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ABSTRACT

A small Southeastern high school that had undergone a turnaround or conservatorship process experienced a lower than average teacher retention rate. The authors conducted a qualitative case study to investigate teachers' experiences and perceptions of how turnaround strategies may have influenced their morale and how that effect on morale may have affected the teachers' retention. Bandura's self-efficacy theory provided the conceptual framework for this study. The research questions addressed teachers' perspectives of morale as well as their views and experiences with the conservatorship process. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 8 teachers who were actively employed at the school before the conservatorship process and who were subsequently retained by the district. Interview results produced 6 themes relating to factors that influence teachers' perspectives of morale: (a) powerlessness, (b) excessive visitations, (c) loss of confidence, (d) ineffective instructional practices, (e) stress and burnout, and (f) ineffective professional development opportunities. This qualitative research study identified factors that may potentially affect teachers' morale positively and promote social change in in turnaround schools by fostering an environment where stakeholders work collaboratively to increase teachers' retention and further school success.
Keywords: *morale, self-efficacy, state interventions, chronically low-performing schools, conservatorship, and ESSA.*

INTRODUCTION

During the 2014–2015 school year a local school district imposed a conservatorship model as part of a comprehensive school turnaround strategy to help a chronically failing high school improve students' educational achievement (Mass Insight, 2010). At the time, the high school under study had a student population of 536 students, where 100% of students were economically disadvantaged (State Department of Education, 2016).

The state advised the district to turn the daily operation of a local high school over to conservatorship, reflecting the need to address the high school's low academic performance (Appendix A) (State Department of Education, 2015). Such actions have become not uncommon; many states have adopted blanket policies for turnaround, requiring school districts to implement new curriculum programs and replace both school administrators as well as a minimum of half the teachers (Peck & Reitzu, 2014). At the local high school, however, that turnaround effort resulted in poor retention of the remaining teachers and of the new teachers hired subsequently. Between the school years 2014-2017, the State Department of Education (2017) reported declining teacher retention rates at the school each year following implementation of the conservatorship process (Appendix B).

Mader (2014) noted that teachers in the high school under study perceived conservatorship as a method that encourages nepotism and favoritism, as well as a system used to harass and intimidate teachers. An administrator from the high school acknowledged that teachers' morale was lower in the school due to accountability measures associated with the conservatorship process (school administrator, personal communication, May 18, 2017). Similarly, the Memphis Reporter (2015) surveyed teachers in the school and revealed low teachers' morale. Moreover, during the 2014–2015 academic year, over half of the teachers employed at the high school organized a protest in opposition to school management and took unscheduled leaves of absences due to purported illnesses (Clarion Ledger, 2015). Based on these indicators, there was a need to investigate how the turnaround strategies implemented during the conservatorship may have affected teachers' morale and retention in the high school under study.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Review of self-efficacy

Rashidi and Moghadam (2014) showed that self efficacy serves as a meditator for the construction of teachers' schema for intepreting the world and their expecience. These authors found teachers' views of self-efficacy served to monitor, manipulate, and interpret new information and new experiences. Moreoever, the role of self-efficacy is not merely internal; it affects behavior as well. Indeed, Lambersky (2016) found that when morale or self-efficacy is low, performance suffers, and when morale or self-efficacy is high, performance improves. Lambersky therefore argued that teachers' perceptions of morale and self-efficacy mediate all aspects of instructional practice and behavior in the educational environment. In support of that argument, Holzberger, Philipp, and Kunter (2013) demonstrated a positive association between teachers' perceived sense of self-efficacy on the one hand and both students' academic achievement and teachers' instructional performance on the other.

School reform

Comprehensive education reform has been motivated, in part, by the number of students who either do not graduate from high school or graduate lacking the skills and knowledge required for success in college or their careers (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2012). According to Levin and Datnow (2012), one of the tenets of this education reform is to measure academic outcomes and processes while managing educational resources to improve academic success for all students.

Teacher retention

Glennie, Mason, and Edmunds (2016) examined teacher employment data to understand how school reform models may assist in retaining novice teachers. The authors found that external or environmental factors such as a school's location and students' socioeconomic status and academic achievement are factors affect teachers' retention. Unfortunately, these factors are often beyond the school's control. On the other hand, the Glennie et al. study found that internal institutional factors such as a school's culture, administrative support, local school policy, teaching load, and professional development opportunities are in a school's control and when enhanced can increase the likelihood of retaining teachers. The authors reported that teachers report better job satisfaction when they have positive perceptions about school leaders, autonomy, and better professional development opportunities. This job satisfaction is strongly associated with teacher retention.

Turnaround strategy (conservatorship)

The turnaround model comes from the private sector and its applicability to the educational sector is subject to criticism (Trujillo & Renee, 2015). For example, the model fails to acknowledge evidence that mass terminations do not improve organizational performance. Studies have shown that turnaround strategies have thus frustrated families, school leaders, and policymakers, and led to limited improvements (Aragon & Workman, 2015). Moreover, turnaround strategies often not appear to work and may have unexpected adverse consequences. For example, Kirshner and Jefferson (2015) reported that no more than 15% of turnaround schools sustained academic increases beyond 3 years after the turnaround process. Furthermore, Grissom et al. (2014) showed that the accountability measures contained in turnaround strategies had withered teachers' morale, leading to higher than average teacher turnover rates. Based on their survey, the authors also found that teachers believed accountability measures allowed school district officials to pass judgment unfairly without the consideration of institutional factors such as socioeconomic status and chronic absenteeism, factors which are circumstances beyond the teachers' realm of influence. Morgan (2016) provided a complementary finding, showing that teachers encounter daily pressure to improve standardized assessment scores for disadvantaged students who commonly underachieve on statewide and district-wide standardized assessments. Indeed, the blinkered emphasis on data often mandated by school reform can interfere with the more holistic health of the school; for example, Sims and Penny (2015) found that teachers perceived that exclusive focus on data and assessments constricted their opportunities for any broader learning and collaboration.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The practice of using comprehensive turnaround strategies, such as the conservatorship process, has created a problem for a small Southeastern high school by potentially adversely affecting its retention of teachers. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate teachers' experiences and perceptions of how turnaround strategies influenced teachers' morale and how that effect on morale may have influenced the retention of teachers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were used to guide this study:
   RQ: What are teachers' perceptions of morale in a small Southeastern high school that
   has undergone the conservatorship process?
The three subquestions were as follows:
   SQ1: What are teachers' perceptions of the conservatorship process?
   SQ2: What are teachers' experiences with the conservatorship process?
   SQ3: What are teachers' perceptions of the conservatorship process's effect on their
      levels of morale?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND APPROACH

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to investigate teachers' morale by interviewing eight teachers who had experienced the conservatorship process in the high school under study. The qualitative case study, as Creswell (2012) explained, is an approach that centers on an event, location, issue, time, or other physical limitations. Semi-structured interviews were used to investigate teachers' morale. Using one-to-one semi-structured interviews motivated teachers to detail their experiences and perceptions of how the conservatorship process did or did not affect their morale. Qualitative research methods used the inductive process in the collection, exploration, study, analysis, and interpretation of teachers' morale and for identifying patterns of commonalities and differences that existed in research participants' experiences.

Setting, Population/Participants

There are seven schools with 175 teachers in the school district that houses the high school under study. The high school under study has a total teacher population of 41 teachers. The high school under study was similar to the rest of the district, and approximately 72% of teachers throughout the district had experienced turnaround strategies such as the conservatorship process. A purposeful sample of eight teachers from the high school under study who had experienced the conservatorship process during their tenure formed the study sample (Appendix C). Using purposeful sampling procedures and selecting teachers with similar experiences aligned with Lodico's (2010) recommendation of choosing participants who have relevant knowledge connected to the basis of the study. The following were the minimum attributes necessary to participate in this qualitative study:

- Research participants must have worked at the high school under study during the last 5 years, and

- Research participants must have been a full-time certified teacher at the high school under study.

Data Collection, Coding, and Analysis

Over a period of two months semi-structured, private interviews were conducted. Eight purposively selected teachers participated in interviews. Using an interview protocol, questions were used to gather data on how the various facets of the conservatorship process may or may not have affected teachers' perceptions of morale, during teachers' different experiences with the conservatorship process. Data were recorded, transcribed, and coded in a research journal and maintained in a secure location. A voice recorder was used to chronicle all interviews. Coding and categorizing followed Lodico's (2010) recommendation to use the inductive approach, a "bottom-up" process to build a conceptual understanding by using gathered information or data to describe an event. The induction process was used to create a foundation of understanding of teachers' morale and retention through an analysis of teachers' experiences during the conservatorship process. By noting commonalities as well as differences between teachers' experiences the data revealed a general depiction of how the conservatorship process may have influenced teachers' morale.

RESULTS

Data were subsequently organized by key factors that aligned with the research question. Participants described their levels of perceptions of morale during their experiences with certain aspects of the conservatorship process (Appendix D). Many participants expressed that various aspects of the conservatorship process negatively influenced their levels of morale. Participants overwhelmingly expressed how the loss of power, voice, and opinions negatively influenced their levels of morale. Many teachers stated they developed a negative sense of morale during the conservatorship process. Teachers also stated their perception of the various aspects of the conservatorship process were discouraging, leading them to seek employment in other schools and school districts.

As the data analysis proceeded the following themes emerged:

Themes

Powerless and Centrality of Power

A collection of participants' responses revealed teachers found the conservator's actions to be disempowering. Each participant held perceptions that the disempowerment they experienced had a negative influence on their perceived levels of morale.

Loss of Confidence and No Voice

A collection of participants' responses revealed teachers felt they only workers or units of production at the school and were not valued human collaborators in the school reform effort. Participants reported that their inability to share their opinions, experience, and expertise had a negative influence on their perceived levels of morale.

Ineffective Professional Development Opportunities

Many participants believed that repetitive and ineffective professional development sessions had a negative influence on their perceived levels of morale. Teachers reported that there were too many professional development meetings, and that these were delivered in a regimented style of direct instruction without opportunities for discussion or participation. Most sessions focused overly simply on basic instructional practices. Other professional development sessions were either only partly useful or not helpful to veteran teachers.

Excessive Visitations

Participants believed that the conservator's and administrators' excessive use of classroom visits had a negative influence on their perceived levels of morale. Teachers perceived the classroom oversight visits reflected standard accountability practice; however, the implementation was not done in a helpful way. There was no follow-up or formative assessment to provide teachers with pertinent information. Therefore the visits only produced feelings of fear or apprehension.

Support for Repetitive Instructional Practices

Teachers reported that they had to follow the prescribed instructional curriculum. Most participants believed that being mandated to follow the repetitive and ineffective prescribed curriculum and the associated lack of a creative outlet had a negative influence on their perceived levels of morale.

Stressed and Burned Out

Teachers' perceptions included topics such as: looking forward to finding another teaching position, perceptions of anxiety that a non-renewal form would be issued, using available sick days to find another job, using available sick days to recuperate mental health, and poor attendance due to poor morale. Many participants reported being stressed and burned out. They believed these feelings had a negative influence on their morale.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of this study, four recommendations can be offered that build from teachers' interviews and literature to increase teachers' morale and teacher retention rates:

1. Increase the number of teachers serving as leaders within the research site;
2. Institute checks and balance that root out known biases and unconscious biases so as to assist all teachers;
3. Provide participative professional development training that is appropriate to the needs of both beginning and veteran teachers and that is delivered in a way that reflects principles of andragogy and constructivism;
4. Create a professional development program that supports administrative leaders and teachers in their efforts to distribute leadership responsibilities throughout the school, including the encouragement of teacher leadership.

Professional development sessions in the professional development program could provide suggestions specific to the high school's student body that address the cultural and educational needs of the students by providing a collaborative environment meant to spur transformative support as opposed to quid pro quo support. The goal of the professional development program should be to provide administrative leaders and teachers with an understanding of the distributed leadership framework, which will lead to a collaborative effort in the small Southeastern high school's educational reform. Sessions in the program should address teachers' perspectives of (a) the conservatorship process, (b) teacher retention, and (c) teachers' morale by placing an emphasis on:

- Creating an environment of distributed leadership that would serve as a foundation for continuous educational improvement,
- Replacing forced educational participation with collaborative educational participation,
- Selecting school-centered processes with the intent of establishing long-term educational inclusiveness in the school, and
- Securing processes that provide an ongoing system focused on professional growth and academic achievement.

School reform requires constant focus, commitment, and continuing professional development training. Administrative leaders along with teachers within turnaround schools must advocate for inclusivity that will lead to an increase in teachers' morale and an increase in teacher retention rates. Administrative leaders cannot expect successful school reform to take place without strategies in place to include teachers' voice, opinions, experience, and expertise. Teachers must be the wells of information that administrative leaders can draw from to direct the minutia operations within the school reform effort. Administrative leaders must be willing to bypass their suppositions of teachers as less important mechanisms in improving schools and students' academic achievement results. It is imperative for administrators to advocate for the inclusion of teachers' experiences and expertise in transforming schools.

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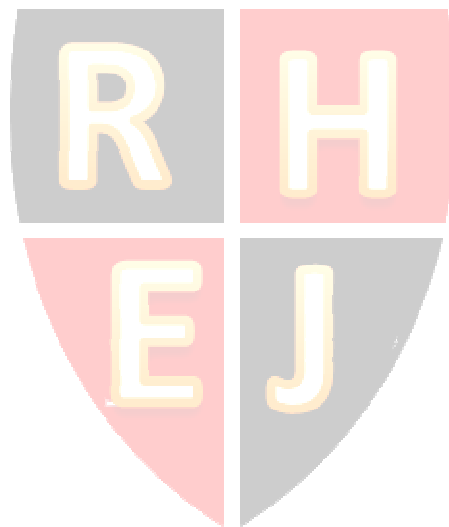
APPENDIX A

School Report Card Data 2012–2016

Year	District	Official grade	Reading proficiency	Math proficiency	Reading Growth	Math growth	Graduation rate
2015-2016	TCD	C	28%	28.2%	68.2	77.4%	73.8%
2014–2015	TCD	D	29.5%	25%	63.6	58.2	68%
2013–2014	TCD	D	39.6%	63.3%	47.4	69.4	57.3%
2012–2013	TCD	F	28%	58%	Not Met	Not Met	59.7%

Note. Graduation rate and academic achievement of the high school under study, 2012–2016 (State Department of Education, 2017).

Appendix B

Teacher Retention Data 2014–2017

District #	District name	School #	School name	Year	New teachers	Returning teachers	Total teachers	% return
7100	Abstract School District	008	High school under study	2014–2015	13	33	46	72%
7100	Abstract School District	008	High school under study	2015–2016	14	28	42	67%
7100	Abstract School District	008	High school under study	2016–2017	18	23	41	56%

Note. Retrieved and adapted from State Department of Education Reported Teacher Turnover Data (State Department of Education, 2017).

Appendix C

Demographics of Interview Participants

Participants	Yrs. as an educator	Yrs. at current school	Returning to school next year	Teacher retention possibility
A	18	10	Y	Plan to retire in 2 years
B	16	4	Y	Would not return to teach at a conservatorship school if it was his decision
C	5	5	Y	Would not return to teach at a conservatorship school if it was his decision
D	9	7	Y, but looking for a new school	Leaving (if possible) for monetary reasons, conservatorship process stressful
E	14	8	Y, but looking for a new school	(If no other job is available) Conservatorship process stressful
F	10	4	Y, but looking for a new school	Leaving (if possible) for monetary reasons
G	9	5	Y, but looking for a new school	(If no other job is available) Conservatorship process stressful
H	22	6	Y, but looking for a new school	Divisions created due to the recruiting process participant is leaving after this year.

Appendix D

Overview of Themes from Participant Interviews

	Themes	Positive influence on participant	Null influence on participant	Negative influence on participant
1	Stressed and burned out		A, B, G	B, C, D, E, F, H
2	Powerless, the centrality of power			B, H, A, F, C, G, D, E
3	Excessive visitations			A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H
4	No confidence and no voice			A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H
5	Repetitive instructional practices			A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H
6	Ineffective and repetitive professional development opportunities	A, B		C, D, E, F, G, H