “aha” moments can create motivation for teachers, while disruptive behaviors, often coupled with little parental support, were draining. Teachers frequently described themselves as shaping behavior and preparing students for life beyond academics, which is increasingly difficult with poor student behavior.

Theme 6: Leadership Micromanagement

Three participants identified micromanagement as harmful to motivation. Teachers expressed that micromanagement challenges autonomy and creates feelings of mistrust. In contrast, leaders who gave teachers independence fostered growth, creativity, and stronger commitment to the profession.

Theme 7: Work/Societal Pressure

Several participants pointed to external pressures such as low pay, high accountability, and negative societal views as discouraging. Many teachers express feeling stretched by high demands and underappreciated by society, which often sees them more as caretakers than the dedicated professionals they truly are. This lack of respect can negatively impact morale and retention.

Theme 8: Parent Behavior

Parental behavior was cited as a factor decreasing motivation. When parents fail to enforce discipline at home, students often resist classroom rules, making management more difficult. Teachers noted that a lack of parental involvement often adds pressure on them, creating challenges but also opportunities for growth in education.

8. Leadership Behaviors Influencing Motivation

Motivating leadership behaviors encompass professionalism, genuine care for team members, building strong relationships, fostering mutual respect, and ensuring effective communication. Roßnagel (2016) stated that motivating employees is a crucial leadership task because motivation translates employees' knowledge, skills, and abilities into effort and performance by determining the direction, intensity, and duration of work-related behaviors. Providing support, ensuring consistency, and fair evaluation reinforced teachers' sense of value, while micromanagement, overtasking, and inconsistency diminished motivation. Studies confirm that supportive, transformational leadership enhances well-being, performance, and resilience, while excessive workload and poor accountability contribute to stress and attrition (Cooke et al., 2019; Fattah, 2021; Nexhip et al., 2022; Toropova et al., 2020).

Theme 1: Being Professional

Eight participants emphasized that professionalism directly impacts teacher motivation. Leaders who trust teachers' expertise, treat them as professionals, and avoid toxic behaviors create stable environments where teachers feel valued. Conversely, unprofessional leadership—such as favoritism or ignoring staff concerns—discourages teachers and fosters instability. Professionalism sets the tone for respect and motivates educators to remain committed to their work.

Theme 2: Building Strong Relationships

Seven participants highlighted the value of leaders building genuine relationships with staff. Teachers noted that personal encouragement and authentic investment in their well-being enhanced trust, motivation, and instructional performance. Leaders who trust and uplift teachers foster teamwork and resilience, while weak relationships can leave staff feeling disconnected and lacking motivation.

Theme 3: Showing Mutual Respect

Participants highlighted the incredible importance of mutual respect in retaining teachers. Leaders who show genuine respect build trust and professionalism. Conversely, unfair behavior like favoritism can lead to disappointment and higher

turnover. When teachers feel valued, it uplifts their efforts, promotes fairness, and deepens their dedication to the profession.

Theme 4: Communicating Effectively

Six participants identified effective communication, clear expectations, transparency, and active listening as essential to motivation. Teachers valued their involvement in decision-making and policy discussions, which fostered a sense of ownership over school goals. Effective communication is essential for fostering a positive work environment. By ensuring clear and consistent messaging, organizations can reduce confusion and promote a supportive atmosphere, ultimately strengthening staff morale.

Theme 5: Providing Support

Supportive leadership was identified by six participants as essential for motivating teachers. Educators appreciated leaders who provided support during difficult situations, provided growth opportunities and recognized the stress faced by staff. Conversely, a lack of support often resulted in burnout, high turnover rates, and feelings of being undervalued.

Theme 6: Overtasking and Micromanagement

Four participants shared their insights, revealing how overwhelming workloads and constant micromanagement can really decrease motivation. They emphasized that such pressures hinder personal autonomy and stifle creativity, making it tough to find enthusiasm in their work.

Theme 7: Being Inconsistent

Two participants noted that inconsistent leadership can cause confusion and demoralization. Inconsistency and unpredictability erode trust and hinder school-wide progress. Teachers emphasized that consistency in decision-making is necessary for building stability and maintaining staff commitment.

Theme 8: Evaluating Fairly

Only two participants stated that fair evaluations were important for leadership motivation, with most viewing them as subjective, punitive, or disconnected from growth. Teachers stressed that evaluations should be objective and focused on development. When framed as opportunities for reflection and mentorship, evaluations were more motivating and supported retention.

Theme 9: Holding Themselves Accountable

Two participants highlighted how crucial it is for leaders to embrace accountability! Teachers truly value leaders who admit their mistakes, remain present for students, and take responsibility. Conversely, when accountability is missing, it can really shake staff confidence in our leadership team.

9. Implications

The findings of this study highlight the importance of teacher motivation and leadership support in educational settings for teacher retention. Key factors such as professionalism, mutual respect, communication, fairness, and accountability are essential for creating an environment where teachers feel valued. While teacher

salary and benefits are important, they are secondary to the teacher's individual purpose.

The study also highlights implications for leadership practice. School administrators should avoid micromanagement and inconsistent behaviors, which can discourage teachers and undermine their motivation. Instead, leaders should actively engage in listening practices, such as conducting surveys, to better understand the needs of their staff and to respond accordingly. Professionalism should be consistently modeled and expected, cultivating an environment characterized by respect and shared accountability. Furthermore, clear and effective communication is essential for reducing confusion, building trust, and ensuring that teachers can focus their energy on delivering high-quality instruction.

In addition to practical implications, this study points to several avenues for future research. Future studies may benefit from examining teacher motivation and leadership factors in different school contexts, including urban, rural, and suburban districts, to determine whether contextual factors influence outcomes. Research with larger and more diverse samples of teachers could also strengthen the generalizability of findings. Further exploration is warranted into the balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, particularly how leadership behaviors enhance these dimensions. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of transformational leadership on both teacher motivation and student achievement.

10. Recommendations

Drawing from the findings of this study, we propose targeted strategies to inspire and retain dedicated educators by fostering a supportive environment where teachers feel valued and motivated to continue their vital work. Teacher motivation is driven by strong leadership. Leaders should recognize the diverse needs of their staff, empower teachers to participate in decision-making, and provide resources for their professional growth. Trust-based relationships and open communication help create a collaborative school culture that supports both teachers and students. Teachers should regularly reflect on their original reasons for entering the profession. This personal connection sustains passion and resilience during challenges. Strategies include journaling, keeping motivational reminders, or revisiting meaningful student interactions. Keeping a sense of purpose helps teachers navigate daily stressors with a renewed commitment to their work.

Teacher salaries and benefits must reflect the demands of the profession, including education and expertise. When pay and benefits are stable, this can reduce stress for teachers and allow them to concentrate on instruction instead of personal financial burdens. Collaboration and the creation of positive relationships strengthen the school culture, promote consistency, and foster a sense of belonging. Professionalism should be consistently modeled by leaders through fairness, mutual respect, and high ethical standards. When teachers feel valued and supported, they are more likely to stay in the profession and contribute positively to

the school climate. Transparent and consistent communication reduces confusion, sets clear expectations, and allows teachers to have a voice in decision-making. Effective communication fosters trust, enhances collaboration, and empowers educators to prioritize high-quality teaching.

Future researchers should consider conducting a comparative analysis of teacher motivation across urban, suburban, and rural school districts to understand how contextual factors influence educators' experiences. As school demographics, community resources, leadership structures, and student needs vary significantly across these settings, a comparative approach would help determine whether the effects on teacher motivation and leadership support observed in this study are similar or different, depending on district context. Such research could provide targeted insights to help educational leaders tailor retention strategies to the specific conditions of their environment.

11. Conclusion

Overall, the research emphasizes that teacher motivation and retention are closely tied to the quality of school leadership. When leaders foster professionalism, communicate transparently, and prioritize support and respect, teachers feel valued and empowered to remain in the profession. These findings highlight the crucial role of leadership in fostering a positive and sustainable educational environment, providing practical guidance for administrators aiming to enhance teacher retention and improve student outcomes.

Through semistructured interviews with 10 experienced public school teachers, the research captured the lived experiences of educators and identified recurring themes that reflect both the challenges and supports affecting retention. Data were carefully collected, validated through member checking, and analyzed using a coding framework to ensure credibility and depth of interpretation.

The findings revealed that the most significant motivators for teachers were leadership support, career purpose, fair compensation and benefits, strong team collaboration, and positive student behaviors. Conversely, factors such as micromanagement, inconsistent leadership, societal pressures, and unaddressed parental behaviors undermined motivation. The study also highlighted key leadership behaviors that directly impact retention, including demonstrating professionalism, building strong relationships, showing mutual respect, communicating effectively, providing support, evaluating fairly, avoiding overtasking and micromanagement, ensuring consistency, and holding oneself accountable.

The findings of this study also highlight several key considerations for industries involved in education, workforce development, and community growth. A stable and motivated teaching staff has a direct influence on the development of a skilled future workforce. When teachers feel supported, respected, and empowered, they are better equipped to develop the academic and social skills that employers rely on. Industry partners can apply these insights to strengthen their connections with schools through community collaborations, teacher recognition

programs, and professional development initiatives. Programs that focus on teacher well-being, improve the teaching profession, and reduce burnout can enhance the long-term quality of the workforce and economic stability. By investing in environments where teachers feel appreciated, industry stakeholders help foster conditions that support effective teaching and lifelong educator commitment.

For academic institutions and researchers, this study emphasizes the importance of advancing scholarship that centers on teacher experiences and examines leadership behaviors through the lens of motivation and retention. Higher education institutions can incorporate these findings into teacher preparation and educational leadership programs by stressing the relational and professional skills highlighted in the study. Coursework and training focused on communication, professionalism, support, and transformational leadership can better prepare future administrators to create positive school climates. The study also emphasizes the importance of expanding research to diverse educational settings to enhance the applicability of the findings. Ongoing research, including comparative and longitudinal studies, will enhance understanding of how leadership practices influence teacher motivation over time and how these practices affect student outcomes. By applying these insights, academia can help develop stronger leadership pipelines and contribute to sustainable improvements in teacher retention and school stability culture.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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