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## Principal Servant Leadership Effects on Relationships with Teachers in Underperforming Schools

Marta Georgina Vasquez-McNamara  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

M. Georgina Vasquez-McNamara

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2021

Abstract

Principal Servant Leadership Effects on Relationships with Teachers in Underperforming  
Schools

by

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MPhil, Walden University, 2021

MA, New Mexico Highlands University, 2008

BA, Chestnut Hill College, 2004

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Industrial and Organizational Psychology

Walden University

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## Abstract

Research has shown that a leaders' behavior can impact employee organizational outcomes and how employees engage at work. The primary purpose of this qualitative, interpretive, phenomenological study was to interview a purposeful sample of teachers and a principal at an underperforming school to examine and understand their lived experiences and the meaning of principal–teacher relationships in underperforming schools using a servant leadership framework. The goal was to describe principals/teachers' experiences, perceptions, and meanings associated with servant leadership in building relationships. Data were collected by conducting semistructured interviews. Following an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach, the data were transcribed and coded for emerging themes. Participants expressed that preparation programs need to provide field experience opportunities because lack of experience leads to organizational issues, particularly at underperforming schools. Participants also indicated that their motivation and engagement were negatively affected by lack of collaboration, feedback, and support from leadership. Conversely, positive experiences that promoted team collaboration, inclusion in the decision process, and communication enhanced motivation and engagement. The impact of positive social change included providing information that can be used to improve the standards and quality of leadership regarding building positive principal–teacher relationships in underperforming schools.

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## Dedication

First, I would like to thank God. Without him I am nothing and through Him I was able to accomplish this work. I want to express my deepest appreciation and love to my husband and children. To my loving husband, Patrick, thank you for believing in me, for your support and encouragement and for always willing to sacrifice whatever was necessary to ensure that I was successful in achieving this dream of mine. The successful completion of this journey is as much your accomplishment as mine. To my children, Evan, William, Alannah, and Aiden, I love you very much and you are the greatest gift from God. Thank you for being understanding during my absence, you have all been very patient with me throughout this journey. Thank you for always motivating me and cheering me on, there is nothing you four cannot achieve, so go out there and reach for the stars, for I cannot wait to see the great things each of you accomplish. This journey, which at times felt would never come, has taught us to appreciate and value our time together and to always celebrate the small goals in life.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Current demands toward high-quality education, school improvement efforts, and pressure placed on student achievements have resulted in mandated federal and state government policies. These policies hold school districts accountable in ensuring they are meeting guidelines based on adequate yearly progress (AYP) such as Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the Northwest Evaluation Association, measured through students' standardized assessment scores (Department of Education, 1998). However, low achieving schools have trouble meeting guidelines due to continued annual budget cuts, resulting in states spending less money per student as well as increases in teacher turnover and leaders either being terminated or transferred to other schools (Leachman & Mai, 2014), which worsens problems faced in the education system.

By gaining a deeper understanding of teacher–principal relationships, this study can help provide a framework in narrowing the gap between low performing and high performing school. Leaders' behavior can impact employee organizational outcomes and how they engage at work, which can affect organizational outcomes (Karakitapog˘lu-Aygu˘n & Gumusluoglu, 2013). Behavior is affected by thoughts, beliefs, and feelings (Bandura, 1999), meaning a leader's leadership style can positively or negatively influence their employees in the organization (Lian & Tiu, 2012). Thus, leaders must perform leadership behaviors that improve the dynamics of an organization, leading to positive movements within the organization. For instance, the servant-leader is someone who moves beyond the transformational leader (Black, 2010). Leaders might find that

when a servant leadership approach is used, turnover intentions decrease, and relationships between leader and employee are fortified.

The remainder of this chapter includes the background and problem statement as well as the purpose, research question, theoretical framework, and nature. The chapter also covers the assumptions and scope of the study. The chapter concludes with the significance and a summary and description of the remaining chapters.

### **Background of the Study**

Depending on the organization, leadership style can positively or negatively influence organizational performance (NawoseIng'ollan & Roussel, 2017). Leadership behaviors are a critical factor in increasing organizational commitment, which results in higher levels of performance, increased satisfaction, and decreased turnover intentions and absenteeism (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014). Leadership styles can also affect teachers' attitudes (Duyar et al., 2013). Based on research in a small urban school district, teachers stayed when principals were committed to growth (Brown & Wynn, 2009).

Within the next decade, about 2 million new teachers, over 700,000 in urban areas alone, will need to be hired to accommodate the rise in population. The increase in teacher turnover has increased the cost to school districts including recruiting, the hiring process, and training new teachers (Jennings et al., 2017; Morello, 2014). Studies have also shown that having well-qualified teachers are a vital factor in increasing student achievement; therefore, decreasing teacher turnover is an integral component in increasing teacher quality (Brown & Wynn, 2009). However, research has also shown that schools with an increased number of students whose demographics are from minority

groups hired teachers with lower qualifications/experience compared to schools with fewer minority groups (Brown & Wynn, 2009). These schools with high poverty populations also have higher turnover rates, which further contributes to an achievement gap. This indicates the need for having the right leadership style to help teachers develop their skills.

Importance of principal leadership an integral part of schools' effectiveness is the principal (Hoy & Smith, 2007). A contributing factor to school achievement is the level of preparation principals have in knowing how to effectively recruit, select, and retain well-qualified teachers (Fuller et al., 2011). Leadership can also indirectly affect students' learning through providing support to teachers (Brown & Wynn, 2009; Wallace Foundation, 2017). There is a need to for teachers and leaders to support each other instead of being viewed as separate leaders within the school (Neumerski, 2012). Principals can improve low-performance schools through increased efforts in increasing teacher's motivation (Finnigan, 2012). Principals' style of leadership has a mediating effect on teacher outcomes (Orphanos & Orr, 2014).

Leadership style is most effective when it is implemented in a people-first approach (Smith, 2016). A central belief of Greenleaf's servant leadership philosophy is to serve others, which includes developing employees so that those employees can become servant leaders themselves (Liden et al., 2014). In other words, a leader becomes a role model for the employees, and the employees aspire to become role models themselves. This relationship produces an intentional interaction as opposed to reacting to work demands. Student achievement has improved in schools with a servant leadership



style (Black, 2010). Servant leadership may also affect teachers' school commitment in various cultural settings (Cerit, 2010). There has also been a significant correlation between servant leadership and trust (Del & Akbarpour, 2011). Research has shown a strong correlation between perceived servant leadership levels, job satisfaction, and teacher retention rates (Shaw & Newton, 2014).

Relationships form the basis of strong leadership by administering characteristics of transformational, transactional, inspirational, and instructional leadership styles. These relationships ensure school leaders will successfully utilize an integrated model rather than a single model (Smith, 2016). Given the various positive outcomes of servant leadership, the focus of this study was to gain a greater understanding of principal to teacher relationships in underperforming schools from a servant leadership perspective.

### **Problem Statement**

Having an effective school leader is essential in improving teaching performance and student learning efforts (Berebitsky et al., 2014), and research has shown a link between high-quality teaching and increased student achievement (Harris & Sass, 2011). Though principal's leadership skills do not have a direct impact on student outcomes, the leadership style of the principal might influence the principal-teacher relationships (Cotton, 2003). A teacher's work attitude can also be enhanced through collaboration and leadership style (Duyar et al., 2013), which can help shape the social context in the school and reach educational outcomes (Price & Moolenaar, 2015). Transformational leadership can serve as an effective style in successful school improvement efforts (Allen

et al., 2015); however, though transformational, inspirational, and instructional styles are present in some principals, these styles of leadership are rarely seen (Smith, 2016).

Most studies regarding school improvement efforts have centered around current administrative policies, perceptions of principals of school improvement efforts, and teacher perceptions of school improvement efforts (Tucker et al., 2010). There is a lack of studies that address principal–teacher relationships in underachieving schools from a qualitative perspective. Further, what has not been well-explained is how principals and teachers describe the meaning of leadership in helping poor-performing schools. Given the rigorous standards and demands for student achievement, instructional demands to meet state and federal guidelines, and lack of impact guidelines have had, there is a need for understanding principal to teacher dynamic in low achieving schools to improve educational outcomes (Allen et al., 2015).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore principal–teacher relationships in underperforming schools using a servant leadership framework. The focus was to describe the experiences, perceptions, and meanings principals and teachers associated with servant leadership in building relationships. Results may encourage servant leadership in principals to develop a positive social, academic environment. The results of this study may contribute to new insights that can lead to decreased turnover intention and rates in underperforming schools. The social change implications include improving the standards and quality of leadership regarding positive principal–teacher relationships.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions guide this qualitative interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) study:

Research Question 1: How do teachers from underperforming schools experience servant leadership in the workplace?

Research Question 2: How do teachers and principals describe the meaning of servant leadership?

Research Question 3: How does servant leadership influence the teacher-principal relationship in underperforming schools?

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided through the lens of servant leadership. Servant leadership is rooted in the leader–follower relationship, making it an essential topic in leadership studies because of its ability to enhance collaboration and promote long-term mutual obligations (Zou et al., 2015). Servant leadership promotes the evolvment and enhancement of individuals by nourishing relationships and enabling autonomy (Washington et al., 2006). Servant leadership emphasizes service to others and the acknowledgment of building the individuals within the organization to work together toward the greater good (Parris & Peachey, 2013). When organizations foster a servant leadership environment, goals and objectives are met (Jones, 2012), as employees feel empowered and committed toward the organization (Melchar & Bosco, 2010).

Ten fundamental characteristics of servant leadership behaviors include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship,

commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 2010). Building relationships and empowerment were two competencies of a servant leader used to guide this study along with these fundamental characteristics. The competency of building relationships include understanding others' needs, providing a supporting environment, and building trusting relationships (Coetzer et al., 2017a). Additionally, when teachers feel empowered, it can result in creating togetherness within the school mission and teachers' values as well as increase teachers' buy-in in reaching school goals (Lumpkin et al., 2016).

Historically, a principal's role has been the focus of school performance; however, servant leadership has not been explored as much, especially when exploring principal–teacher relationships. The results of this study may contribute to uncovering a new side to servant leadership regarding how servant leaders, as principals, empower and build relationships of teachers, or followers, in underperforming schools. Understanding the meaning of teacher–principal relationships can add to self-awareness, collaboration, and support for the betterment of under-performing students. Additionally, by gaining an understanding of teacher–principal relationships, from a servant leadership perspective, it can potentially lower the costs associated with teacher absenteeism and turnover. The outcome is a positive social, academic environment for students as well as positive interactions between teachers and principals from a servant leadership approach. Chapter 2 will provide a more detailed explanation of servant leadership.

### **Nature of Study**

The study used a qualitative, phenomenological research study approach because the goal was to explore in-depth the meaning of leadership between principals and teachers in underperforming schools from the participants' perspective. In qualitative research, the researcher's focus is on the depth and understanding of specific situations, groups, moments, or individuals (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Further, phenomenological research describes lived experiences by exploring contextual meaning through situational knowledge of those individuals being studied (Creswell, 2007). The qualitative phenomenological approach was an appropriate choice for this study because of the ability to be a part of the natural setting to observe and interview individuals in their natural environment to gain a deeper understanding (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I specifically applied an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to understand the experience of leadership for teachers and principals in underperforming schools. IPA was chosen because it is the best approach to capture the perceptions of individuals (Smith et al., 2009). This design provided an opportunity for teachers and principals to share their perspectives and experiences.

To gain an understanding of leadership style and teacher relationships, I conducted in-depth interviews at an underperforming school with a sample group of teachers and school leaders to explore their lived experiences. The focus was on understanding how individuals construct meaning and knowledge through interactions within their social context (see Creswell, 2007). Teachers and school leaders were recruited from an underperforming school. The data collection process consisted of

conducting semistructured interviews lasting between 45–60 minutes each. Interviews were transcribed and shared with participants for accuracy. The data analysis consisted of coding interviews and thematic analysis to help provide detailed information on the data collected.

### **Definitions**

*Authentic follower:* The follower undergoes self-governing motivation; they own their process, performance, and product; sense psychological safety to offer opinions; work collaboratively in partnership with the authentic leader; and make proactive contributions to the organization (de Zilwa, 2014).

*Authentic leader:* An authentic leader is self-aware of their thoughts and emotions and develops transparent relationships with followers (Alavi & Gill, 2017).

*Job satisfaction:* Finding intrinsic value through ones work from the recognition of one's labor (Pacheco & Webber, 2016).

*Leader development:* To develop leadership skills and expertise (Day et al., 2014).

*Leadership:* The act of social identification, which occurs as an individual seeks out the partnership and collaboration of others to achieve a common goal, essentially enabling and empowering individuals to contribute to a more significant result (Akindele & Afolabi, 2013).

*Servant leader:* Serves first, the focus is the development and growth of followers, promoting a sense of community, and sharing decision making (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2016).

*Stewardship*: Refers to providing a service to an organization or an individual. It is an innate behavior that is validated and sustained over time (Botha, 2014).

*Turnover*: The departure of staff within the year resulting in instability (Holme et al., 2018).

*Turnover intention*: Theoretical definition describing it as making a final mental decision in deciding whether to deliberately leave the organization or stay (Bothma & Roodt, 2013).

*Underperforming school*: Label given to the school by the state department of education at the end of the year, indicating whether the school met or did not make AYP (Garcia, 2011).

### **Assumptions, Scope, and Limitations**

In any study, there are assumptions, the scope, and limitations.

#### **Assumptions**

It was assumed that servant leadership behavior would result in building a united, collaborative working environment between leaders and teachers. Therefore, it may result in reduced turnover rates among teachers. I assumed that the more a leader was seen as a servant leader, the higher the performance expectations in reaching educational outcomes together would be, resulting in teachers overcoming challenges in underperforming schools and lower turnover. It was also assumed that participants would provide truthful answers during interviews and would genuinely be interested in contributing to the study rather than trying to predict what the answer should be. It was also assumed that there was a need to conduct this study in underperforming schools.

**Scope**

This study addressed the principal–teacher relationship in underperforming schools and how these relationships were perceived among principals and teachers. The specific scope of this study consisted of K–12 teachers and a principal from an underperforming school. The reasoning for this population was due to achievement gaps, turnover rates, and continued failed school grade marks. The population consisted of staff employed for at least 1 year at an underperforming school. Schools were identified in a specific local public school district in the southwest state of New Mexico, which had received a letter D or F for 3 or more consecutive years. Participation in the study was voluntary.

**Limitations**

The process of this qualitative study presented several limitations. In an IPA study the participant provides their interpretations of their world (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). A participant’s belief could place a limitation by creating inconsistencies of interview results. Since this study relied on participants who volunteered, their perspective can significantly differ positively or negatively from individuals not included in the study because the researcher is only decoding the perspectives of participants’ interpretations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Responses were limited to the interviewees’ perspective, clarity, and thoroughness in answering questions.

Additionally, since the study only looked at teachers and principals from underperforming schools in the area, there is a potential of bias and a limit on the generalizability of results. To avoid the potential of conflict of interest, I selected low



achieving schools outside of my school district or targeted schools I did not have a connection with teachers or leaders. Since the size of the sample was small and was only taken from one school, the ability to apply results to individuals outside the specified sample could be complicated; however, findings could be applied to other underperforming schools. Another limitation was time; interviews conducted were completed within a shortened timeframe, not allowing the opportunity of longitudinal data collection for obtain greater insight.

### **Significance of the Study**

Leadership styles are important for maintaining school improvement accountability efforts and having high-quality teachers, which is integral to student outcomes (Duyar et al., 2013). But there is little known about the principal–teacher relationship in low performing schools. There has been little evidence illustrating how the leader-to-teacher dynamic influences student outcomes, nor what servant leadership looks like or means to principals and teachers in low-performing schools. Servant leadership has shown the potential in increasing employee behavioral and attitudinal outcomes in the retail sector; however, there is a need to research underlying mechanisms for how and why this relationship occurs (Liden et al., 2014).

In addition to expanding the literature in the industrial/organizational profession about relationship building among leaders and employees, this study provides insights on how principal–teacher relationships can improve school improvement efforts and student outcomes. The learning environment for education is vital in setting the structure towards educational success. The results of this study provided further knowledge in helping to

increase the overall quality of interactions for both teachers and leaders in low achieving schools.

### **Summary**

Research has shown the importance of effective leadership and the positive outcomes associated with it (Allen et al., 2015; Black, 2010; Smith, 2016). Given the impact leadership has and the demands for school improvement efforts, exploring principal–teacher relationships in underperforming schools can contribute to knowledge on servant leadership and provide insight toward creating effective schools. In Chapter 2, the literature review provides a discussion of relevant literature, providing an evaluation of servant leadership and how servant leadership has been applied in various organizational settings. In Chapter 3, the research design, rationale, and methodology are discussed. Chapter 4 explains the results of the study, the lived experiences of selected participants, and any themes identified as evidence of the impact servant leadership has on the leader to teacher relationship in reaching educational outcomes. Lastly, in Chapter 5, a discussion of research findings is provided along with recommendations based on the findings.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The No Child Left Behind Act is the federal law affecting education from kindergarten through high school (Manna, 2010). Under the act, schools are measured based on meeting AYP, which is used to gauge and explain school-to-school differences within districts in school quality (Northrop & Kelly, 2018). Schools that do not meet AYP earn the label of a failing school (Northrop & Kelly, 2018), followed by holding administration (the principal) accountable for not meeting AYP such as them being reassigned to a different school or fired from the district (Cotton, 2003). Thus, accountability measures strive to change school staff behavior toward utilizing learning methods covering specific content (Northrop & Kelly, 2018). However, the pressures applied from meeting accountability measures have shown that the behaviors of teachers within the classroom change negatively and positively depending on the circumstances. Continual change due to reform can create conflict, resistance, and a form of loss of identity (Mitchell & Shoho, 2017). As a result, the pressures schools receive from meeting AYP can impact workplace relationships (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020).

Relationships grounded on trust can help guard against school improvement challenges (Finnigan & Daly, 2012), and the tenure of leaders influences building trusting relationships (Beck, 2014). Therefore, prematurely removing leaders can create further strain on a system that is already struggling. Continual change disruption can create anxiety among teachers and staff, which can result in impacting student achievement (Mitchell & Shoho, 2017). This continual change disruption is where principals can work toward improving school outcomes instead of getting removed from the schools. When

taking impactful actions to replace ineffective ones, it results in motivating individuals to do more (Fullan, 2018). Having an effective school leader is thus a critical element in improving teaching and learning efforts (Berebitsky et al., 2014). An effective leader who purposefully guides their employees toward growth and promotes a positive organizational culture can lead to the success of the organization (Allen et al., 2015) through employee commitment and engagement (Nikolova et al., 2019). In the educational setting, the principal serves as the driver within the entire school, and the teacher helps achieve and drive the school mission by delivering quality service to students.

It is important to understand interpersonal relationships between teachers and leaders to have a substantial impact on organizational learning (Louis & Murphy, 2017). Having an understanding of leader to teacher relationships in underperforming schools can provide insight in improving educational outcomes. Given the demands to meet state and federal guidelines, there is a need for understanding principal to teacher dynamic in low achieving schools to improve educational outcomes (Allen et al., 2015). To help understand the relationship between leaders and teachers in underperforming schools, this chapter provides the theoretical foundation used to ground this study. The chapter also reviews leadership, contributions to organizational performance, teacher turnover, teachers' responses to leadership behaviors, and servant leadership's effect on teacher job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

For this study, several databases were used in reviewing the literature available through Walden University: EBSCO host, Emerald, JSTOR, SAGE journals online. The focus centered around reviewing peer-reviewed journal articles and books, along with references used within journal articles. Research began using Google and Google Scholar to classify and locate articles related to the topic of servant leadership, leadership, and education.

The search was conducted within the following disciplines: business, human resources, management, education, nursing, and psychology. In addition to searching servant leadership, a search for other concepts included trust, job satisfaction, teacher turnover, principal development, support, well-being, job commitment, and any articles that related to the relationship between leadership and teachers. Additionally, other keywords used were *team building*, *leadership styles*, *servant leadership* and *support*, *servant leadership* and *culture*, *effective leadership styles*, and *what is servant leadership*.

When setting parameters, the publication period was set to 2010–2019, ideally striving to stay within 5 years. However, when searching for the topic selected, a limiting issue faced was certain articles used research outside of the selected decade. The publication period was expanded to include older articles only if appropriate in emphasizing the purpose of the study.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

### **Servant Leadership Framework**

Robert Greenleaf introduced the idea of servant leadership in the 1970s based on his experience in business. According to Greenleaf (1977), a central tenet of servant leadership is that the focus is on the follower over the self-interest of the leader. The leader has an inner desire to serve others genuinely. This service is achieved by (a) respecting the skills and capability of people, (b) enacting altruism through actions and leadership, (c) prioritizing relationships, (d) inspiring and empowering others to achieve goals, and (e) encouraging active participation in the success of the group and recognizing the efforts of peers (Washington et al., 2014). Servant leadership focuses on the well-being and growth of others while sharing the power and putting the needs of their employees first (Allen et al., 2016; Iikhanizadeh & Karatepe, 2018; Maxwell & Gibson, 2018; Rachmawati & Lantu, 2014). Servant leadership involves having a vision or direction and implementing roles, where employees become responsible, and leaders become responsive to employees (Blanchard, 2018). Because servant leadership is an approach that engages followers from different principles, it is ideal in facing organizational challenges (Eva et al., 2019). For instance, servant leaders can influence employees' perceptions of workplace spirituality, resulting in enhanced employee creativity (Williams et al., 2017).

The foundation of servant leadership is social exchange theory, which enhances the link in the relationship between employees and leaders. Social exchange theory is a process where exchanges that occur are social and are founded on a trust that actions of

individuals will be reciprocated at some point in the future (Settoon et al., 1996). In other words, the individual enters a negotiated relationship (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003). For example, the psychological contract is an idea that considers the relationship between the employee and the organization, implying the exchange of services such as an employee carrying out specific duties in exchange for job security (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2008). The psychological contract serves as an unwritten mutual expectation between both parties implied through observed actions or behaviors. Servant leadership uses the negotiated relationship by emphasizing employee engagement, individuals reaching their fullest potential, and positively influencing the community. Thus, the servant leader is positively influencing the relationship of employees through building trust (Chan & Mak, 2014). Servant leadership also focuses on the psychological needs of employees and long-term performance sustainability (Eva et al., 2019), which ensures fulfillment of the psychological contract and the follower's desire to engage in behaviors that will benefit the organization (Panaccio et al., 2015). When leaders' behaviors promote an environment of building equally valuable and trusting relationships, the level of motivation, and job satisfaction increases within the organization (Chan & Mak, 2014). Thus, the genuine relationships that are created between leaders and employees develop a culture where employees' behaviors are being transformed.

Despite these descriptions of servant leadership, in Greenleaf's original essay, he did not define servant leadership; rather, he described servant leadership as a service to others, where the relationship with employees centers on their growth, forming a mutual trust and empowering those the servant leader is leading (Staats, 2015). Though servant

leadership theory shares similarities to other leadership theories, no other theory embodies all the characteristics of servant leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leadership extracts fundamental principles from various theories forming an all-encompassing philosophy that extends beyond leading in an organization; it is a way of life and philosophy that is applicable in all aspects of life. Servant leaders provide vision, build effective teams, and empower employees through their moral and humble nature (Allen et al., 2016). Therefore, though there is no definition of servant leadership, indicators of the leadership style include whether followers are growing as individuals and transforming into servant leaders themselves (Greenleaf, 2008).

Greenleaf's lack of a standard definition has resulted in different explanations of servant leadership, models to use, and what behaviors or characteristics determine servant leadership (van Dierendonck, 2011). Research on servant leadership can be grouped in three different stages: development of servant leadership, measurement of servant leadership, and the development of a servant leadership model (Eva et al., 2019). Models established by Spears (1995, 2010), Laub (1999), Patterson (2003), and Russell and Stone (2002) have been the most influential models to date. The Spears model has set a foundation to follow when identifying essential characteristics of servant leadership such as empowerment, accountability, and stewardship (van Dierendonck, 2011; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

Spears (2010), through an in-depth analysis of Greenleaf's written works, established 10 characteristics of servant leadership he felt were fundamental to the development of servant leaders:



1. Listening: the ability to listen intently to how others communicate as well as the regular use of reflection.
2. Empathy: striving to understand and empathize with others. People need to be accepted and recognized for their individual and unique spirits.
3. Healing: having the ability to learn to heal one's self and relationship with others to achieve transformation and integration. Servant leaders recognize that they have an opportunity to help make whole those with whom they come in contact.
4. Awareness: general, particularly self-awareness, fortifies the leader. It assists the leader to gain an understanding of issues involving ethics, power, and values. Awareness provides the ability to view most situations from a more integrated, holistic position.
5. Persuasion: similar to visioning, an individual relies on persuasion rather than positional authority in making decisions. The leader strives to convince rather than coerce. The leader is effective at building consensus within groups and uses sound reasoning with followers.
6. Conceptualization: looking at a problem or an organization and seeing things beyond the day-to-day realities. Traditional leaders are clouded by only focusing on achieving short-term goals, whereas a servant leader includes broader-based conceptual thinking. Servant leaders are called to seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day operational approach.

7. Foresight: it is rooted in the intuitive mind. It is foreseeing the possible outcome of a situation while maintaining a clear understanding of lessons learned from the past and keeping the present and future outcomes in mind.
8. Stewardship: A commitment to serving the needs of others, while also emphasizing the practice of openness and persuasion, not control.
9. Commitment to the growth of people: individuals have an intrinsic value; therefore, servant leaders are committed to the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of every individual in the organization.
10. Building community: seeking to identify ways for building community among those who work in the organization. (Spears, 2010, p. 27)

In order to find a meaningful framework that would define the characteristics, competencies, measures, and outcomes of servant leadership, Coetzer et al. (2017a) conducted a literature review to create a servant leadership framework for practical use within organizations. Through their systematic review, the researchers were able to find eight common characteristics or personality traits of servant leadership along with four competencies:

1. Authenticity: identity, intentions, motivation, being sincere, and adhering to moral principles.
2. Humility: being humble, having high self-awareness of one's strengths and areas needing further development.
3. Compassion: having the ability to forgive others for mistakes, being kind, caring for others, having empathy.

4. Accountability: being responsible, actions are transparent, holding others accountable, monitoring others, and setting clear expectations based on the individual's capabilities.
5. Courage: doing what is morally right despite negative opposition, having high ethical conduct.
6. Altruism: being a positive influence.
7. Integrity: being honest, fair, having strong moral principles, and is ethical.
8. Listening: a deep commitment to respectful and active listening, asking questions to build knowledge, allowing time for silence and reflection.

In addition to these eight common characteristics, Coetzer et al. outlined four competencies of servant leadership, which refer to cognitive and technical knowledge, skills, traits, and habits, which are applied purposefully to obtain the desired outcome:

1. Empowerment: Being committed to the process through (a) alignment and activation of talent; (b) the creation of a productive work environment; (c) continued development of others; (d) transforming followers; (e) transferring responsibility; (f) sharing information; (g) providing individual coaching, mentoring, and support to employees; (h) building self-confidence; wellbeing and proactive follower behavior; and (i) helping followers to mature emotionally, intellectually, and ethically.
2. Stewardship: the process of having accountability for the common interest of a society, an organization, and individuals and leaving a positive legacy.

3. Building relationships: is the ability to communicate effectively. A process of which involves (a) being aware of capabilities, deficiencies, and mindset of others; (b) instill a nurturing environment that is supportive and encouraging of others; and (c) create an environment that fosters trustful relationships with individuals, customers, and the community.
4. Compelling vision: the ability to conceptualize a higher vision, create value for a community and connect past events and current trends with potential future scenarios. (Coetzer et al., 2017a, p. 16)

These characteristics and competencies are essential in building trust and relationships at all levels of an organization to help create a productive work environment. In this study, I focused on building relationships and empowerment along with the fundamental characteristics described by Spears (2010).

## **Literature Review**

### **Leadership**

Leadership is one of the most researched topics in organizational behavior (Rost, 1993). It is believed that leadership is an extraordinary characteristic possessed by an individual (McCleskey, 2014). However, past research has found that there are more than 221 definitions for leadership, some being broad while others are narrow (McCleskey, 2014). The reality is that there is no one agreed-upon definition of leadership because it depends on the interest of the individual (Bass, 2008; McCleskey, 2014). Regardless of how leadership is defined, a commonality across the board was that leadership looks to influence others towards an intentional, common goal (Gandolfi & Stone, 2017). The

leadership style of a leader varied depending on the leadership behaviors they ascribe to (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016). Trying to define the elements of leadership is difficult because of its many complexities and how leadership presents itself depending on the organizational sector. However, how a leader behaves and leads their employees, regardless of organization, can have a positive or negative impact on the organization (Gandolfi & Stone, 2017).

When looking at the field of leadership, many styles of leadership have evolved from research studies: behavioral theory, situational, transactional, and transformational. Several styles have empirical data and have been extensively researched; however, the focus around these styles have mostly centered around controlling the workplace and implementing methods without the input of employees. For example, transactional leadership influences employees through conditional rewards and negative feedback (McCleskey, 2014) whereas servant leadership focuses less on control and more on the development of the leader to follower relationship. Transactional leadership, on the other hand, the leader serves more like a real manger; the relationship centers upon an exchange of employees, desired behaviors are reinforced, and corrective action when unwelcomed behaviors are shown (Young et al., 2020).

According to Sun (2013), servant leaders are distinct from traditional leadership because their primary focus is the needs of others within the organization, thus developing the leader to follower relationship. Based on the situation, servant leaders can display servant leadership behaviors and utilize other effective leadership behaviors such as visioning, ethical, authentic, accountability to influence followers, the organization,

and their stakeholders (Sun, 2013). Eva et al. (2019) point out how servant leadership is people-centric – motive, follows a method of approach, and it is a mindset – stewardship. Servant leaders have a strong sense of self and psychological maturity, where they prioritize each follower's needs based on their interest, recognizing that each individual is unique (Eva et al., 2019).

This person-oriented approach allows the opportunity to strengthen relationships in a safe manner within an organization (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Fostering a person-oriented approach where employees feel supported, psychologically safe, and have autonomy, empowers employees to be engaged and committed to their work, thus achieving organizational goals. In order to obtain a maximum effort by employees, Biswas and Bhatnagar (2013) suggested the importance of organizations going beyond the contractual relationship and provide employees with economic and psychological support because it creates a positive evaluation of affective experiences. Meaning, when providing employees with resources such as organizational support, psychological safety, and autonomy, it inherently encourages them to give more effort. Additionally, past research has found that when employees perceive organizational support, it fortified their evaluation towards their organizational fit and empowered them to be more engaged (Biswas & Bhatnager, 2013). In short when employees felt supported, their commitment to the organization, and job satisfaction increased.

True leaders remove themselves from a self-serving mindset to one that is selfless, operating as a conscious leader (Sisodia, 2018). A servant leader is a complete person, drawing from various elements from within and externally. Servant leaders have

a high level of emotional intelligence as well as systems thinking, knowing to recognize how each part of a system fits within the larger system (Sisodia, 2018). For any organization to reach its organizational outcomes, it is imperative to have the right leadership that encourages the growth and development of employees.

Lao Tzu described the wonder of leadership as: "A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say, we did it ourselves." (Shinagel, 2019, para. 4). Lao Tzu's description illustrates how leadership can be a give-and-take process of respect and collaboration. A leader who invests himself or herself in his or her employees can lead to employees achieving desired outcomes. Additionally, research has shown a connection between emotional intelligence and servant leadership (Du Plessis et al., 2015). When leaders were aware of their own emotions and others, they adjusted their approach to maintain mutual respect. When leaders adapted to situations and regulated their own emotions, they promote a trusting and fair environment (Du Plessis et al., 2015).

When looking at emotional intelligence and servant leadership of high school athletic directors, Lee (2017) found a positive association between servant leadership and emotional intelligence, which had a positive association with developing goal orientation. It was found that athletic directors with high levels of emotional intelligence displaying servant leadership traits were more likely to focus on student-athlete development of goals, educational success, and career achievement (Lee, 2017). Staats (2015) noted that when leaders were aware of how the process of their leadership approach influenced employees, they had a better understanding or adaptability as to how to improve

themselves, their employees, and the organization. Additionally, the leader's level of emotional intelligence influences the level of employees' trust towards the leader, which also influenced how followers viewed their leader's level of servant leadership (Du Plessis et al., 2015).

In order to transform employees within an organization, an essential aspect of effective leadership is the ability to understand, value, listen, and empower employees. Servant leadership can foster a high-quality leader member-exchange (LMX) relationship (Hanse et al., 2015). According to LMX theory, leaders build relationships based on different qualities with different employees (Erdogan & Enders, 2007). LMX is about the quality of the relationship between the employee and supervisor (Hanse et al., 2015). LMX is a working dynamic where the closer the working relationship of leader and follower are, the more effective the employee is with their work (Gandolfi & Stone, 2017). These relationships are built on trust and mutual respect, which further enhances an employee's organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Volmer et al., 2011). However, when looking at LMX alone, this leadership style can be personal in the sense of viewing employees as favorable through the eyes of the leader. The focus is on the organizations' goals first, not its people (Gandolfi & Stone, 2017).

Through LMX, the relationship formed between leader and employee provided access to many positive benefits such as positive organizational outcomes, increased job satisfaction, and commitment (Lloyd et al., 2017). Additionally, when leaders demonstrated active, empathetic listening, more significant positive relationships were



maintained. Servant leadership produced higher levels of LMX through its ability to develop its followers and enabled the development of interpersonal relationships (Newman et al., 2017). They also found that LMX had a mediating effect on servant leadership and psychological empowerment. This research suggests that servant leadership has an influence on social exchange relationships between employees and leaders when high levels of LMX are displayed.

### **Leadership Preparation**

The educational system requires schools to reach their goals, leading to increased pressure to find innovative ways to achieve those goals. Being innovative in education is essential to maintain a viable future, always ready to handle any problem that may arise (Serdyukov, 2017). The first step in achieving innovation begins with developing quality leaders. Leaders are innovators that promote change, inspire, and influence people (Serdyukov, 2017). Therefore, having leaders who can relate to their employees is a critical ability in building trust, collaboration, and reaching organizational outcomes together.

With the continuous technological advancements in the educational setting and the demand for increased student performance, the need for quality, well trained, and knowledgeable educators should be the main priority from a sociological perspective (Türkkahraman, 2014). Research has further shown that the success of students depends on the quality of schools and the quality of educators within the schools (Türkkahraman, 2014). Therefore, having a leader who understands the teacher's needs and development of skills can positively affect the organizational culture. Raising the standard of quality of

education to the point of enhancing professional development, leadership style, competencies could result in instilling a life-long desire to learning, increased motivation, autonomy, and attitude changes (Serdyukov, 2017).

The principal is the most significant influencer within the school. Principals set the culture, the climate, and help contribute to all facets of the success of the school. Therefore, it is essential to ensure the effectiveness of leadership preparation programs. Concoran (2017) notes the importance of reviewing the quality of principal preparation programs, suggesting the establishment of creating an accountability process to ensure the effectiveness of preparing principals to meet the current demands of education. When looking at university preparation programs, Davis (2016) found that school districts that hired leaders coming out of university programs were not satisfied with the quality of preparation programs. Additionally, when surveying universities that offered principal preparation programs, they indicated their program needed improvement in preparing leaders to be effective in recruitment and selection of quality teachers, decision-making and utilizing data (Davis, 2016).

According to Clayton et al. (2013), principal K-12 preparation programs are not aligned with leadership theories nor make the connection with on the job experiences. In other words, principals are not adequately prepared. Young (2015) noted that leadership preparation and development opportunities leaders receive had an influence on the quality of their leadership. They further noted that critics continue to point out preparation programs as still flawed in core program areas despite changes within those programs. For example, the way prospective students are recruited and selected into

preparation programs, the quality of education they receive, how they are assessed, and how they are certified and placed into leadership positions (Young, 2015).

In the USA, for a leader (principal) to obtain their K-12 licensure in public education requires an advanced degree, teaching license, and at least three years of teaching experience (Orphanos & Orr, 2014). When looking at mentorship programs for new principals, there is an insufficient amount of research regarding the preservation of mentorship networks within small, rural schools for new leaders, especially when faced with state accountability pressures (Clayton et al., 2013). Further, there is no agreed-upon definition or model that indicates exemplary leadership preparation (Orphanos & Orr, 2014). They further noted that there is a need for understanding the relationship of quality leadership preparation programs, practices, and teacher outcomes. Research has shown that certain leadership traits have effectively promoted student learning (Bush, 2018). Spears (2010) notes that while servant leadership characteristics can occur naturally within some individuals, these predispositions can be enhanced through learning and practice. Therefore, the quality offered in leadership preparation matters in developing quality leaders.

Simon et al. (2018) conducted a study at a regional university in Austria on postgraduate students to determine whether having the opportunity towards self-reflection, collaboration, and collegial interaction increased the confidence of prospective and current leaders. The results demonstrated that when these practices were given, they had an influence on self-development, which led to bolstering their social and interpersonal skills as leaders. These results indicate the importance of providing

development opportunities for principals and potential staff members on track to become principals so that they can practice and develop their leadership skills.

### **Relationship-Centered Leadership**

When looking at health education, relationship-centered care principles focus on a relationship grounded on the uniqueness and needs of the patient-practitioner relationship. Practitioners are self-aware and carry themselves in a way that they are emotionally present and empathetic (Weiss & Swede, 2016). The relationship is genuine and engaging. The focus of the relationship is founded on the commitment of serving others. These relationships extended beyond the patient-centered relationship; they extend to professional teams, and the community the patient is a part of, to further grow and nurture the positive relationship (Weiss & Swede, 2016). These relationships are rewarding and meant to transform the individual. That transformation will then extend out to the interconnected relationships each member is a part of within a system.

With leadership styles changing, there is a higher need for relationship-centered leadership and high ethical standards that go beyond transformational leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Strong leader-employee relationships can be formed when leaders provide support and feedback, leading to positive outcomes. Forming high-quality leader-member relationships has shown to assist in the overall effectiveness of both leader and employees (Brouer et al., 2012). Additionally, when leaders maintain and build effective relationships at work, it gives the organization a competitive advantage. An employee's performance, which is enhanced by leadership style, develops a company's competitive advantage by promptly achieving its goals (Setyaningrum et al., 2017).

Studies show that a leader's mindset can shape and guide behaviors leading to influencing motivation or suppressing it based on interactions with students and staff (Adams et al., 2017). Relationship-centered leadership focuses on the connections made between leader and follower because of its collaborative nature, and concern leaders show towards employees. Leaders emphasize treating employees with respect, working on building relationships, and a pleasant work environment (Mikkelsen et al., 2015). Leadership pertains to working together with employees and how they work together to achieve a common goal. According to Catano et al. (2001), it is integral to have active participation from both leaders and members to execute goals and services. Kelloway et al. (2013) conducted a study where they examined the relationship between positive leader behaviors and employee wellbeing and found that relational leadership produced favorable outcomes for both individuals and the organization.

When leaders displayed positive behaviors, such as being grateful for employees and providing praise, employees' affect increased, thus having a positive effect on wellbeing for both employees and leaders, resulting in goal achievement and positive task performance (Kelloway et al., 2013). When employees perceive their employer satisfies their work needs and expectations, the employee's organizational relationship is enhanced (Birtch et al., 2016). Servant leadership is multidimensional in that it utilizes all the elements of leadership, including ethical and relational (Coetzer et al, 2017a), meaning, the relationship between the leader and employee is the key to achieving organizational goals. Having leaders who possess a collaborative leadership style (i.e., servant leadership) can play a role in achieving school improvement outcomes (Moorosi

& Bantwini, 2016). Collaborative leadership in a school setting would be the impetus for leaders to actively engage the teaching staff, which would, in turn, enhance the relationship between the teacher, parent, and student. Research has shown that collaborative leadership would necessitate a higher level of engagement while also fostering a partnership between parents, students, and teachers that would ultimately enable students to reach their goals and increase their academic outcomes (Orphanos & Orr, 2014).

In the educational setting, a teacher is more likely to commit to work if the organization enables more significant interactions among members (Cerit, 2010). Relationship-centered leadership can have the potential to be further enhanced when it comes from an authentic place. For example, servant leadership is an exchange between leader and follower that promotes individual integrity and morality, utilizing the positive aspects of authentic and ethical leadership (Ling et al., 2017). When following a relationship-centered leadership approach, the relationship helps reinforce a culture of trust within the organization.

Gregersen et al. (2014) suggested that further research is needed in understanding employees and leadership dynamics. Savage-Austin and Honeycutt (2011) further suggested that organizations can benefit from understanding how leaders engage employees in day-to-day activities, as this understanding can result in organizational effectiveness. A common thread among the research demonstrates how relationship-centered leadership promotes a mutually respectful environment where employees are

supported in reaching organizational goals through learning and employee engagement, in turn, resulting in higher levels of organizational commitment.

### **Ineffective Leadership and Teachers Psychological State**

Sturm et al. (2017) found character and competence are two interconnected concepts integral in leader development because competence helps a leader enhance their character and style of leading (Sturm et al., 2017). While all leaders possess their unique style of leading, a leader may lack competencies or skills to lead others effectively or have destructive leadership behaviors. Developing a leader's character is integral in preventing any competency deficiencies and vice versa (Sturm et al., 2017).

The lack of leader competencies and skills can hurt those employees and the organization. Past research has found that negative experiences have a stronger and lasting impact on employees over positive experiences (Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). For example, a power-oriented leader prioritizes their personal goals at the expense of the organization and followers (Karakitapoğlu-Aygün & Gumusluoglu, 2013). Kelloway et al. (2012) illustrated the link low-quality leadership has on an employee's psychological state, such as increased stress, anxiety, depression, mental health disturbances, health-related issues like high blood pressure, illness and absenteeism.

An individual's attitude can help predict behaviors, particularly how it might influence affect, cognition, and behavior (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). For example, working under an ineffective or destructive leader, an employee's job attitude is affected by the leader. In short, a job attitude is an individual's assessment of whether they approve or disprove of the organization (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012).

Destructive leadership behaviors lead to negatively impacting employee motivation and wellbeing (Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). The same can be said for an incompetent leader. When a leader cannot communicate, provide feedback, and provide support effectively, that impacts an employee's wellbeing and increases stress leading to turnover (Darioly & Schmid Mast, 2011). It is up to the leader to maintain employee loyalty; however, when leaders are incompetent or destructive, this can be damaging to the formation of lasting leader employee relationships. Thus, leadership behavior plays a vital role in influencing an employee's health and perceived wellbeing (Gregersen et al. 2014).

Additionally, leadership behavior influences employees' intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation (Duyar et al., 2013). Research has also shown that poor leadership affects employee job satisfaction and motivation (Buono & Bowditch, 2003). Kelloway et al. (2012) found that a leadership style such as management-by-exception or laissez-faire leadership played a mediating role in negatively affecting wellbeing due to lack of trust in the leader (Kelloway et al., 2012). They also discovered the perceived meaning an employee finds in their work mediated the relationship between a transforming leader and psychological wellbeing. Parris and Peachy (2013) noted past research has found empirical evidence where servant leadership enhances wellbeing in the workplace by creating a positive workplace, in turn increasing trust and organizational commitment.

Agarwal (2014) noted that an essential element of work engagement is an employee's psychological safety. Additionally, employees who were supported experienced a more significant positive leader-employee relationship (Agarwal, 2014).



From an employee level, servant leadership has a positive effect on work engagement, organizational citizenship behavior, creativity and innovation, organizational commitment, trust, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, person-job fit or person-organizational fit, leader-member exchange, and work-life balance (Coetzer et al., 2017a). From a team standpoint, servant leadership had a positive effect on organizational citizenship behavior, team identification, service culture, and procedural justice. These various outcomes are essential to note because it can eliminate barriers or any possibilities of employees leaving the organization (Coetzer et al., 2017a). When leaders are adequately sustaining positive working relationships and are motivating, they lead to higher positive outcomes than the traditional "means to an end" leadership approach (Schwarz et al., 2016).

### **Teacher Turnover**

Since the mid-1980's teacher turnover rates have been increasing at an alarming rate, particularly at the elementary and secondary level, and have had the highest rate amongst high-status, high-paying profession (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2013). This teacher turnover is either a result of moving to a different school or leaving education altogether (Morello, 2014). From an organizational level, district-wide, teacher turnover produces challenges from an operational, quality, and financial level for all district leaders. The teaching force has become increasingly less stable; for example, between 1988-2008, annual attrition increased from 6.4 to 9 percent (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2013). Turnover is particularly highest among minority groups, particularly in underachieving schools, which can make staffing such schools difficult.

According to Park and Shaw (2013), at any level of an organization, turnover rates impact organizational performance from a Human and Social capital perspective. What is especially alarming is that most turnover rates occur at high-poverty, high-minority, urban, and rural public schools (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2013). From a human capital perspective, when seasoned and experienced employees leave, the organization suffers because of the accumulated knowledge and skills that are lost, resulting in increased recruitment, selection, and training costs (Park & Shaw, 2013). From a social capital perspective, turnovers disrupt the social relations within the organization and collective orientation as well as increase costs in newcomer socialization (Park & Shaw, 2013). Turnover affects the organization and places a challenge in forming teacher leader relationships.

According to Shaw and Newton (2014), it takes about 3-7 years to become a qualified teacher, yet teachers leave within the first five years. For example, the rate of first-year teachers leaving increased 34 percent from 1988-2008 (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012). Some reasons teachers leave are due to feeling burnout, low satisfaction, and low commitment towards their school, which can harm low achieving schools. In a national survey of teachers, results indicated that teachers left their roles because they were dissatisfied with school workplace conditions (Duyar et al., 2013). According to Morello (2014), teachers did not leave the students, rather teachers left because of working conditions and lack of resources. Teachers also felt the administration did not care about them and felt unsupported by the administration (Morello, 2014).

Brewster (2013) noted an obstacle to building trust in schools between all members within the school was a lack of follow-through on or support towards school improvement efforts and high teacher turnover. In short, turnover has an impact on the bottom line. For this reason, developing leaders to effectively work well with teachers, particularly, improving the principal teacher relationship to boost productivity, thereby indirectly enhancing student outcomes is essential to understand further.

Teacher stress has been shown to be associated with negative outcomes such as depression, burnout, turnover, which directly impacts the teacher-student relationships within the classroom (Ouellette et al., 2018). While student outcome is not part of this study, it is essential to note that low teacher satisfaction, which is linked to teacher turnover rates, particularly in high poverty schools, has an influence on student achievement. High levels of stress and low job satisfaction interferes with instruction and student learning (Ouellette et al., 2018). Schools, where students experienced high turnover, statistically scored lower on standardized tests (Smith & Persson, 2016). Ingersoll and Merrill (2013) noted that there is a need to continue to research the reasoning for turnover rate because if turnover trends continue to rise there will be widescale financial consequences in the educational system.

### **Servant Leadership and the Organization**

Throughout leadership history, leadership styles have focused on implementing models that leaders could apply to reach organizational goals, servant leadership being one that has brought success to top organizations (Olesia et al., 2014). Relational leadership, like servant leadership, can serve as a viable approach in a variety of sectors.

Servant leadership is a humanistic style (Parris & Peachy, 2013). Servant leadership is the only approach that genuinely places the employees of the organization ahead of the organizational mission (Weiss & Swede, 2016).

Van Dierendonck (2011) found six essential characteristics that followers have seen from their servant leaders such as enable autonomy in individuals, promote self-growth, are vulnerable and humble, are genuine and accepting of others, and provide inspirational leadership. All these attributes were essential in building trust at all levels of an organization. Ilkhanizadeh and Karatepe (2018) found that when looking at trust in the organization as a mediator, the impact servant leadership had on flight attendants' perceptions of job, career, and life satisfaction, flight attendants, had the highest levels of job, career and life satisfaction. According to Sendjaya and Pekerti (2010), trust is remaining open, vulnerable, and having faith that placing one's vulnerability onto another will result in a positive outcome. They further noted that the aspects of benevolence and integrity were a part of servant leadership behaviors that help form trust between followers and servant leaders (Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010).

From a customer service level, servant leadership influences performance at the individual and group level in the following way: When employees modeled the behavior of leaders, it created a serving culture, in turn influencing how all members interacted with each other (Liden et al., 2014). Servant leadership eliminates self-interest through the established norms and expectations of behavior between employees, resulting in a cooperative and supportive environment, thus through the elimination of self-interest objectives, organizational and employee performance is increased (Liden et al., 2014).

Servant leadership helps generate and support positive organizational behaviors. Studies suggest servant leadership fosters an environment where employees' wellbeing is improved, where they experienced increased job satisfaction, where employees' feel emotionally healthy, self-determined, experience increased self-efficacy and can handle organizational challenges and changes better (Beck, 2014; Du Plessis et al., 2015; Jit et al, 2017). Therefore, servant leadership serves as an appropriate approach to challenges faced within underperforming schools. Savage-Austin and Honeycutt (2011) found that when organizations were open to servant leadership practices, the organizations were able to build a community within the organization, which created an environment where employees were able to blossom and develop (Savage-Austin & Honeycutt, 2011). Research further noted that openly communicating with employees and including employees in the decision process created trust, increased loyalty towards leader and organization, morale improved, and reduced employee turnover (Savage-Austin & Honeycutt, 2011).

### **Behavioral Responses**

When leaders are effective and transforming in their practices, research has found that teachers' engagement, commitment, and effectiveness increased (Orphanos & Orr, 2014). This level of increased engagement, in turn, can result in having talented personnel achieve organizational outcomes. Liden et al. (2014) noted that servant leadership impacts followers through role modeling. When employees see their leader providing emotional support and assisting them in reaching their full potential, employees began to view their leader as a role model (Liden et al., 2014). Research has also shown

that servant leadership had a positive effect on job attitudes, organizational behavior, commitment, and job satisfaction. Adams et al. (2017) found that the actions of school leaders influenced social and psychological dimensions in student learning.

Job satisfaction pertains to cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to one's work and how the individual reacts to how they perceive work (Hulin & Judge, 2004). On the other hand, organizational commitment is an individual's alignment of goals and vision towards the organization and being a part of something (Allen & Meyer, 1990). In essence, having an engaging and meaningful job increases levels of satisfaction and commitment towards the organization as well as an individual's identification with the job itself.

Additionally, when employees are included in the decision-making, are supported and treated with justice, their level of engagement is reinforced, and trust towards the organization increases because perceived organizational justice is influenced through trust (Agarwal, 2014). When leaders took a humbling role within the organization, it fostered organizational citizenship behaviors by acknowledging the talents of employees and empowered followers through the strengths they brought to the organization (Ebener & O'Connell, 2010). When employees feel their organization values them and includes them in the decision process, employees feel a part of the organization, further strengthening their commitment to the organization.

Organizational support emits a belief among employees that their contributions are valued, and leaders care about their wellbeing (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003). Engagement is essential; without it, there would be negative consequences; therefore,

building trusting relationships is vital. In order to achieve this, an effective leader strives towards tending to all aspects that promote and sustain trust and eliminate actions or barriers that bring down organizational trust (Agarwal, 2014). Servant leadership fulfills employees' socioemotional needs, further enhancing organizational trust. Servant leadership promotes a safe environment where followers can feel accepted for whom they are, thus meeting their emotional needs (Lu et al., 2019). Based on social-processing theory, individuals use information obtained from their work environment and behave according to their perceptions. How a leader behaves can significantly influence how employees feel and express themselves. Because servant leaders show empathy, employees' trust is developed (Lu et al., 2019).

Chatbury et al. (2011) found a positive connection between servant leadership and interpersonal trust. They postulated that trust was earned because the servant leader was empathetic and accepting of who his or her employees were as people (Chatbury et al., 2011), which illustrates how positive connections can affect performance and productivity. Not only has servant leadership enhanced follower and organizational trust, but it has also positively affected organizational citizenship behavior, procedural justice, work engagement, team and leader effectiveness, and collaboration between members (Parris & Peachey, 2013).

### **Summary**

As previously noted, Greenleaf (1977; Spears 2010) coined the term servant leader describing a servant leader as someone who serves others first. While there is much to be learned and researched regarding servant leadership, numerous scholars

(Liden et al., 2014; Parris & Peachey, 2013; Sun, 2013; Trastek et al., 2014; Van Dierendonck, 2011) have written on the benefits of servant leadership behaviors within various organizations. Researchers have noted how servant leadership could serve as a viable leadership theory to explain unresolved challenges faced in the twenty-first century (Parris & Peachey, 2013).

Chapter 2 reviewed literature that highlighted the construct of servant leadership, turnover, engagement, and the relationship leadership plays in influencing employees and the organization. In reviewing the literature, the literature suggests that servant leadership takes on a multidimensional approach; it is not a one size fits all model. Instead, servant leadership fits into the organization and is adjusted based on that organization's needs. However, throughout the literature, the need for further research in the area of servant leadership is also suggested. This chapter presented studies that have mostly been quantitative or mixed-method in nature; none have addressed principal-teacher relationships in underachieving schools from a qualitative perspective. Further, the finding of this study added to the existing research on servant leadership and contributed to filling existing gaps in researching leadership behavior on engagement and relationship-centered leadership in underperforming schools.

Researching displayed servant leader behaviors, particularly leader-follower relationships, allows the opportunity for employees to reach their full potential through a collaborative growth centered relationship, especially in low performing schools in reaching organizational outcomes. Chapter 3 is an overview of the qualitative research method used. The design approach for this research is a phenomenological qualitative



methodology. Chapter 3 includes research questions and the population sampling approach. Chapter 3 also discusses the role of the researcher, data collection, and ethical considerations.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this IPA study was to understand the lived experiences of teachers and principals regarding servant leadership in underperforming schools. The results provide insight into the effects of servant leadership on building leader–teacher relationships and engagement. This chapter provides a review of the qualitative method that was used in this study. The review includes the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, and methodology used to gain a greater understanding of the principal–teacher relationship.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

A qualitative approach was selected to gain a detailed understanding of principal–teacher relationships in underperforming schools from a servant leadership perspective. Phenomenology is used to look at the lived experiences of a phenomenon and how individuals relate to it as well as help individuals understand the phenomenon (Dawidowicz, 2016). Within phenomenology, there are different types of approaches to consider depending on the direction of the study (Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, within phenomenology, there are two primary schools of thought: descriptive (transcendental) and interpretive (hermeneutical; Dawidowicz, 2016). Descriptive phenomenology supports researchers exploring how to describe the lived experience, whereas interpretive considers the interpretation of responses an essential part of the study (Dawidowicz, 2016). Interpretive phenomenology focuses on the individual’s subjective view of the experience, which provides useful information as to how individuals understand their lived experiences.

For this study, an IPA approach was chosen. The focus of IPA is the systematic exploration of personal experiences for better comprehension of those experiences (Barr & Nieuwerburgh, 2015; Tomkins, 2017). IPA offers the researcher the possibility to obtain an insider perspective through making sense of and giving individuals a voice of their lived experiences (Noon, 2018). IPA paired well with the intention of this study, which was to acquire a thorough explication of the participants' individual experiences of servant leadership on building leader–teacher relationships. Through IPA, I gained insight into participants' interpretations and views of empowerment and building relationships. IPA was conducted through a thorough examination into the subject matter of servant leadership and the teacher–principal relationship since principals play a role in initiating relationships with teachers (Price, 2012). For this qualitative phenomenological study, the data helped answer the following questions:

Research Question 1: How do teachers from underperforming schools experience servant leadership in the workplace?

Research Question 2: How do teachers and principals describe the meaning of servant leadership?

Research Question 3: How does servant leadership influence on the teacher–principal relationship in underperforming schools?

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative research, the researcher's focus is on the depth and understanding of specific situations, groups, moments, or individuals (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The theoretical lens, a critical element in the research process, guides what is essential to

examine, what people should be studied, and the shapes and types of questions asked (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the role of the researcher while establishing participant contributions to the study. In conducting the research, I took into consideration certain elements that would allow the research to progress. To ensure the validity of the study, I obtained access to the intended population, receiving approval from the institutional review board (IRB); maintained confidentiality; and collected and analyzed the data.

The researcher needs to avoid bias during data collection and analysis to ensure the integrity of the study (Dawidowicz, 2016). Bracketing throughout the IPA process requires the researcher to continually re-examine perceptions and interpretive lens (Smith et al., 2009). Going into the research topic with an open mind is important because pre-understandings can cause the researcher to interpret the nature of the phenomenon before understanding the significance of the phenomenological question (Snelgrove, 2014). Throughout the study, I maintained reflexivity because working in the field of education and having daily interaction with educators in the district could have influenced interpretations. Having reflexivity entails an ongoing awareness of the researcher's influence in rationale, construction, and the interpretation process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). It was imperative to share any potential bias throughout the study and use neutral language to minimize research bias when conducting interviews by journaling any bias, thoughts, and observations. Being mindful and aware of how these elements influence observations or overall research are essential in ensuring the quality and credibility of the research. It was also essential that I created an environment for participants to feel safe to

share their lived experiences without worry (Alase, 2017). Selecting an offsite location such as a library or local coffee house ensured an environment where participants felt safe to share their experiences. Further, I selected participants from a low achieving school outside of my school district to prevent conflict of interest.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

The participants for this study consisted of teachers and at least one principal assigned to underperforming schools in New Mexico. Participants were employed for at least 1 year at the underperforming school in the area and understood English. The sampling strategy was purposeful to collect data through face-to-face interviews. To preserve consistency, only those employed at underperforming schools were included in the study.

When conducting IPA research, participants should be impartially equivalent for the study to maintain relevance and personal significance but should also be representative of an ample group (Noon, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). When determining the sample size, there is not a specific number; instead, the size is dependent on the phenomenon in question (Noon, 2018). For this study, the sample size consisted of six participants to prevent data overload but ensure the ability to obtain rich, in-depth information from the selected number of participants. Since the sample size was small, there may be a limit on generalization of results. However, in IPA research, the researcher is seeking to understand the individuals' perception and how they make sense of the situation; to collect meaningful information, a small sample size is appropriate to

support the depth of case-by-case analysis (Tang & Dos Santos, 2017). IPA is an idiographic approach; the sample size is kept small because of the detailed case by case analysis of each transcript (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Data Collection and Instrumentation**

Participants were recruited by first contacting the administration at underperforming schools in New Mexico via email or phone school administrators to explain the study and why. Data for this study were collected from educators placed in underperforming schools in the area. Once the underperforming schools were identified, I contacted teachers and principals by email informing them of study and purpose. After gaining access to six participants, the location for interviews selected was a quiet and comfortable place.

When conducting IPA research, data are collected through in-depth or semistructured interviews (Charlick et al., 2016). I used an in-depth, semistructured interview guide, each participant was interviewed via telephonically due to COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, which also included nonverbal body language and verbal inflections (Barr & van Nieuwerburgh, 2015). Face-to-face interviews can present nonverbal cues such as gestures, body language, and facial expressions, which can provide messages to the researcher in gaining a deeper understanding of verbal responses (Al Balushi, 2018). After each recorded interview, I took notes in a journal to reflect on initial impressions and interactions between the participant and me as well as reactions to the possible developing themes discovered (Smith et al., 2009).

In order to have a successful interview process, prior to commencing interviews, to build rapport, I began a light conversation with the participant to ease any tension or possible concerns. Smith et al. (2013) noted the importance of establishing rapport before beginning the interview process to create a comfortable setting for participants. I informed participants that the interview process would be a one-sided conversation, that there were no right or wrong answers and that I would mainly use active listening in order to gain a thorough account of the experience. I informed participants, to ensure no detail was left out during the interview process, that interviews would be recorded. To adhere to the IRB human protection requirements, all techniques, strategies, or devices used during the interview had participants' full consent and approval (Alase, 2017).

Several days before the interviews, I e-mailed participants to schedule a time and location. During the interview process, participants were given a voluntary consent form to participate in the study, and were reminded of the purpose of study, assured anonymity would be maintained, and that provided information would only be used for research purposes.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Following an IPA method, an in-depth qualitative interview (Appendix A) was used to gather information on each participant's perspective. The data collected was from interviews, and codes were utilized to capture participants' perspectives from collected data. Since IPA supports the opportunity to analyze in detail how participants perceive and make sense of their experiences, semi-structured in-depth interviews are the most effective way to collect data (Pietkiewics & Smith, 2014). Once interviews were

completed, all information obtained through the interviews, my reflective journal notes, verbatim recordings, and any other notes were combined to obtain a complete account of the research. Alase (2017) noted that when transcribing interviews, it should be verbatim into a hard copy and analyzed using a color-coded format and categorized into themes (Alase, 2017).

In qualitative research, a code is a word or short phrase that gives a summary of a portion of language-based or visual data (Saldaña, 2016). Coding involves defining, finding, and marking in-text relevant concepts, themes, events, examples, names, places, or dates (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). When coding concepts, the key is to look for repetition throughout various data items, emotive, and robust language, an agreement between individuals (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). These codes are assigned throughout the analysis and transcription. The process of choosing code words begins with reviewing notes from interviews multiple times and making notes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). A key element in qualitative research during the review process of interviews and notes is to look for words that have meaning to delve deeper into information obtained (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Through this process, I was immersed into the data to discover any emerging themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Thematic analysis is flexible and useful because of the search for common threads across an entire interview or set of interviews (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). A theme summarizes or provides conclusions of what the researcher has learned (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Themes show the relationship between two or more concepts (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 194). A theme illustrates the significant component of content analysis



(Saldana, 2016). Themes are important because they provide a source where one can compare, describe, and explain the findings (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Themes help evaluate participants' perspectives, point out similarities and differences, and they generate unanticipated insights (Nowell et al., 2017). Additionally, a software program, NVivo, for qualitative data analysis was used to help organize and store data.

Ultimately, I analyzed data following Charlick et al. (2016) seven-step guide of IPA data analysis. In order to gain a thorough understanding of participants' interpretations, the first step pertained to reading all data collected and reading notes, journal, and transcriptions, again, in order to become immersed in the data. The next step was to move onto processing notes and extracting relevant statements, followed by developing emerging themes and then searching for connections from emergent themes. The final step was to move to the next case – bracketing previous themes, looking for patterns across cases, finishing with deepening analysis taking interpretations to a deeper level.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

According to Alase (2017), when conducting IPA research, the researcher should develop tools that allows the data and findings to be thoroughly authenticated to prevent poor results. I used the following tools to navigate data gathering and analysis.

#### **Credibility**

The credibility of this study pertained to setting aside preconceptions and biases in order to encompass a phenomenological mindset. I bracketed experiences during the interview process in the event any personal interpretations emerged, as it would be an

essential factor in ensuring the credibility of the study, virtually ensuring the truth of the study and its findings (Connelly, 2016). Having a credible study enhances the credibility and overall trustworthiness of the data provided in the study.

Credibility is equivalent to internal validity and seeks to ensure the confidence of the study. To ensure credibility, Connelly (2016) suggested the following techniques: member-checking, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement with participants, and reflective journaling. According to Saldana (2013), member-checking helps in ensuring the validity of the data obtained. Once the transcription of interviews were completed, I had participants review their transcribed interview for accuracy to ensure the validity of the study.

### **Transferability**

Transferability pertains to the study being able to be applied in other studies of similar contexts. Transferability can be considered similar to formal generalization in quantitative research. However, while formal generalizations focus on statistical generalizations, transferability focuses on each individuals' story through the support of rich, detailed descriptions (Connelly, 2016). The aim was to obtain rich, detailed descriptions of individuals' experiences, during the interview process, to provide enough detail to draw conclusions from and determine whether they were applicable in other similar settings. The key was to provide an informative and vivid picture that resonated with readers (Connelly, 2016).

Establishing credibility and transferability was then obtained through the verification and authenticity of data by conducting a thorough examination of all the data

collected from the interviews. Interview accuracy was then safeguarded by giving participants a copy of the interview to ensure all information obtained was accurate. I provided a detailed account of all experiences during data collection, making connections surrounding the data collected. I discussed where interviews occurred and the time of day for readers and other researchers to recreate the scene and provide a picture of the research study.

### **Dependability**

Similar to reliability in quantitative research, dependability in qualitative research pertains to the stability of the research over time (Connelly, 2016). Dependability was established through thorough documentation of procedures and processes for interpreting and analyzing data so that the research study could be replicated. A procedure to ensure dependability included the maintenance of a process log; a process log included all the researcher's notes accounting for every detail throughout the study (Connelly, 2016). I documented procedures immediately after the interviews by having participants validate their transcript to check for accuracy. I also combined my notes with the transcript of recorded interviews to have a complete account of the interview process, then reviewed all my notes, bracketed when necessary, and organized data to identify any themes.

### **Confirmability**

Dependability deals with consistency. Confirmability, on the other hand, would emphasize maintaining neutrality (Korstjens & Moser, 2017), meaning the researcher ensures that interpretations are based on the data obtained and not the researchers' viewpoints. Guba and Lincoln (1994) noted that to achieve confirmability, establishing

credibility, dependability, and transferability must first be achieved (Connelly, 2016). Confirmability is parallel to objectivity because confirmability deals with ensuring the data and interpretations are based on the context and participants (Connelly, 2016). To ensure confirmability, Korstjens, and Moser (2017) recommended using an audit trail as a strategy. By having a detailed account of decisions made during the research process, reflective thoughts, research materials adopted, and information on data management, the auditor has a full account of the research path (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). The goal of confirmability was to ensure that findings are reflective of participants' responses, which was obtained by following the aforementioned audit trail.

### **Ethical Procedures**

In any research study, there is a potential for ethical issues to arise, such as bias related to study. Throughout the designing to the reporting research process, it would be imperative to protect participants' and research by considering the following ethical challenges: anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent, and bias (Sanjari et al., 2014). For this study, I maintained anonymity by using a number coding process to maintain participants privacy. Also, the real names of participants were not used when labeling recorded interviews. To further ensure confidentiality, all transcriptions and notes were kept electronically and kept in a password protected computer. All information obtained was solely used to complete this research.

Additionally, Ravitch and Carl (2016) noted the importance of a researcher notifying participants of their rights, participants having an understanding of the purpose of study, goals, expectations, and roles of participants to be included in the study. Before

commencing the research study, participants were provided with the purpose of the research study and consent to participate in the research form. I addressed all issues of privacy, confidentiality, and protection of human subjects and notified participants they had the right to participate or not and were free to end participation without penalty. Before any data was obtained, permission from Walden's IRB was first obtained. IRB approval served as notice that I was adhering to the protection of human participants and all research ethics.

### **Summary**

I described why the selection of a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach was appropriate based on the research study. This qualitative study was designed to use an IPA approach to explore the effects of the principal-teacher relationship in underperforming schools. IPA allowed the researcher the opportunity to collect data related to the lived experiences of volunteered participants from underperforming schools. Using IPA, the researcher described, explored, and interpreted the effects of servant leadership in terms of the principal-teacher relationships in underperforming schools. This chapter discussed information on the research design and rationale for the selected study, the role of researcher, methodology, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 discusses the data analysis and results from this study.

## Chapter 4: Results

Because of a need to explain how principals and teachers describe the meaning of leadership in helping underperforming schools from a qualitative perspective, the purpose of this IPA study was to interview teachers and a principal at an underperforming school to explore their experiences regarding servant leadership. The focus was to describe the experiences, perceptions, and meanings participants associated with servant leadership in building relationships from an IPA approach, answering research questions related to how teachers from underperforming schools experience servant leadership, how teachers and principals describe servant leadership, and how servant leadership influences the teacher–principal relationship. IPA provided the possibility for participants who have experienced similar events to share their thoughts and experiences openly without alterations (Alase, 2017). Based on the responses from the interviews, the analysis used for this study determined that building leader–teacher relationships from a servant leadership framework could be beneficial in underperforming schools.

In chapter 4, the setting and demographics are first presented to provide the reader a visual representation in understanding participants’ experiences and context. The data collection and analysis are then described. Evidence of trustworthiness is also discussed, and the chapter concludes with the results of the study.

### **Setting**

Once participants were identified and agreed to participate, I made myself available via live phone calls, Google Meets, Zoom, email, and text messages. Each participant was provided an informed consent document via email to confirm willingness

to participate. I contacted each participant via phone, text message, and email to confirm the date and time of the interview. The interviews were initially intended to be conducted in person; however, due to a public health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the state shut down only allowing essential workers outside the home, and no social contact was permitted. In order to comply with the health order set in place, participants were given the option to use Zoom, Google Meet, or conduct interviews via phone. All participants expressed feeling most comfortable participating via phone call, which made observing body language a challenge.

Participants' privacy was ensured by having each interview conducted with both me and participants in a private space in our individual homes with no other individuals present to avoid distractions. At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself, established rapport, and asked each participant if they had any questions regarding the study, interview process, or informed consent. I further preceded by asking participants if they were comfortable with having the phone conversation recorded to ensure the accuracy of the phone interview. Each participant expressed consent to having the conversation recorded. I used a script to help guide and engage the semi-structured interviews, ensuring all participants were asked the same questions for uniformity purposes, which helps ensure comparison and data quality (Young et al., 2018).

### **Demographics**

The targeted population for this study included schools that were underperforming and had a grade rating of D or F for 2 or more years, as indicated by the New Mexico Department of Education annual grade reports (New Mexico Public Education

Department, 2019). All participants were recruited by me through purposive sampling. The first step was to search through the state's department of education website, where all school grade (performing and low performing) information is available to the public. Once schools were identified, I researched each school. Then I found contact information for each staff member, which was available on public access school websites. I reached out to all K-5 staff members via email. Invitations and inclusion criteria to preserve consistency to be eligible to participate were provided in each email. Once participants were secured, to respect participants' identity, participants were numbered sequentially P1 through P6.

All six participants were employed at an underperforming school for 1 or more years. Participants included five teachers and one principal. Table 1 illustrates total years in education and years in current underperforming school. Recruitment for participation was open to all genders; however, all participants who volunteered for the study were female. Regarding participants total years in education, the total number of years in education ranged from 15 to 25 years, with the average between all six participants being 18 years. As for current time at the current location, the number of years ranged from 2 to 15 years in the role. The average is 5.5 years at the current location among all six participants.

**Table 1**

*Participants' Total Years in Education and Years in Current Role*

Participant	Year in service	Tenure
P1	15	15



P2	18	2
P3	11	7
P4	17	3
P5	23	3
P6	25	3

*Note.* The data presented in Table 1 illustrates participants' total time in education versus current time in the role to illustrate level of experience.

The diversity of participants' years of experience improves the trustworthiness of the data collected. Having a variety of different levels of experiences in education enriches the level of research credibility by allowing me to have data to compare participants' experiences. Teachers' perceptions of their work and curriculum they follow at school influences how they respond within the work setting (Woon Chia & Goh, 2016).

### **Participants' Profiles**

Participant 1 is currently an elementary teacher. P1 has been an elementary teacher for 15 years. P1 has been teaching the same grade level and location since receiving an education degree.

Participant 2 is currently an elementary teacher. P2 has been a teacher for 18 years with experience working in various grade levels K-8. She has worked in both underperforming and affluent high-achieving schools. P2 has been at her current site for 2 years and has been involved as a grade-level team leader. A grade-level team leader serves as the teacher who represents the grade they teach when attending staff meetings.

Participant 3 is currently an elementary teacher. P3 has been a teacher for 17 years at various schools throughout the community. P3 has experience working with various cultural populations and has served as a mentor to other teachers. P3 has been at the current site for 7 years.

Participant 4 is currently a principal. P4 began her career as a special education teacher, then received her principalship degree after a couple of years of teaching. P4 has been a principal for 17 years. P4 has successfully worked at various schools, from underperforming to high achieving schools. She has also worked in schools from various cultural populations within the state. P4 has been at her site for 3 years and is currently leading other leaders to improve their schools.

Participant 5 is currently an elementary teacher. P5 has been a teacher for 23 years. P5 began her career in education in another state, working at underperforming schools in various grade levels from second to fifth grade. She has been at her current site for 3 years.

Participant 6 is currently an elementary teacher. P6 has been a teacher for 25 years. P6 began her career in education in another state, working with the Native American population. She also has had experience working in various states at underperforming schools working in various grade levels K-8. P6 has been at her current site for 3 years and is contemplating retirement due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semistructured interviews. Data collection for IPA research is best collected through in-depth or semistructured interviews (Charlick et al.,

2016). Semistructured interviews allow the researcher to have meaningful conversations with participants that are purposeful to help reveal participants' thoughts and gain access to their perspectives of experiences (Charlick et al., 2016). The study involved interviewing six participants from January 23 to February 12, 2021. Participants were interviewed based on their availability over the course of 3 weeks.

As participants emailed or sent a text indicating interest in the study, I provided participants informed consent forms. After participants responded to an email agreeing to participate, I made final arrangements with selected participants confirming date and times that best fit with participants' availability. Each interview was scheduled between 60–90 minutes long and recorded with permission. Participants were then asked a series of interview questions, which the IRB approved at Walden University before beginning the study:

- How long have you worked in an underperforming school?
- What prompted you to teach at an underperforming school?
- What is the most rewarding and most challenging part of being a teacher/principal at an underperforming school?
- Discuss your experience with parent involvement.
- Discuss your experience with the school culture.
- Discuss the principal–teacher relationships you have experienced as a teacher/leader.
- Have you considered leaving your role as a teacher/principal at an underperforming school?

- How has the principal–teacher relationship affected your decision to stay/leave school?
- Discuss the factors that influence your level of job satisfaction.
- Describe the type of support you receive as a teacher/principal.
- What elements do you consider necessary in a relationship between principal-teachers?
  - How have these elements of principal-teacher relationships affected your decision to remain in or leave your role?
- Describe the leadership style you think is most effective.
- Discuss which traits you consider are essential for principals to have in leading an underperforming school.
- Discuss your experience with leaders, followers, and service.
- Have you heard of servant leadership style?
  - If no, the interviewer offers a definition.
  - If yes, ask understanding of servant leadership style.
- Discuss how can principals in underperforming schools use a servant leadership style with teachers.
- Based on your experiences working in an underperforming school, describe what you think the outcome of principals using servant leadership in the school would be.

Due to COVID-19 social distancing state mandate rules, interviews had to be conducted over the phone. At the time of interviews, participants acknowledged ongoing

organizational changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For participants' privacy and to avoid any interruptions, each interview was conducted with both me and the participant in an isolated space with no other individuals present. At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself, established rapport, and asked each participant if they had any questions regarding the study, the interview process, or informed consent. Participants were asked permission to record the interview for accuracy and ensure no information was missed. Participants P2 to P6 had interviews recorded using an audio recording device. P1 preferred not to have interview recorded. To help participant feel comfortable speaking freely, a text to speech was utilized instead. My own thoughts, perceptions, and notes were typed in a Word document for each interview. At the conclusion of each interview, I reviewed each answer provided for accuracy.

All participants were informed I would respect their privacy requests. Besides obtaining gender, total years of work experience in education, and time in the current role, no other identifying information was collected during this study. I also assured all participants that the data collected would remain in strict confidence and locked in a confidential file for a period of three years. Three years after the study is completed, all files will be destroyed.

Each interview began with an open-ended question pertaining to how long they had worked in education, particularly at an underperforming school. This question allowed the participant the opportunity to think back on the total number of years working in education. Participants took their time talking out loud to themselves as they worked through recalling the various roles they had throughout the years. Working

through questions helped participants to recount their experiences and transition through each question in an organic manner from an established script to help guide the interview. Participants were prompted to discuss specifics and encouraged to discuss their experiences of leadership at an underperforming school. Each interview ranged from 60–90 minutes long. All data collected from interviews were transcribed, my reflective journal notes were also reviewed to obtain a complete account of information obtained. Transcribed interviews were analyzed using NVivo qualitative software to help with coding, identify any themes, or help find connections between participants.

All participants were eager and happy to help share their experiences. Open-ended questions were asked to ensure participants were given an appropriate format to share their lived experiences freely. For example, when asking participants “what elements do you consider necessary in a relationship between principals and teachers?” I was able to attain a greater understanding of participants’ lived experiences through their stories and reflections. The guided script followed a particular sequence to guide the interviews. The script had five different categories: introduction, context of school, principal teacher relationships, leadership, and servant leadership. When certain questions were unclear or not addressed, I would restate the question, probe, or ask for more detail for greater understanding. Additionally, throughout the interview, I rephrased or summarized participants’ responses to ensure the accuracy of the information gathered. I also kept a reflective journal.

Maintaining awareness of preconceptions and reflecting on objectivity is essential to analysis because the researcher’s own experiences and knowledge serve as a guide in

the phenomenological inquiry (Neubauer et al., 2019). A reflective journal was used to note my thoughts before, during, and after the interview. My journal also served as my field notes where I jotted down: time and setting of the interview, verbal, and nonverbal communication during the interview such as pauses, laughter, voice inflections, my thoughts regarding the overall interview, and words or phrases that stood out. The interviews lasted on average 60 minutes. P6 spent about one hour and thirty minutes in the interview, while P4 and P3 lasted 55 minutes. P1 and P2 spent a few minutes past the one-hour mark. At the conclusion of each interview, I reviewed each answer with participants to check for accuracy, participants were informed that comments would be used in study and asked if they had any further questions or information they would like to share.

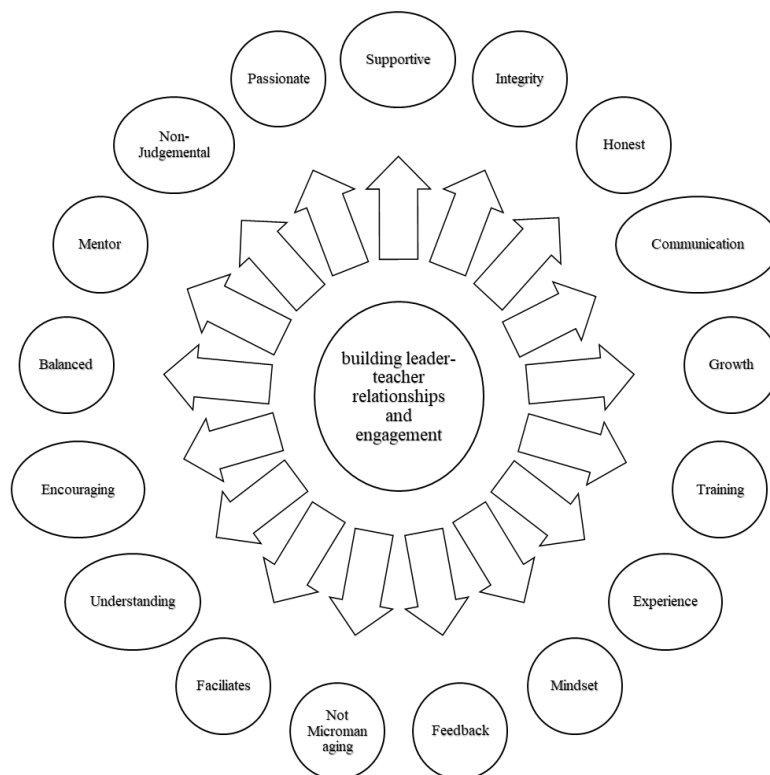
### **Data Analysis**

Before delving into the analysis, I journaled my personal and professional experiences to separate my viewpoints. I followed Charlick et al.'s (2016) seven-step guide of IPA data analysis: (a) reading and re-reading, (b) initial noting, (c) developing merging themes, (d) searching for connections across emergent themes, (e) moving to the next case, (f) looking for patterns across cases, (g) taking interpretations to deeper levels. Throughout this process, I reviewed each response to understand the whole picture and looked at the whole transcript when looking at each part of the analysis process to understand participants' viewpoints.

Following the seven-step approach helped me to see how each element is intertwined, pieced together like a puzzle. Step 1 involves reading and re-reading all data

collected, reading notes, journals, and transcriptions, again, in order to become immersed in the data. I found myself returning to step one periodically. Then I began step two of the initial noting phase to explore semantic content. A linguistic set of comments was made. The linguistic comments covered language use, pauses, laughter, hesitation, and repetition. The noting phase was beneficial in assisting me to become more familiar with the transcript and to delve into reflection. I was able to jot down initial ideas and underline and highlight words that stood out or were repeated. This step was beneficial in allowing me to identify key words that were related to the research questions. Step three: pertained to developing emerging themes. The process for this stage is done by looking at the entire transcript focusing on the analysis of notes made (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Step four involved making connections from the emerging themes discovered in step three. The overall analysis from each transcript provided an in-depth understanding of participants' interpretations of principal servant leadership effects on relationships with teachers in underperforming schools. Figure 1 shows frequently used terms used by participants, which were used as codes in developing emerging themes. Table 2 represents some codes identified, and Appendix B represents the complete table of codes identified.



**Figure 1***Frequently Used Words in Interviews***Table 2***Codes Identified*

Participant	Coding Categories	Excerpt
P1	Resources	"I need to help students grow, but I don't have enough time to plan"
P2	Support	"Knowing that I can count on my principal's support encourages me to want to do better"
P3	Demographic	"The demographic we serve is tough"
P4	Training	"Training was not adequate to help build confidence in ability to perform job. I have had to learn by trial and error"
P5	Trust (Lack)	"there's general lack of trust in education and leaders"
P6	Collaboration	"The bottom line is to help students grow academically, working together in collaboration towards common goal is the first step"

As codes were being identified, I made some notes and bracketed out any personal opinions or assumptions. I manually highlighted similarities in the data on a notepad to keep the data organized. Participants' responses further led to discovering several themes. Discovering themes began to become more evident the further I reviewed participants' stories. My focus centered around the effects of servant leadership in building the leader-teacher relationship. Creating diagrams and charts helped in making connections and seeing patterns and themes. By breaking down participants' responses, the researcher can capture the essence of participants' experience without distorting or misrepresenting (Alase, 2017). I focused my attention on keywords and codes identified looking at similarities to identify any patterns. I identified a commonality that emerged from the data a) lack of resources; b) lack of trust; c) demographics; d) training. When looking deeper into commonalities, I identified emergent themes: a) Understanding the demographics – the population, the school serves was one main concern, b) having support, c) participants felt seeing a need to help others was important, d) having experience - training to effectively work within population school serves, d) having autonomy, empowerment to teach the classroom with creativity and effective resources.

Through extensive data analysis, I was able to answer one of my research questions: How does servant leadership influence the teacher-principal relationship in underperforming schools? All participants emphasized the importance of support, communication, having empathy, understanding the population, the social and cultural norms. Participants shared that the influence of servant leadership could lead to positive

changes that ripple beyond the school. Participants identified that there are struggles of trust within the school and community which creates more barriers.

Through a rigorous process of analyzing participants' responses, themes were identified in helping provide insight into participants' experiences. I was able to gain a deeper understanding of challenges teachers and leaders face in underperforming schools, but I was also shown the successes some teachers have had working in underperforming schools.

### **Discrepant Cases**

During the analysis stages of my study, I did not discover evidence that would contradict the findings. While participants had various teaching experiences, participants shared everyday experiences of support, professional development, and leadership styles. Upon further analysis to ensure I had followed the analysis plan as indicated; I did not discover a case that disagreed with other participants. Had there been one, I would have noted any variances within the data to preserve evidence of trustworthiness.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

Having a credible study enhances the credibility and overall trustworthiness of the data provided in the study. Through various methods, credibility is attained when participants' interpretations are represented accurately by the researcher (Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility is equivalent to internal validity and seeks to ensure the confidence of the study. To ensure credibility, Connelly (2016) suggested the following techniques: member-checking, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement with participants, and

reflective journaling. Member-checking was used to confirm credibility. All data obtained from each participant and notes were used in documenting participants' experiences. I used a journal to write down my thoughts or assumptions that emerged during data collection. I felt, to ensure trustworthiness, I needed to reflect on any assumptions or biases that might have surfaced during analysis. Each interview had its own document where I typed responses and notes. Five out of six interviews were also audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. At the conclusion of each interview, I reviewed information obtained with each participant to confirm accuracy. Participants did not have any concerns or further questions.

### **Transferability**

According to Alase (2017), when conducting IPA research, the researcher should develop tools that will allow the data and findings to be thoroughly authenticated to prevent poor results and be applied in other studies of similar contexts. Transferability focuses on each individual's story by supporting rich, detailed descriptions (Connelly, 2016). Transferability was implemented through variability in participant selection and obtaining rich thick descriptions from interviews.

### ***Variability in Participant Selection***

The variability used included three different classifications: gender, time in the current role, and total years of experience in education. Adding different variability to the participant selection process helps this study to be applied in various environments beyond the school setting. Variability helps ensure transferability by incorporating the

various elements used in the selection process while preserving some homogeneity among participants.

### ***Rich, Thick Description***

Having detailed, thick descriptions from interviews was essential in obtaining information for this study. The foundation of IPA research is obtaining detailed and thick descriptions of participants' lived experiences (Alase, 2017). Each interview detailed rich and thick descriptions of participants' experiences, particularly when digging deeper through open-ended follow-up questioning, provided anecdotal information based on examples of past and current experiences, and parallels pre Covid 19 and during Covid 19 pandemic observations. Some examples of open-ended follow-up questions included:

- Tell me more about \_\_\_\_\_?
- What was that like for you \_\_\_\_\_?
- Regarding \_\_\_\_\_, tell me more about that experience?
- Tell me more about positive and negative experiences?
- I continued asking open-ended questions until participants had nothing further to add. For example, P2 shared experiences that compared working at an affluent successful school versus underperforming lower social economic status school.

### **Dependability**

Dependability in qualitative research pertains to the stability of the research over time (Connelly, 2016). Dependability was established through thorough documentation of procedures and processes for interpreting and analyzing data so that the research study

can be replicated. A process log includes all the researcher's notes accounting for every detail throughout the study (Connelly, 2016). To ensure dependability, I followed the data collection process described and approved by the IRB at Walden University. Dependability was achieved by maintaining and implementing a consistent process during all interviews. Interview questions followed a script, using open-ended questions. I read all questions the same following the same order for all interviews. I reviewed responses with each participant to check for accuracy. Participants did not add any additional information after the interviews were completed. I focused my attention on participant's responses, not allowing my perspective of servant leadership to influence data collection.

### **Confirmability**

To ensure confirmability, recognizing my influence of experiences on the study is essential. Maintaining self-awareness of pre-conceptions and reflecting on how my own subjective experiences are part of the analysis process while simultaneously reflecting on participants' experiences to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon's experiences is essential (Neubauer et al., 2019). I implemented the use of a notepad to journal my reflections throughout the data collection and analysis process to ensure confirmability.

## **Results**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to interpret and discover lived experiences of principal-teachers in an underperforming school to describe the servant leadership effects on principal-teacher relationship building in underperforming schools.

When analyzing participants' responses, I noticed some common responses from participants' stories that described characteristics of the phenomenon, providing insight into how servant leadership behaviors had an effect in building leader-teacher relationships and engagement. There were several themes that emerged in the data that allowed me to answer the research questions. The themes included:

- seeing a need
- support
- understands the demographics – population school serves
- understanding of others – empathetic
- experience – training
  - Subtheme: coaching/mentor
- Empowerment – creativity, autonomy
- positive change – a ripple effect
- growth and development

Results of the study are presented by the research question and the themes resulting from participants lived experiences from interview script that allowed me to answer the research questions.

### **Research Question 1**

Participants were asked a series of questions regarding their experiences on principal-teacher relationships in an underperforming school. The questions consisted of the following categories: the context of school, experiences regarding principal-teacher relationships, leadership, and servant leadership. Besides uniformity of questions, the

script facilitated the process in discovering themes that would lead to understanding the central questions of the study. RQ1: “How do teachers from underperforming schools experience servant leadership in the workplace”? According to participants’ responses leader support and communication was a large factor in participants’ perceptions. Balyer et al., (2015) found that when principals create learning communities it fosters an environment that encourages cooperation, support, and collaboration; however, these learning communities were mostly not being executed correctly. Participants’ responses indicated that having continual support and communication enhances the overall school culture.

Participants comment that having a supportive environment and communication was necessary and essential in reaching academic and emotional needs of students. Participants also reflected on some positive successes students had experienced within the classroom that helped open communication with families. Participants described challenges faced within the community which creates separation at all levels of the organization.

Emerging themes provided insights and answers to research questions. Research question 1: How do teachers from underperforming schools experience servant leadership in the workplace? This question was answered using Theme 2, support, Theme 4, understanding of others – empathetic, Theme 6, empowerment – creativity, autonomy, Theme 8, growth, and development. Theme 2 resulted out of all six participants’ statements regarding support from categories in the interview script. Support was also a



keyword used throughout the interview by all six participants. Theme 4, 6, and 8 emerged from participants' reflections based on experiences throughout their profession.

***Theme 2: Support***

Establishing a supportive environment towards all members of the organization and continuous open communication. All participants shared positive and negative experiences they had encountered throughout the years from previous and current level of support from parent, leader, coworker, to district level.

P1 noted, "the teachers that have remained the longest have each other's backs, I feel supported and united with my grade level teachers. I was sick from Covid, I was surprised principal was supportive and understanding during my recovery. Communication is important, especially during this year that has been challenging."

P2 stated, "I am in a lot of committees where I get a lot of support, my director, and school leader, are very supportive. I appreciate my leader's honesty and communication; their level of honesty and communication motivates me to want to improve and do better. Communication is my number one factor along with feeling supported that will influence my decision to stay or leave an organization."

P3 noted, "During my seven years at current location, I have had six different principals come and go, who were not very supportive and did not communicate which created a closed-minded culture by veteran teachers; this is how it is done mentality. Thankfully, our new principal is very supportive, positive, encouraging and always communicating with all staff promoting collaboration and growth."

P4 stated “as a leader it is important to set relationships from the beginning, providing support from a mentor approach, and communicating expectations clearly. I began as a special education teacher and saw a need for change, noticed a disconnect and lack of support. My support depends on who is leading at district level often leaving leaders to figure everything out by trial and error.”

P5 stated “support comes from leadership and coworkers. We are dedicated to the students learning and we have each other’s back in supporting efforts. Principal is supportive and communicates changes, they go out of their way to keep us informed about upcoming changes and encourages a collaborative environment. To show appreciation principal came in early to make everyone a pancake breakfast and thanks us for all our hard work. Previous principal was abusive and ridiculed anyone who asked for help. With a new leader in place, teachers are beginning to open up more, and feel less stressed.”

P6 stated “The culture is still recovering from a blaming, shaming, lack of coaching and demanding environment from previous leader. We are in time of healing, communication and support is improving and in a much better place than before. Having a supportive environment fosters teachers ability to develop a classroom environment that promotes sense of community and trust.”

The theme of support and communication was repeated continuously with all participants. These statements are some examples of how having support and open communication has helped build relationships within the classroom and with their school leader, which fosters a safe and trusting environment.

***Theme 6: Empowerment Creativity, Autonomy***

Mubarak and Noor (2018) found that leaders are instrumental in impacting creativity and are also pivotal in empowering development and reinforcing creativity. Having leaders show care and understanding of teachers roles positively influences teachers. P1 stated “A principal’s honesty, treating others with equality and fairness, and promotes collaboration are factors that contribute to helping teachers feel empowered. Including teachers in the decision process helps build the principal-teacher relation.” P1 felt uncertain about trusting leadership due to past experiences with previous leadership, they “lost respect for all leaders.” P1 was hesitant in providing information in certain instances, while she had expressed having the ability to be creative within their classroom, they wondered how long it would last.

P2 stated, “My principal gives us the opportunity to collaborate as a team and share knowledge. Our director is always giving us opportunities to be creative and teach with freedom within the classroom.”

P3 noted “I am so grateful for our principal, since she has been assigned to our site, she’s been making positive changes to improve relationships, build trust, and include us in decision process. She empowers by encouraging us to share ideas, be creative in the classroom and actually teach. For example, I had found some books that I felt would be a great source to enhance my lesson, I approached my principal about it hesitantly thinking she would turn me down, but to my surprise she helped look for the books and was able to obtain funding to purchase the book. I had never had any other leader do that for us.”

P4 stated “I keep an open-door policy; I encourage my teachers to come talk to me, I listen to understand and include my teachers in the decision process. I consider what teacher have to say and share to promote building relationship through empowerment.”

P5 stated “some challenges in teaching centers around administrative duties, paperwork, teaching to the standards to meet district demands take away creativity, not being able to teach freely takes our autonomy and joy of teaching. Current leader provides the ability to run own teacher meetings, given some autonomy and are being trusted that they will do their job.”

P6 stated “lack of voice, lack of protection, there is no way to have anyone help teachers to rise above and be treated as a professional to teach freely. Leader listens, but there is only so much they can do to provide support because ultimately the pressure stems from the district and the department of education to raise standardized scores. We have been programmed for so long to just follow orders free thinking and creativity is stagnant.” Participants’ statements captured their general sentiment to the importance of being empowered, given autonomy and allowed to be creative.

## **Research Question 2**

How do teachers and principals describe the meaning of servant leadership? Leaders that create a positive environment and positive relationships encourages an environment where people can grow and flourish (Whittington, 2017). Leaders who viewed themselves as leaders who serve other first, display behavioral characteristics that could create an environment where individuals thrived and found meaning in their work.

Research question 2 was answered using Theme 1, seeing a need, Theme 2, support, Theme 4, understanding of others – empathetic, Theme 6, empowerment – creativity, autonomy, Theme 8, growth, and development. Theme 1 developed from three out of five participants’ statements regarding seeing a need to help others, feeling most needed in a particular sector in education, and seeing a need to improve schools. Theme 2 emerged from participants’ statements in feeling supported by peers or administration. Theme 4, 6, and 8 resulted from participants’ reflections based on recent experiences with the current administration.

### ***Theme 1: Seeing a Need***

The servant leader has a genuine desire to serve other first, focusing on the growth and development of others (Trepanier, 2018). Participants share reflections of traits they seek in leaders and share experiences of feeling the need to serve in education.

P2 stated, “empathy, compassion, communication, conviction, recognizes a need, and inspires are important traits a leader needs to have to effectively lead at an underperforming school.”

P3 mentioned they selected an underperforming school because they saw a need and wanted to give back to the community. “I felt I could give more and felt the need, having a leader who also recognizes and is aware of needs, is positive, supportive, and empathetic can help create positive change within the school and community.”

P4 noted, “being there for everyone, giving back and finding ways to help students, teachers and the community, leading by example. I had a situation where a teacher’s computer was not working and needed to prepare to teach a class, unable to get

in contact with IT department I took it upon myself to get a replacement computer then drove down to the next city to drop of computer to teacher so they could teach their class. It's about going the extra mile and serving to address needs.”

P5 stated “diplomacy is really important because our demographic has to undergo through a lot of struggles and have a higher need than other schools. Having responsibility, integrity, honesty, communication, and good listener need to be present and kept in the forefront because there is a lot of distrust between education and the community that is generational.”

P6 stated the following elements are essential in a leader, particularly at an underperforming school “a leader that builds rapport, inspires teachers, models, provides feedback, and is forward thinking. Leader gives back to the community, recognizes the needs of the school and the community, and has a genuine passion to help others. I see our current leader trying and doing whatever she can to build rapport and change culture that is open to change.”

#### ***Theme 4: Understanding of Others—Empathetic, Humility***

P1 “having a leader that is unreasonable and unwilling to be understanding towards others negatively affects the principal-teacher relationship and community. For example, the previous leader would not listen to teachers’ requests, instead would respond by saying, you can quit if you don’t like it here. Leaders are supposed to drive us to wanting to do better.”

P2, P3, P5 had similar feelings expressing the importance of having a balanced leader with an approach that is non-micromanaging and nonjudgmental towards staff and

community to help reinforce the supportive environment. For example, P2 stated that a leader who is “non-micromanaging helped the environment feel relaxed and less stressed.” P3 stated that having a leader that is not judgmental helps staff feel comfortable.” P5 shared an experience with a previous leader who was judgmental and staff feeling unable to ask questions or say anything in fear of being judge by the leader.

P4 as a leader has learned to read staff and recognize efforts. They have learned building relationships from beginning is essential and maintaining those relationships through team-building opportunities has helped in learning more about their staff, particularly strengths and weaknesses. P4 stated listening and taking on a “we are in this together approach” to understand others also helps.

P6 stated their biggest discontent has come from previous leaders’ inability to build a principal-teacher relationship. “With the population we serve having empathy and humility is important especially when there is already a lack of support and involvement”.

### **Research Question 3**

How does servant leadership influence the teacher-principal relationship in underperforming schools? This question was answered using Theme 2, support, Theme 3, understands the demographics – population school serves, Theme 5, experience – training, Theme 7, positive change – ripple effect, and Theme 8, growth, and development. Theme 2 emerged from participants reflecting on organizational support leading to a mindset change, community support towards educational growth. Theme 3 emerged from participants’ perceptions and experiences towards assigning leaders that

understand the population the school serves. Understanding the demographics can help with buy-in and community support. Theme 5 emerged from participants' reflections on past experiences of leaders being assigned to schools without experience in teaching. Based on participants' responses, a sub-theme emerged to have a coaching or mentorship program for leaders and teachers. Theme 7 and 8 emerged from teachers' reflections on servant leadership fostering an environment that encouraged personal and professional growth, creating a ripple effect throughout the school, positively affecting staff, students, and the community.

***Theme 3: Understands the Demographics—Population School Serves***

P1 stated “The relationships that I have formed with coworkers, students, and the community has helped me understand how to support student needs. When leaders and teachers are placed in underperforming schools it is important, especially for the leader, to understand the population is it serving. Often times before I can teach, I find myself having to provide a meal or a snack, students come hungry. They can't learn when hungry.”

P2 stated, “the community we serve is hard, both parents have to work to make ends meet, bringing in leaders that does not understand the community is not going to be beneficial to the overall growth of the school.”

P4 stated “ as a leader knowing the community and school site is integral in understanding how to best support community, students and staff”.



P5 and P6 noted the importance of understanding the demographic and school needs before being assigned to underperforming schools because it is not the same as high achieving schools, “leaders need to come in with an open mind and prepared.”

***Theme 5: Experience and Training***

P1 stated “there is a disconnect in experience and level of training. Many principals come into the school with zero knowledge of classroom management, classroom teaching experience.”

P3 “Preparation programs need to provide field experience opportunities, lack of experience, particularly at an underperforming schools can lead to organizational issues.”

P4 noted “to be a successful leader you need to have the correct competencies and field training.”

P5 stated “experience is acquired through trial by fire, and it is terrifying. There needs to be an implantation of field training and meaningful professional development before assigning educators to school sites.”

P6 “leaders are being hired to be managers not leaders, they are not properly trained. It is very rare to find a principal that leads instead of just managing and telling us what to do. We need leaders that understands the classroom setting, pedagogy, and is flexible in their approach.”

**Subtheme: Coaching/Mentor.** P1 stated,

Leaders are assigned to school without any formal training in the classroom and expect them to run a school. When first starting out I had to figure things out on my own, thinking about it, I think having some form of peer mentorship program

or coaching for teacher and leaders, especially leaders would be highly beneficial for the profession.

P3 stated “having a mentor buddy system would be beneficial to overall growth in the profession.”

P4 stated that “new incoming principals don’t have the mentorship program that used to be in place many years ago. Having a mentorship program is very valuable to the overall growth and development of leaders and wished there were mentorship or coaching programs available to new leaders.”

P5 stated how when they had first began teaching the school had a mentorship and coaching program that leaders and teachers where assigned. “It was a great program because we received a lot of support and encouragement to grow and reach higher potential, which was great because we could see the growth and success students were achieving, then the program was discontinued. The district brought in a different program to implement, but it wasn’t the same; the focus changed, and all the progress made just stopped .” Participants expressed the benefits of having mentorship or coaching program being beneficial. Observing others and having a mentor to guide an individual to gain experience professional growth, and confidence can lead to a reduction in turnover. Effective mentorship programs help transform and retain effective educators (Sowell, 2017).

Throughout data analysis I maintained a record of how themes answered each research question (see Table 3). Support was expressed in answering all three research

questions in various ways, but when looking at all three questions as a whole, themes intertwined showing connections and relationships within the themes.

**Table 3**

*Themes and Relationship to Research Questions*

Research Questions	Themes
RQ1: How do teachers from underperforming schools experience servant leadership in the workplace?	Theme 2: Support. Theme 4: Understanding others – empathy, humility. Theme 6: Empowerment – creativity, autonomy. Theme 8: Growth and Development.
RQ2: How do teachers and principals describe the meaning of servant leadership?	Theme 1: Seeing a need Theme 2: Support. Theme 4: Understanding others – empathy, humility. Theme 6: Empowerment – creativity, autonomy. Theme 8: Growth and Development.
RQ3: How does servant leadership influence the teacher-principal relationship in underperforming schools?	Theme 2: Support. Theme 3: Understands the demographic – population school serves. Theme 5: Experience Training. Theme 7: Positive change – ripple effect. Theme 8: Growth and Development.

### Summary

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to interview teachers and a principal at an underperforming school to explore and understand the lived experiences of teachers and principals regarding servant leadership in underperforming schools. The focus was to describe the experiences, perceptions, and meanings principals/teachers associated with servant leadership in building relationships from an IPA approach. The interviews provided insight into servant leadership experiences and how it could be utilized at an underperforming school to enhance principal-teacher relationships and improve schools. Based on participants stories it provided a narrative where they had experienced some form of servant leadership and grew excited at the possibility of outcomes schoolwide. Based on the experiences of participants, the

following possible outcomes of servant leadership in possibly helping create partnerships within the community; helping in building trust among staff and community through support and open communication, helping overcome barriers and challenges faced within the school and community through empowerment, leadership training, specifically mentorship and coaching were received with excitement by participants.

Overall, this study provided an opportunity to understand the nature of experiences in underperforming schools opening a window into researching this topic further and branching out to look at other factors such as servant leadership coaching and mentorship programs in underperforming schools, looking at how servant leadership can create partnerships within the community, and overcome social and cultural barriers affecting educational outcomes. Chapter 5 will include interpretations of findings, limitations and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative IPA study was to explore and understand the meaning of principal–teacher relationships in underperforming schools from a servant leadership lens. The focus was to describe experiences, perceptions, and meanings principals and teachers associated with servant leadership in building relationships in underperforming schools. Participants’ perceptions on factors of servant leadership included having trained leaders who understand the demographics and population the school serves, and support and open communication were also essential in fostering trust, building collaboration, and decreasing turnover rates. Thus, understanding of others—empathetic, empowerment—creativity, autonomy, growth, and development, when consistently expressed, positively influenced teachers at an underperforming school. Additionally, positive experiences that promoted team collaboration, inclusion in the decision process, and communication enhanced motivation and engagement. Participants’ experiences showed that they value relationships of leaders who have expressed servant leader behaviors. The findings also revealed that teachers and leaders desired a mentorship or coaching program to build leadership skills and understanding when commencing their profession, an area that could be researched further. This chapter will provide an interpretation of findings and discuss limitations and recommendations for future research.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Servant leadership is an approach that engages followers from different spiritual, ethical, and relational principles, making this ideal in facing the day-to-day challenges in

various organizations (Eva et al., 2019). Servant leaders do not use their power on their followers; instead, they support their employees to achieve organizational goals (Ilkhanizadeh & Karatepe, 2018). But when considering leader preparation, there has been a lack of focus in policymaking regarding principal preparation methods and training, creating a need for further research in understanding teacher quality, principal characteristics, and student achievement (Fuller et al., 2011).

The findings of this study showed connections of servant leadership behaviors in building relationships and engagement. In the following subsections, interpretations of findings are discussed, and connections that support previous research are presented throughout the findings including participants' comments and the themes that answered the three central questions:

- Research Question 1: How do teachers from underperforming schools experience servant leadership in the workplace?
- Research Question 2: How do teachers and principals describe the meaning of servant leadership?
- Research Question 3: How does servant leadership influence the teacher-principal relationship in underperforming schools?

### **Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 was “How do teachers from underperforming schools experience servant leadership in the workplace?” According to participants' responses, leader support and communication were significant factors in their perceptions. Theme 2 was support and Theme 6 was empowerment—creativity and autonomy from leaders.

When principals create learning communities, it fosters an environment that encourages cooperation, support, and collaboration; however, these learning communities are not always being executed correctly (Balyer et al., 2015). This means there is a need to train leaders further to execute programs effectively. Additionally, engaging leaders meet employees' basic psychological needs by inspiring, strengthening, and making connections with their employees, resulting in higher levels of work engagement (Nikolova et al., 2019). A participant stated, "I appreciate my leader's honesty and communication; their level of honesty and communication motivates me to want to improve and do better." Another stated, "having a supportive environment fosters teacher's ability to develop a classroom environment that promotes a sense of community and trust." These experiences indicate how meaningful it is for teachers to feel supported and empowered.

### **Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 was "How do teachers and principals describe the meaning of servant leadership?" Leaders who create a positive environment and positive relationships encourage an environment where people can grow and flourish (Whittington, 2017). Leaders who see themselves as serving others first display behavioral characteristics that create an environment where individuals thrive and find meaning in their work. A servant leader recognizes each individual's worth and sees how each individual is integral to the whole organization (Chan & So, 2017).

Theme 1 for this question was seeing a need, and Theme 4 was understanding of others—empathetic, humility. Participants expressed, "leadership: being there for

everyone, giving back and finding ways to help students, teachers, and the community, leading by example” as well as “An unreasonable and unwilling leader to be understanding towards others negatively affects the principal-teacher relationship and community” and “Leaders drive us to want to do better.” Another participant stated, “with the population we serve, having empathy and humility is important especially when there is already a lack of parental support and involvement.” Previous research has also shown that motivation, work engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment are positively affected when servant leaders show humility (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017). The 10 characteristics of servant leadership as described by Spears (2010) were expressed as having been experienced throughout these interviews. Humility, being empathetic of others, and seeing a need, were the highest expressed characteristics among participants, indicating the importance of having a servant leader who shows humility toward others in underperforming schools.

### **Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 was “How does servant leadership influence the teacher–principal relationship in underperforming schools?” When leaders are influential and transforming in their practices, teachers’ engagement, commitment, and effectiveness increase (Orphanos & Orr, 2014). This level of increased engagement can result in having talented personnel achieve organizational outcomes. Additionally, character and competence are two related concepts integral in leader development because competence helps leaders enhance their character and style of leading (Sturn et al., 2017). Based on



the finding of this study, this central question resulted in two themes and a subtheme, which will be described in further detail in the following sections.

***Theme 3: Understands the Demographics—Population School Serves***

A participant stated, “when leaders and teachers are placed in underperforming schools, it is important, especially for the leader, to understand the population it is serving.” Another participant stated, “the community we serve is hard; both parents have to work to make ends meet, bringing in leaders that do not understand the community is not going to be beneficial to the school’s overall growth.” These experiences indicate how meaningful it is to have an experienced leader who understands the demographic they are serving. Other research has found that most educators lack an understanding of community perceptions whose members had a high population of minorities such as a lack of trust toward school and school leaders (Khalifa, 2020).

***Theme 5: Experience and Training***

According to previous research, principal K-12 preparation programs are not aligned with leadership theories or connected with on-the-job experiences (Clayton et al., 2013). In other words, principals are not adequately prepared. Participants in the current study also expressed concerns with the level of training leaders and educators receive when entering the profession. P6 stated that “there is a disconnect in experience and level of training. Many principals come into the school with zero knowledge of classroom management and teaching experience.” Participants expressed how preparation programs need to provide field experience opportunities because lack of experience, particularly at underperforming schools, can lead to organizational issues.

Miller and Martin (2014), when looking at leadership preparation programs, particularly for leaders to lead in urban schools, found that leaders felt they lacked opportunities to grow and develop skills—further noting the importance of developing leaders to provide positive learning experiences to meet demands and current challenges faced by diverse populations). Participants expressed that to be a successful leader, you need to have the correct competencies and field training. P4 stated, "experience is acquired through trial by fire, and it is terrifying. There needs to be implementation of field training and meaningful professional development before assigning educators to school sites." The findings from these lived experiences contribute to the current research regarding principal preparation programs. Participants' statements and reflections of leader preparation programs capture how leaders in underperforming schools need to lead with a different mindset and approach. These statements present the importance of further researching leader development, particularly leaders placed in underperforming or disadvantaged populations.

**Subtheme: Coaching/Mentor.** The first step in achieving innovation begins with developing quality leaders. Leaders are innovators that promote change, inspire, and influence people (Serdyukov, 2017). Therefore, having leaders who can relate to their employees is critical in building trust, collaboration, and reaching organizational outcomes together. Participants expressed how leaders are assigned to schools without any formal training in the classroom and are expected to run a school. P4 stated that when they were first starting, they had to figure things out on their own. When thinking about their experience, P4 reflected by saying, "I think having some form of peer mentorship

program or coaching for teacher and leaders, especially leaders, would be highly beneficial for the profession." Rowland (2017) noted that school districts use their funds towards teacher development when developing educators, leaving principals with little to no resources or funding to receive professional development. School leaders are influential in student learning and oversee school improvement efforts, yet they are overlooked (Rowland, 2017).

Rowland (2017) noted that when leaders were allowed to receive on-the-job training and support, they found leaders could affect positive change and reach national goals towards student achievement (Rowland, 2017). Research has shown that leaders who participated in training and development programs were better prepared to lead positive changes in schools and how high-achieving schools maintained success through continual leadership development practices (Jerdborg, 2021). Participants expressed how having a mentor buddy system would be beneficial to the overall growth of the profession.

The challenges faced by principals in rural and urban schools are common around the globe; Hardwick-Franco (2019) stresses the importance of leaders needing district support and professional development opportunities specific to school site needs. Raising the standard of quality of education to the point of enhancing professional development, leadership style, and competencies could instill a life-long desire to learn, increased motivation, autonomy, and attitude changes (Serdyukov, 2017). The insight of principal training and development in underperforming schools is an area where continued research would be beneficial in understanding further.

### **Limitations of the Study**

In conducting this study, some limitations were having to work through COVID-19 challenges. I followed the process as outlined in my proposal as closely as possible to ensure trustworthiness. A slight deviation that could be viewed as a limitation was a change in how interviews were conducted. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person interviews were not permitted due to the state's public health order in place at the time of interviews. Instead, interviews were conducted via telephone during their duty work break or late evenings after work. The limitation of telephonic interviews left me to rely on vocal cues, such as pauses, sighs, pitch, and intensity, versus body language cues and facial expressions. The time of day the interview was conducted could have presented some limitations. For example, some interviews were conducted late after work, others on the weekend, and during lunch break, resulting in a limitation of mental or emotional fatigue due to the time interview was conducted, having a bad day, or feeling overwhelmed at the time of the interview.

Given that the study is phenomenological, the participant provides their interpretations of their world (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Since this study relied on a small sample of participant volunteers, their perspectives can significantly differ positively or negatively from individuals not included in the study, limiting the generalization of results (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). A final limitation was the current COVID-19 pandemic; emotions and state of well-being could have impacted participants' responses. Further studies post the COVID-19 pandemic could be beneficial in counteracting some of these limitations.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the results from the research study, the following areas could benefit from further research. The first area would be to explore training and development programs that focus on coaching and mentoring educators, particularly principals and instructional leaders, from a servant leadership approach—creating a mentorship program commencing while in the principal preparation program and extending beyond graduation. Looking at principal preparation programs, such as prerequisite requirements, theoretical foundations, and cultural models presented. Researching further the benefits of on-the-job training opportunities and principal-focused professional development to reduce turnover rates. Pendola and Fuller (2018) found higher principal turnover rates were from poor, low-performing, and higher needs schools. They also found that principals who had higher levels of training and experience stayed in the profession longer. Additionally, researching the benefits of creating districtwide coaches that work directly with principals throughout the year. Researching the feasibility of implementing, at the district level, an effective coaching and mentoring program to support leaders, particularly leaders assigned to underperforming schools, can help create stability by reducing turnover rates and fostering school-community relationships.

Researching further various professional development models tailored to meet school and community needs demographically, particularly in lower social-economic communities, for example, rural vs. urban schools; looking at continuous improvement efforts currently in place and outcomes to create a roadmap towards finding best practices in developing effective principal professional development opportunities. Continued

research on principal-teacher relationship building and how those relationships shape and form the organizational culture, student achievement outcomes, and community support.

### **Social Implications**

By gaining a deeper understanding of teacher-principal relationships, this study helped provide underperforming schools evidence of servant leadership behaviors used by leaders could be an area in helping narrow the gap between low performing and high performing schools. This study provided a safe place for participants to present lived experiences of servant leadership in building relationships in underperforming school settings. The impact of social change might improve the standards and quality of leadership regarding building positive principal-teacher relationships in underperforming schools. If underperforming schools support a servant leadership environment to build positive principal-teacher relationships, it could positively influence school outcomes and community support.

This research can be used as an incentive for researchers to explore further the influence of servant leadership at underperforming schools. Through participants' lived experiences, results confirmed the positive effects servant leadership behaviors have on building principal-teacher relationships. School districts may apply the results to current and future leadership development initiatives to encourage servant leadership approach in underperforming schools.

Berebitsky et al. (2014) found that having an effective school leader is critical in improving teaching and learning efforts. Nikolova et al. (2019) pointed out that engaging leaders can also positively meet employees' basic psychological needs by inspiring,

strengthening, and making connections with their employees, resulting in higher levels of work engagement. As positive principal-teacher relationships are formed, improved student outcomes may result from engaged teachers in the classroom. The positive outcomes of following a servant leadership model may create more robust connections within the organization resulting in continual positive social change opportunities such as building a sense of community and belonging within the organization, changed mindsets, increased collaboration, and trust.

### **Conclusion**

The primary purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to interview teachers and a principal at an underperforming school to explore and understand the lived experiences of teachers and principals regarding servant leadership in underperforming schools. The findings revealed positive outcomes to servant leadership behaviors shown in building the principal-teacher relationship in underperforming schools. This study opened up the possibility of exploring this topic further and researching other avenues that could lead to positive outcomes in underperforming schools. Training and educating leaders in servant leadership behaviors that align with teachers' values foster a servant leadership culture that enhances learning, teacher motivation, and engagement. As P2 stated when asked what they see as a possible outcome to having a principal who is a servant leader at an underperforming school, "It would be phenomenal; it would create a ripple effect throughout the school and the community." Participants received the idea of a servant leader well.

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## Appendix A: Interview Form

Interviewee:

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Interviewer: Marta Georgina Vasquez-McNamara Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Introduction

Introductory Question

- Rapport building
  - Be accommodating by introducing myself, informing them of my role, ask participant small talk questions like “how was your day,” “what is your job,” and other questions that will help ease participants.
- Description of study
  - The purpose of this study is to understand the relationship of principal-teacher relationship in underperforming schools. Participants in the study will be asked to participate in an hour-long interview about their experiences. Additionally, once the interview is completed, the participant will be asked to check the accuracy of the transcript session.
- Answer any questions of the interviewee
- Review and sign informed consent (Appendix B)

Questioning

The interview will begin by asking your responses to questions regarding your experiences regarding principal-teacher relationships in an underperforming school. The



questions will consist of the following categories: the context of school, experiences regarding principal-teacher relationships, leadership, and servant leadership.

Category	Question	Question
Introduction	How long have you worked in an underperforming school?	
	What prompted you to teach at an underperforming school?	
Context of School	What is the most rewarding and most challenging part of being a teacher/principal at an underperforming school?	
	Discuss your experience with parent involvement?	
	Discuss your experience with the school culture?	
Principal-teacher Relationships	Discuss the principal-teacher relationships you have experienced as a teacher/teacher?	
	Have you considered leaving your role as a teacher/principal at an underperforming school?	How has the principal-teacher relationship affected your decision to stay/leave school?
	Discuss the factors that influence your level of job satisfaction?	
	Describe the type of support you receive as a teacher/principal	
	What elements do you consider necessary in a relationship between principal-teachers	How have these elements of principal-teacher relationships affected your decision to remain in or leave your role?
Leadership	Describe the leadership style you think is most effective	
	Discuss which traits you consider are essential for principals to have in leading an underperforming school.	
Servant Leadership	Discuss your experience with leaders, followers, and service	
	Have you heard of servant leadership style?	If no – interviewer offer definition If yes, ask Understanding of servant leadership style
	Discuss how can principals in underperforming schools use a servant leadership style with teachers	
	Based on your experiences working in an underperforming school, describe what you think, the outcome of principals using servant leadership in the school would be.	

## Appendix B: Codes Identified and Themes

Participant	Coding Categories	Themes	Excerpts
P1	Resources	Support	“I need to help students grow, but I don’t have enough time to plan”
P2	Support	Support	“Knowing that I can count on my principal’s support encourages me to want to do better”
P3	Demographic	Demographic (Understanding population)	“The demographic we serve is tough”
P4	Training	Professional Development/Training	“Training was not adequate to help build confidence in ability to perform job. I have had to learn by trial and error”
P5	Trust (Lack)	Demographic	“there’s general lack of trust in education and leaders”
P6	Collaboration	Support	“The bottom line is to help students grow academically, working together in collaboration towards common goal is the first step”
P2, P3, P5	Non-judgmental	Understanding of others - Empathy	“Compared to previous leader, this leader doesn’t judge me, they listen” (P2) “Previous leader made us feel bad, judged and questioned every action” (P3) “Our new leader doesn’t judge; she tries to get to know everyone” (P5)
P1-P6	Encouraging	Understanding of others - Empathy	
P4, P6	Mindset	Training	“As a leader I try to be open and keep a mindset that promotes growth” (P4) “We are in a time of healing; mindsets need to change to effect change” (P6)
P1-P6	Experience	Training / Demographic	All participants stated entering leaders in profession come in with a lack of experience, formal training or knowledge of population.
P6	Freedom to teach Understanding	Growth Empowerment Empathy Support	“Creativity is missing in the classroom, everything feels stagnant” “I got sick from Covid and couldn’t teach, I was surprised at my leaders understanding and support to help me get through while sick”
P2, P5	Communication and feedback	Support Growth	“Having continual communication helps me feel part of the system” “Communication and feedback helps me to gage where I am, to grow and improve”
P6, P2	Social cultural norms and barrier challenges	demographic	“Lack of parental support, community mistrust are some challenges that create separation” “It’s not those parents don’t want to be involved; they just can’t this is a struggling community”
P1, P2, P6	Overwhelmed	Support	“I feel like I don’t have enough time to get it all done” “I feel like I am being pulled in every direction” “I am overwhelmed with so many responsibilities my days are very long, and I don’t think leadership at the district level understand what we go through”