DISSERTATION

# THE ROLE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN EMPOWERING PUBLIC EDUCATORS

Submitted by

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# ABSTRACT

## THE ROLE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN EMPOWERING PUBLIC EDUCATORS

This study aimed to identify the leadership actions and behaviors that school administrators, who have recently transitioned from a teaching position, associated with empowerment. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to elicit the participants' experiences of empowerment and disempowerment and how they try to create cultures of empowerment at their schools. The participants described their experiences of empowerment as they become leaders. They shared the transformational leadership behaviors they witnessed in others and fostered in themselves as they created cultures of empowerment in their own schools.

This study found three factors facilitating transitions to formal leadership: being empowered through informal leadership roles, having access to pathways to become a leader, and being pushed outside one's comfort zone. The participants described the qualities effective leaders possess and the qualities of psychological empowerment one must have to take the necessary risks to become a school leader. Participants shared how, to build cultures of empowerment, they lead by example, have a vision and clarity, build trust, recognize the strengths of others, coach their staff, and share power in their schools.

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# DEDICATION

In loving memory of my father, who always empowered me to pursue my dreams. “Whatever it is, don’t stop until you are done.” And fierce recognition of my mother who always made sure the race was run.

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# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

While school administrators take on many duties of leadership, teachers play a vital role in school leadership as well. Many teachers have always been school leaders, filling formal roles such as department chair, union leader, coach, curriculum coordinator, team leader, or others. They have also filled informal roles such as being a peer mentor, being a source of emotional support, being advocates for school improvements, and providing input to curriculum and school policy changes (Carswell, 2021; Muijs & Harris, 2006; Von Dohlen & Karvonen, 2018). Teachers are expected to lead students in their educational journey, guide them in decision making, and provide social and emotional support, all the while delivering quality content (Carswell, 2021; Muijs & Harris, 2006; Von Dohlen & Karvonen, 2018). There has been a focus in the literature on the importance of building cultures of empowerment in schools to drive academic success and increase teacher retention (Hart, 1995; Ismail et al., 2011; Kõiv et al., 2019; Kirk et al., 2017; Padhi & Sahu, 2020; Tindowen, 2019; Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015a; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015b). However, it remains unclear what specifically school administrators and school leaders can do to empower teachers to become leaders, improve their craft, advance their career, and remain in the field. Teachers can best support students when school administrators empower them to educate as leaders. This paper aims to review the literature around the following research question: What leadership behaviors do school administrators demonstrate that educators find empowering?

## Background of Study

In recent years, literature has shifted to focus on transformational leadership, or a "leader's behavior, influential traits, power and situational variables" that influence performance

(Hoxha, 2015, p. 45). Transformational leadership relies on the empowerment of individuals to take on leadership roles. Developing a culture of empowerment in a school includes clear communication from leadership, sharing of decisions within the school, and giving teachers the power to participate in informal leadership roles (Moran & Larwin, 2017).

Moran and Larwin (2017) explain that principals need to craft the philosophy that leaders are not simply those with a formal title, and must begin to empower teachers to participate in shared leadership and decision making for the benefit of the school. Teachers show greater empowerment and commitment to a school when they feel their input and suggestions are implemented (Moran & Larwin, 2017). Principals benefit from building cultures of empowerment: teachers will be more committed to their school and profession, which will produce better instruction, directly improving learning outcomes. While the conceptual framework of empowerment is well established, there is limited literature discussing teachers' perceptions of how their leader incorporated empowerment in school settings.

**Transformational Leadership**

The understanding of the relationship between transformational leadership and empowerment lends itself to this study. Bass (1985) posited four dimensions of transformational leadership aimed to develop people: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Idealized influence means the leader serves as a role model, demonstrating their values and living up to high standards. They put the needs of organizational members first. Inspirational motivation includes visionary leadership and the ways the leader inspires their followers to buy into the vision. Intellectual stimulation aims to challenge the current thinking of followers, reframe problems, and generate innovative solutions. Individualized consideration means paying close attention to the needs of followers, showing

care, and providing mentorship (Geijsel et al., 2002). In 2002, Geijsel et al. performed a study on the effects of transformational leadership in schools and found the shift toward this type of leadership increased teachers' commitment to their work and motivation to improve their practice.

Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) built upon the work of Bass (1985) to posit four behaviors of successful leadership in schools. They include: setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and improving the instructional program. Like Bass's (1985) "inspirational motivation," Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) explain that "setting direction" involves unifying the school under a shared vision and holding staff, teachers, and students to high expectations to meet that purpose. "Developing people" builds on the "intellectual stimulation" dimension of Bass (1985) to account for district and school leaders providing educators the opportunity of professional development. To redesign the organization, leaders strengthen the school culture, modify existing organizational structures, and facilitate collaboration. Improving the instructional program means establishing stable routines, building structures that assist change while also providing instructional support, monitoring school academic data, and limiting the external demands on teachers (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

School leaders are expected to nurture growth in their teachers so that their teachers may do the same for their students. Transformational school leaders empower teachers to work autonomously and find their own ways of doing things (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012). Transformational leaders set high expectations, have a clear and purposeful vision, and set high standards (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). However, transformational leaders do not give their followers a step-by-step plan to achieve these goals. Instead, they allow their followers autonomy to come up with their own ideas of how to meet

expectations (Den Hartog & Bleschak, 2012). Because of this, empowerment is a key strategy to meet common goals and actualize a shared vision (Raquib et al., 2010). One way to increase teacher empowerment is through transformational leadership strategies. It is clear that empowerment and transformational leadership intersect. The exploration of the intersection between these concepts may provide insight into leadership behaviors that would increase teacher empowerment.

In a review of the literature, Leech and Fulton (2008) curated a list of five leadership practices that elicit the highest level of performance in organizations. Reminiscent of the work of Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) and Bass (1985), four of the identified practices are "challenging the process," "inspiring a shared vision," "modeling the way," and "encouraging the heart" (Leech & Fulton, 2008, p. 633). To build a collaborative culture, the final identified practice is critical: "enabling others to act." Enabling others to act involves empowerment and trust. This is built on the sharing of information, ideas, and resources (Leech & Fulton, 2008). If leaders wish to empower their employees, they can do so by "making certain that people have the skills and knowledge needed to make good judgements, keeping people informed, developing relationships among the players, involving people in important decisions, and acknowledging and giving credit for people's contributions" (Kouzes & Posner, 1987, p. 162). Leech and Fulton (2008) encourage organization leaders to master these practices to empower their followers and increase the efficacy of their organization.

Further research expands on this idea to apply the concept to schools. The literature explains school administrators must master these practices to increase teacher empowerment, leading to increased teacher efficacy. Several quantitative studies in the late 20th century have suggested a correlation between teacher empowerment and teacher efficacy. For change and

improvement to occur in schools, teachers must feel empowered to participate in the change. These studies posited that teacher empowerment relies on shared decision-making, a trusting and respectful relationship with the principal, access to information and other resources, and recognition (Blase, 1987; Hallinger et al., 1992; Kowalski, 1994; Short et al., 1994; Smylie, 1992; Wall & Rinehart, 1998; Wohlstetter & Briggs, 1994). "The successful leader, then, is one who builds-up the leadership of others and who strives to become a leader of leaders" (Sergiovanni, 1990, p. 27). With recent increase in teacher turnover due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Dos Santos, 2021; Lieberman & Will, 2022) and the positive relationship between psychological empowerment and teacher retention rates evidenced in recent studies (Ismail et al., 2011; Kõiv et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2021; Padhi & Sahu, 2020; Tindowen, 2019; Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015a; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015b; Wronowski, 2018), more studies should be conducted to understand the leadership behaviors that foster teacher empowerment in public schools. Administrators' focus could then shift to the dimensions of effective transformational leadership, psychological empowerment, and social-structural empowerment. The purpose of this study was to examine the perspective of current administrators who have recently transitioned from a teaching role to identify the effective leadership strategies that empowered them to take on a leadership position.

**Approaches to Empowerment**

According to Conger and Kanungo (1988), empowerment is the "process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification [...] of conditions that foster powerlessness" (Conger & Kanungo, 1988, p. 484). It is important to note that empowerment is different from power. In Kanter's (1977) foundational work in structural empowerment theory, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, she describes opportunity,

information, support, and resources as tools of empowerment. Kanter (1977) explains there are two key structures of empowerment: the structure of opportunity and the structure of power. The structure of opportunity relates to job conditions that allow employees to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to advance within the field or organization. The structure of power involves access to information, support, and resources. Power is the authority to make decisions and control resources relevant to one's role (Spreitzer, 2007). This paper will refer to power in terms of how it affects empowerment, and the focus in the next sections will be on the approaches to empowerment.

***Social-Structural Empowerment***

Spreitzer (2007) describes two "complementary" approaches of empowerment: social-structural empowerment and psychological empowerment. Since the 1980s, these have been the two main approaches to empowerment presented in the literature. Psychological empowerment will be addressed in the next section. The social-structural approach refers to the concept that individuals at every level of an organization can be empowered. Even employees at the bottom of an organizational hierarchy can be empowered if they have the right tools.

The social-structural perspective of empowerment resembles aspects of a democracy. Most organizations fail to be truly democratic because not every member gets a formal vote, most often with concentrated disenfranchisement among members lower in the hierarchy. In the model of social-structural empowerment, subordinates are given some decision-making power. The goal of social-structural empowerment is to share power by delegation of responsibilities (Spreitzer, 2007). Conger and Kanungo (1988) define empowerment as "the process by which a leader or manager shares his or her power with subordinates" (Conger & Kanungo, 1988, p. 473).

The social-structural empowerment approach fails in some ways: it only focuses on empowerment within an organization and it does not address the intrinsic nature of empowerment that employees experience. Employees can have all the tools Kanter (1977) describes - opportunity, information, support, and resources - and yet still feel disempowered. On the contrary, employees can have none of these tools and still feel empowered. Therefore, it is important to address the psychological perspective of empowerment (Spreitzer, 2007).

***Psychological Perspective of Empowerment***

The psychological perspective of empowerment focuses on the employees' experience of their work. The psychological approach to empowerment refers to the intrinsic values of an employee and how they use these values to orient themselves in the work environment. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) defined four dimensions of psychological empowerment: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Meaning involves an alignment of one's personal beliefs and values and the needs and impacts of the work role. Competence refers to the level of capability one possesses to perform the expectations of their role. Self-determination refers to one's initiative to take action when there is a need in the workplace. Impact refers to the extent one's influence affects outcomes in the workplace. According to the psychological approach, all four of these dimensions must be present for one to be empowered (Spreitzer et al., 1997).

This perspective is limited by its focus on the individual. To best manifest empowerment, psychological empowerment must be fully integrated with social-structural empowerment. There needs to be a better understanding of how one influences the other (Spreitzer et al., 1997). A longitudinal study conducted by Laschinger et al. (2004) aimed to test the link between psychological and structural empowerment and job satisfaction. The study included a cohort of 185 randomly selected nurses, whose feelings of job satisfaction and empowerment were

assessed using The Conditions of Work Effectiveness Questionnaire, Spreitzer's (1995) Psychological Empowerment Scale (PES), and a Global Job Satisfaction Scale. They were assessed again three years later. While structural empowerment could account for effects on psychological empowerment and job satisfaction, Laschinger et al. (2004) determined that psychological empowerment did not have a significant effect on job satisfaction. Therefore, Laschinger et al. (2004) suggest it is critical for organizations to emphasize creating a culture of empowerment to positively impact employees and work-related outcomes.

**Colorado Senate Bill 10-191**

This qualitative study included interviews of five newly appointed administrators in a Colorado school district, meaning all administrators involved with the study were subject to Colorado-specific conditions. Colorado Senate Bill 10-191 (SB 191) complicates the issue of teacher empowerment within the state. Senate Bill 10-191 (SB 191), which was proposed in January 2010 (Crandell & Boyce, 2014), required an educator evaluation system for all licensed educational professionals in the state of Colorado. The evaluation is intended to serve as a baseline for achievement, support the implementation of new curriculum and programs, measure individual educators' growth, determine the effectiveness of licensed employees, and help make decisions around hiring and compensation (Senate Bill 10-191, 2010). "The bill defines teacher effectiveness through a series of teacher observations, glimpses at student work, and data from student test scores" (Crandell & Boyce, 2014, p. 29).

SB 191 was designed with good intentions (specifically, to increase educator effectiveness in order to support student achievement). However, SB 191 has had negative impacts on teacher empowerment. It has affected all five domains of social-structural empowerment by limiting teacher decision making, impeding equitable power distribution,

limiting the flow of open communication, generating fear around performance-based pay, and not supporting the training required to effectively increase student achievement. The political climate in Colorado makes understanding effective transformational leadership skills to increase teacher empowerment a critical focus.

## Statement of the Problem

Although much research has been done on strategies to empower teachers in theory, novice administrators' perspectives on these strategies have yet to be considered (Lai & Cheung, 2015). Similar informational gaps exist regarding how administrators empower their colleagues and integrate empowerment into their daily actions. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate perspectives of experienced teachers who have recently transitioned into school administration to determine how acts of transformational leadership fosters empowerment in school settings. This study set out to understand what specific experiences educators value in their journey of empowerment.

## Research Questions

To guide the study, the researcher explored the following questions: What does teacher empowerment mean to experienced teachers who have recently transitioned into school administration? What leadership behaviors do educators associate with empowerment? How do these educators narrate their experiences of the cultures of empowerment at their school?

## Significance of Study

This study will help school leaders understand specific actions they can take to increase teacher empowerment, which is important because high levels of teacher empowerment support increased teacher retention and increased student achievement (Hart, 1995; Ismail et al., 2011; Kõiv et al., 2019; Kirk et al., 2017; Padhi & Sahu, 2020; Tindowen, 2019; Tschannen-Moran and

Gareis, 2015a; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015b). Additionally, the current work done on this topic has been disproportionately quantitative. This work would add to the qualitative exploration of how leadership and empowerment intersect and give voice to those most impacted: teachers.

Ismail et al. (2011) demonstrated in their quantitative study of 118 East Malaysian teachers that "the relationship between empowerment and transformational leadership positively and significantly correlated with the organizational commitment" (p. 89). Therefore, Ismail et al. (2011) demonstrated that empowerment and transformational leadership have a critical impact on employee retention. However, their study fails to address how empowerment and transformational leadership can be developed in an organization.

Kõiv et al. (2019) explored this concept further by conducting a quantitative study involving a total of 711 teachers from 31 Estonian schools. The teachers were surveyed to determine the relationships between teachers' perceptions of school leadership, their psychological empowerment, and job satisfaction. This study found that trust in the principal, an aspect of transformational leadership, directly impacts psychological empowerment, which has a direct impact on job satisfaction. Likewise, through their quantitative study, Tschannen-Morris and Gareis (2015a) assert that trust also has positive impacts on student achievement. Their study included data from 64 schools and 3215 teachers. "Student achievement was also correlated with trust, principal behaviors and school climate" (p. 66). Again, however, Kõiv et al. (2019) and Tschannen-Morris and Gareis (2015a) fail to address how to build trust between a principal and their staff.

Another quantitative study was conducted by Tindowen (2019) on 215 Catholic Higher Education teachers in the Philippines. He found that not only do teachers who feel empowered

through status, professional growth, self-efficacy, impact, shared decision making, and autonomy demonstrate increased commitment to their work, but their students also demonstrate increased growth in the classroom.

While the outcomes of effective transformational leadership and the impacted dimensions of empowerment are understood from a quantitative perspective, the told experiences of educators immersed in cultures of transformational leadership and empowerment would help better portray what school leaders could do to foster these cultures and obtain these outcomes.

## Limitations

The limitations of this study stem largely from the limited sample and limited representation within the sample. The sample was a homogenous sample, which "selects all similar cases in order to describe some sub-group in depth" (Glesne, 2016, p. 51). The stories told in this study were from a select group of mostly white school leaders who have transitioned from a teacher role to a leadership role in the last three years. Due to the type of sampling employed, the participant group lacked diversity. A richer understanding of this topic could be gained, such as through longitudinal or more detailed studies. Data collection was conducted over a short period of just three months, following the unusual circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have notably impacted the experiences of the participants. Researcher subjectivity played a greater role than desired. Additionally, the research was conducted by a single researcher. The inclusion of additional researchers and interviewers could have increased the rigor of this study.

## Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Although data was collected over a relatively short period of time, observations, interviews, and member-checking will serve to triangulate the data. Ethical approval from the

institutional review board (IRB) of Colorado State University was obtained and the participants were informed of this study and its purpose prior to our first meeting. All participants and schools were given pseudonyms. I informed them interviews would be taking place as part of the research, and explained where and with whom the results would be shared. To ensure protection of the participants, the data was not shared with the participants' supervisors in raw form. All participants agreed to take part in this research.

## Researcher's Perspective

I thought about becoming an administrator early in my career. I always liked to lead others and wanted to have a greater impact on a school, beyond the scope of my classroom. However, I had just finished my teaching program and thought it was too soon to pursue this interest. I began my first year of teaching and I was surprised when a colleague I looked up to told me she saw me as a future principal. This was empowering to me. I spoke to my advisor at Colorado State University and shared the idea of potentially getting my administrator license. She encouraged me to do that while simultaneously working toward my PhD.

While working toward my license and PhD, I taught for a total of three years in a district in Northern Colorado. However, my experiences in teaching highlighted the need for passionate and empowered school administrators. I knew I wanted to become an administrator to make teachers' lives easier and more fulfilling. I saw from experience that happy, empowered, teachers had better results in the classroom. I saw a lot of areas for improvement in the schools where I taught. However, I did not always feel empowered to make change. Many of my colleagues and administrators saw me as "too new" to trust my competence and leadership, but I knew even someone with just a few years of experience was ready and capable of making a positive change.

I knew I was passionate about leading. I knew I wanted to have an impact. I wanted to become an administrator that empowered *all* teachers to have a voice, not just veteran teachers.

When I was applying to administrator roles, I faced a lot of challenges. Again, my interviewers were looking for someone who had spent more time in the classroom. I felt discouraged by this idea of "seniority." I thought being in the classroom longer would not necessarily make me a more competent leader. I wondered if other new administrators felt this same discouragement. How did they work through that? What empowered them to make the transition into school administration? What could I learn from other new administrators to help my own journey and also help other aspiring administrators make that transition? That's when this dissertation topic was born.

Finally, I landed an administrative role as Dean of Students in 27J Schools. From my experience, 27J Schools did not do anything in particular or special to recruit administrators. However, at the time they paid less than other surrounding districts, so there were a few administration positions available the year I applied. The pay was not a concern for me. I just wanted to get my foot in the door.

I quickly found 27J Schools is a relatively small district in terms of leadership. They had few district-level administrators compared to the other districts I worked in. Therefore, school leaders were able to work closely and often with the few district-level administrators there were. As my degree progressed and I was ready to start data collection, I intentionally pursued interviews with participants in my current school district. This was important to me because I knew this district valued empowerment. For example, when I was hired, it did not concern my principal that I only spent three years in the classroom. She knew, in her words, "some people make excellent teachers and some people make excellent leaders and we need people in both

positions." 27J Schools also has a focus on empowerment in their district mission statement. I sought to uncover what exactly it was that was happening in 27J Schools to empower new administrators in this district to make the transition from teacher to administrator. I wanted to know what these new administrators valued as empowering and what inspired them to transition into these roles. I wanted to know how they used their own experiences of empowerment to empower their staff.

## Summary

Together, transformational leadership, psychological empowerment, and social-structural empowerment have positively impacted organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and teacher retention in theory (Hart, 1995; Ismail et al., 2011; Kõiv et al., 2019; Kirk et al., 2017; Padhi & Sahu, 2020; Tindowen, 2019; Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015a; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015b). However, little research has been conducted to assess teachers' perspectives on what specific actions, events, or experiences in their careers has led them to feel empowered to improve their practice, take on leadership roles, or remain in the profession. There is no current research on how their perspectives relate to Leithwood's model of transformational leadership, Spreizter's (2007) model of social-structural empowerment, or Klecker and Loadman's (1996) model of psychological empowerment. In the context of high turnover from the COVID-19 pandemic and lower teacher empowerment in Colorado due to SB-191, it is critical to understand how to intentionally leverage transformational leadership skills to empower teachers.

# CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher retention is influenced by many factors including teacher empowerment (Hart, 1995; Ismail et al., 2011; Kõiv et al., 2019; Kirk et al., 2017; Padhi & Sahu, 2020; Tindowen, 2019; Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015a; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015b). There is currently inconclusive research on what specifically empowers teachers in schools to take on leadership roles. This chapter presents a review of the literature pertaining to empowerment, domains of empowerment, and the political arena currently affecting teacher empowerment in Colorado.

This paper is divided into five sections: domains of empowerment, empowerment and leadership, accomplishments of teacher empowerment, Colorado Senate Bill 10-191, and a conclusion. Several definitions of empowerment exist in the literature. The definition used for the purposes of this paper will be described along with the two approaches to empowerment. Next, the nature of behaviors of empowerment, or domains, are reviewed. The influences of empowerment are discussed using literature related to transformational leadership, administrative leadership, and teacher leadership. Suggestions of what cultures of empowerment can accomplish, rooted in the present literature, will be explored followed by a discussion of the political climate affecting empowerment in Colorado.

## Domains of Empowerment

Over the past 35 years, several researchers have produced flagship work within the empowerment frameworks that posit several domains. First, the psychological empowerment approach was developed by Conger and Kanungo (1988). Taking a cognitive approach on empowerment, Thomas and Velthouse (1990) built on Conger and Kanungo's (1988) work to

establish just four domains. A quantitative study by Short and Rinehart (1992) expanded upon these domains within psychological empowerment. Building upon these works, Klecker and Loadman (1996) developed domains within the social-structural perspective. Finally Spreitzer (2007) offered succinct five domains within the social-structural perspective.

**Domains of Psychological Empowerment**

Conger and Kanungo (1988) propose an approach to the empowerment process framed within psychological empowerment: the idea that the need for empowerment arises when employees feel powerless. First, one must assess the conditions in the organization that are responsible for feelings of powerlessness. Once the conditions are identified, managerial strategies and techniques can be employed to address the negative organizational conditions. They suggest providing information of self-efficacy to employees afterward. Conger and Kanungo's (1988) model suggests this would result in the empowerment experience. The researchers explain how removing work conditions that negatively affect empowerment and actualizing employee self-efficacy can lead to an increased effort by employees. This would lead to behavioral effects such as increased initiation of job related tasks and determination to accomplish organizational goals.

Conger and Kanungo (1988) offer specific conditions that could lead to feelings of powerlessness including "organizational factors, supervision, reward system, [and] nature of job" (p. 475). Examples of organizational factors include, "significant organizational changes/transitions," "competitive pressures," "impersonal bureaucratic climate," "poor communications/network-forming systems," and "highly centralized organizational resources" (Conger & Kanungo, 1988, p. 477). A negative supervisory style could include "authoritarian[ism] (high control)," "negativism (emphasis on failures)," "lack of reason for

actions/consequences" (Conger & Kanungo, 1988, p. 477). A negative reward system includes arbitrary rewards, low value rewards, or general lack of rewards. Powerlessness in job design includes lack of clarity, training, or support in one's role. Poor job design includes unrealistic goals, limited voice or inclusion in decisions, lack of resources to perform job functions, lack of opportunities for collaboration with peers or management, lack of opportunities to advance, and lack of meaningful tasks (Conger & Kanungo, 1988).

Strategies and techniques to remove or change these conditions include "participative management, goal setting, feedback system, modeling, contingent/competence-base reward, [and] job enrichment" (Conger & Kanungo, 1988, p. 475). There are four sources Conger and Kanungo (1988) suggest for providing self-efficacy information to employees: "enactive attainment, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, [and] emotional arousal" (p. 475). To maximize impact, employees must know that their efforts will lead to them meeting the expected levels of performance and expected performance outcomes. They must see a connection between their effort and the desired results. To accomplish this, their leader must recognize their efforts as they relate to achievement of goals.

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) also take a cognitive approach on empowerment. They build upon Conger and Kanungo's (1988) work by framing empowerment as intrinsic task motivation. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) identified task assessments to call upon the intrinsic task motivation of their participants and they assessed the participants' construction of their experiences as they navigated the task assessments. "Intrinsic task motivation involves positively valued experiences that individuals derive directly from a task" (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990, p. 668). Task *assessments* are the internal assessments of the task by the person, which Thomas and Velthouse (1990) believe to be the cause of task motivation, (empowerment). The four cognitive

dimensions proposed are meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. This model became the basis for the psychological approach to empowerment.

Fook et al. (2011) used the Thomas and Velthouse (1990) model to describe the relationship between school culture and school organizational health with psychological empowerment. The Psychological Empowerment Scale (PES) was given to 101 randomly selected schools in Sarawak, Malaysia. The PES measures culture variables against the four dimensions proposed by Thomas and Velthouse (1990): meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Both school principals and teachers responded to the PES. The study showed no statistically significant relationship between the school culture or organizational health of the school and the empowerment variables or the psychological empowerment of principals. This study suggests that the PES may not be sensitive to the concept of empowerment proposed by Thomas and Velthouse (1990) in areas of work culture or climate particularly in non-western areas (Fook et al., 2011).

It is clear that the definition of psychological empowerment and the conceptual model put forth by Thomas and Velthouse (1990) lacked robustness. Just two years later, Short and Rinehart (1992) attempted to fill this gap by building on the work of Conger and Kanungo (1988) and Thomas and Velthouse (1990) to establish clear and more robust dimensions of empowerment within the psychological perspective. Short and Rinehart (1992) collaborated to create the School Participant Empowerment Scale (SPES) in their quantitative study. The SPES began with eleven dimensions: knowledge base, competence, status, influence, autonomy, control, responsibility, collaboration, involvement in decision-making, impact, and choice. The SPES was distributed to 10,544 teachers in 307 Ohio schools. Through statistical analysis, Short and Rinehart (1992) determined which of these dimensions best represent empowerment in

schools. They determined only six dimensions of empowerment would be analyzed in their study: decision-making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy, and impact.

Tindowen (2019) conducted a quantitative study on 215 teachers in the Philippines. The goal of the study was to determine the influence of empowerment on organizational behaviors. Their study revealed the relationships between the six dimensions of psychological empowerment on teachers' organizational behaviors.

***Decision-making***

Decision-making relates to the level of involvement and power teachers have in making decisions that affect their roles (Tindowen, 2019). When referring to decision-making as a domain of teacher psychological empowerment, Bogler and Somech (2004) refer to teachers' ability to make decisions around how to deal with students or deliver instruction in their classrooms. Tindowen (2019) found decision-making, as a predictor of teacher empowerment, positively predicts: "affective organizational commitment, continuance organizational commitment, normative organizational commitment, supervisory support, organizational citizenship behavior, and professional commitment to teaching work" (p. 624). Affective organizational commitment refers to a teacher's sense of belonging, identity, and involvement in their school. Continuance organizational commitment refers to the acknowledgement of the benefits of staying with the school when compared to the costs of leaving the school. Normative commitment extends this concept to the feeling of *obligation* a teacher has to stay with their school (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Supervisory support is the teacher's belief that their supervisor values their work and cares for their well-being (Shanock & Eisenberg, 2006). Organizational citizenship behavior refers to the interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence a teacher has that directly impacts the school, but may not directly be listed in the role expectations (Somech &

Drach-Zahavy, 2000). Lodahl and Kejner (1965) explain that teacher professionalism commitment is simply a teacher's commitment to the teaching profession, while professional commitment to teaching work expands on this to include a teacher's commitment to the demands of the profession. In summary, the greater decision-making power a teacher has, the more likely they are to demonstrate greater commitment to their school, build positive relationships with their colleagues and supervisors, and contribute beyond their designated role.

Several other studies have supported the findings of Tindowen (2019) and highlight the positive impacts of teachers being empowered to make decisions in schools. Bogler and Somech (2004) conducted a quantitative study on 983 teachers in Israeli middle and high schools. The analysis of their survey results concluded that out of the six domains of psychological empowerment, decision-making was one of the highest predictors of organizational citizenship behavior and has a significant positive effect on job satisfaction. However, they caution that it is difficult to differentiate between decision-making in the psychological empowerment lens and in the social-structural empowerment lens. The study does not clarify whether a teacher's participation over technical decisions in the classroom or managerial decisions of the school is the key decision-making component to support positive organizational citizenship.

***Professional Growth***

Professional growth refers to a teacher's perception that their school will provide them with opportunities to grow as a professional, increase knowledge of their field, and advance their career. The opportunity to grow professionally "predicts teachers' affective organizational commitment, continuance organizational commitment, normative organizational commitment, job involvement, organizational citizenship behavior, teacher professionalism commitment, and professional commitment to teaching work" (Tindowen, 2019, p. 624). All these organizational

behaviors have been previously described except for job involvement, which Kanungo (1982) describes as the individual's psychological alignment with the job.

A recent study by Peng and Nair (2022) found that decision-making and professional growth were the two practices that empowered Chinese university teachers the most in a newly reformed promotion system. Statistical analysis of an online survey administered to 372 teachers showed that the teachers valued opportunities to grow professionally most in the newly reformed promotional model. They felt opportunities for professional growth allowed for a fair and practical way to increase knowledge and show intentions of developing within the field. Those who pursued professional growth were also more empowered to apply for a promotion.

***Status***

Status refers to the recognition a teacher may receive from their colleagues for their contributions to an organization. Tindowen (2019) found that status, as a dimension of teacher empowerment, can positively predict five organizational behaviors: affective organizational commitment, continuance organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, teacher professionalism commitment, and professional commitment to teaching work. Teachers with higher status in their schools are more likely to be more committed to their school, invest more time on work beyond their role, and demonstrate higher commitment to the profession. A quantitative study by Zembylas and Papanastasiou (2005), where 449 elementary and secondary teachers from Cyprus were surveyed, supports the claim that teachers with greater job status experience a greater sense of job satisfaction. Likewise, Ahmed (2021) collected data from 457 secondary teachers in Saudi Arabia. Regression analysis supported the claim that status as a dimension of empowerment contributed to the organizational citizenship behaviors demonstrated by teachers.

### *Self-efficacy*

Self-efficacy refers to teachers' perceptions of the skills and tools they have to perform their jobs effectively (Klecker & Loadman, 1996). Tindowen (2019) found the dimension of self-efficacy to predict all areas of organizational behaviors in teachers. Teachers who have high expectations of their ability to perform effectively will demonstrate greater commitment to their organization, carry out tasks beyond their job role, feel greater commitment to the teaching profession, and have a more positive relationship with supervisors.

Zainal and Mohd Matore (2021) claim that self-efficacy contributes to innovative behaviors demonstrated by teachers. Innovative behavior is what helps educators overcome the demands and challenges of the job. The researchers surveyed 1415 teachers from four Malaysian states. Multiple regression analysis revealed that along with administrators' transformational leadership practices, teacher self-efficacy had a significant influence on teachers' innovative behavior. Zainal and Mohd Matore (2021) explained that teachers with higher self-efficacy are more inclined to take risks and exert more effort to ensure tasks are carried out properly. "This is because individuals with high self-efficacy have higher motivation, belief, and confidence in their own capabilities" (p.13). Individuals with high self-efficacy have more confidence in themselves and therefore are more empowered to take on more challenging tasks such as leadership roles.

### *Autonomy*

Autonomy refers to the power a teacher has to make their own decisions around aspects such as "scheduling, curriculum, textbooks, and instructional planning" (Klecker & Loadman, 1996, p. 6). In accordance with previous literature, Tindowen's (2019) study indicates teachers' autonomy over scheduling or other organizational decisions has the least influence on predicting

organizational behaviors. Teachers with high autonomy may, however, have a more positive relationship with their supervisors and a greater sense of job involvement.

Ma et al. (2021) explains, "self-determination is the cognition that an individual can make decisions on their method of working, which reflects the individuals' autonomy in work." In a quantitative study of 554 kindergarten teachers in China, Ma et al. (2021) found that psychological empowerment could significantly positively predict levels of autonomy. The teachers reported that because they were empowered, they demonstrated more confidence in their work, had higher levels of autonomy, more trust in their organization, and hope for their program. However, Ma et al. (2021) recognize that teachers must have autonomy to feel empowered. Autonomy allows teachers to perceive value in their work, demonstrate more patience, and take on greater responsibilities. Giving teachers autonomy over their work increases their sense of accomplishment and enthusiasm toward completing tasks efficiently, which therefore increases their job involvement and retention in the field.

***Impact***

Impact is the amount of influence on school outcomes exerted through teachers' actions and decisions. It also refers to the recognition they receive for this (Klecker & Loadman, 1996). Tindowen's (2019) study claims teachers who know their capacity to influence students' lives and their school are more likely to demonstrate higher commitment to their school, build stronger relationships with supervisors, be more involved in their work, and have a greater desire to continue teaching. In Kõiv et al.'s (2019) study, they found that impact, as a dimension of psychological empowerment, was the key in bridging administrators' perceived leadership style and teachers' work-related outcomes. To develop employees' psychological empowerment, teachers must experience their voices and opinions being taken into account and principals must

provide them with the opportunities to do so. These experiences also increase employees' trust in the principal, which has a direct impact on employee retention.

**Domains of Social-Structural Empowerment**

Based on their dimensions, Short and Rinehart (1992) describe empowerment in the psychological perspective, using dimensions that refer to the intrinsic aspects of empowerment. However, in Klecker and Loadman's (1996) review of Short and Rinehart's (1992) study, they recommend approaching Short and Rinehart's (1992) scales and subscales with caution. Klecker and Loadman (1996) offered alternative dimensions of empowerment: "accountability, authority/leadership, curriculum planning/design, collegiality/collaboration, decision making, impact/causal importance, professional growth, professional knowledge, responsibility, self-efficacy, self-esteem, status, and training new teachers" (Klecker & Loadman, 1996, p. 1). Klecker and Loadman (1996) expanded upon the six dimensions of Short and Rinehart (1992) to include a more social-structural perspective. They incorporated aspects of responsibility and impact over school outcomes, collaboration with other employees, and power over organizational change. Klecker and Loadman's (1996) dimensions focus on structures of empowerment within the organization, while Short and Rinehart (1992) focus on intrinsic aspects of empowerment within an individual.

Spreitzer (2007) adds to the work of Klecker and Loadman (1996). She says in the social-structural perspective, ways to increase empowerment include "participative decision making, performance-based pay, open flow of information, flat organizational structures, [and] training" (Spreitzer, 2007, p. 5). Due to Laschinger et al.'s (2004) longitudinal study, which suggests the need for organizations and research to focus more on social-structural empowerment, the next sections aim to do so and further describe the dimensions put forth by

Spreitzer (2007).

***Decision-making***

Decision-making is presented in the literature under various terms including "shared governance," "site-based management," and "participative decision making." Shared decision-making brings forth the democratic organizational structure that cultures of empowerment idealize. It fosters employee buy-in, commitment to their work, and makes their impact on outcomes visible (Hart, 1995).

Dahou and Hacini (2018) distributed 230 questionnaires in Jordanian banks, where participants were randomly sampled. They tested the correlation between employee empowerment and job design, transformational leadership, decision-making authority, training and development, sharing information, and having a self-managed team. The study identified the strongest two correlations: one between transformational leadership and employee empowerment and another between decision-making authority and empowerment. This was to be expected based on previous literature and continues to be supported by recent studies.

Ugwu et al. (2019) also investigated the correlation between decision making and employee performance. They randomly sampled 92 participants in the hospitality industry in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria. They found that there was a positive correlation between all the leadership behaviors tested around decision making, including "my boss involves employees in decision making" (p. 67) and employee commitment. Based on this wording, it is implied that decision-making in this case includes influence on organizational decisions, and therefore pertains to social-structural empowerment. The researchers suggest that for employees to feel greater empowerment, and therefore greater commitment to their work, bosses should seek employee input, allow them to make contributions, trust their decision-making judgment, involve

them in creating goals, and reward good suggestions.

### *Performance-Based Pay*

Performance-based pay compensates contributions to organizational growth. A study by Ongori and Shunda (2008) explored the benefits of employee empowerment within an organization to help future managers develop strategies to empower employees. Ongori and Shunda (2008) used a convenience sample of twenty employees and managers from five organizations in Botswana. They distributed questionnaires that assessed "strategies to enhance employee empowerment in organizations," "benefits of employee empowerment," and "criticism[s] of employee empowerment." (Ongori & Shunda, 2008, p. 89). Contrary to Thomas and Vetlhouse's (1988) suggestion to shift from external motivation, including performance-based rewards, the findings of Ongori and Shunda's (2008) study state that a rewards-based system was the most favored strategy to enhance empowerment. This supports Spreitzer's (2007) claim on ways to increase empowerment from an organizational perspective. While Ongori and Shunda's (2008) findings apply to an organization in the private sector, this does have implications for employees in education, who are often compensated based on their level of education and years they have had in a school district (27J Schools, 2023).

### *Open Communication*

Open flow of information involves open communication from the top down regarding organizational decisions, direction, and performance. It also involves communication from the bottom up, including employee dispositions and ideas (Spreitzer, 2007). Establishing a culture of open communication allows employees to receive better information and make better decisions. In a qualitative study by Balyer et al. (2017), 20 teachers were interviewed about their experiences around administrators' roles in empowering teachers in their schools. Notably, four

teachers explicitly conveyed that "lack of communication lessened their feeling of empowerment" (Balyer et al., 2017, p. 118). One teacher explained that decisions were frequently made without the teachers, which negatively affected them, such as by taking away resources like planning time. This study highlights how critically open communication can affect feelings of empowerment and emphasizes the need for more qualitative studies focused on the empowerment of teachers.

### *Flat Organizational Structure*

Flat organizational structures decentralize power. The opposite of this is centralization, where resources and information are guarded at the top of the organizational hierarchy, leading to top-down decisions being made (Kim & Shin, 2019). A study by Aturupane et al. (2014) examined the Programme for School Improvement (PSI), which decentralizes decision making power in Sri Lanka. The implementation of the program has caused schools to create School Development Committees (SDCs), which work to establish school priorities and implement projects. The results imply the combination of the PSI and SDCs has led to an increase in academic performance in Math and English reading test scores for fourth grade students. While this study aligns with empowerment theory in that decentralization of power has led to improved performance outcomes, there are limitations to this study. One test implies the PSI had an effect on student academic success, but another provided contradicting results. Additionally, the study does not analyze specific components of the PSI for effectiveness. More evidence is needed to support why the PSI has been effective.

### *Training*

Training provides employees with the opportunity to improve their knowledge and skills within their own roles and within the general mechanics of the organization (Spreitzer, 2007). In

Ongori and Shunda's (2008) study, training was the second most favored strategy to increase empowerment. Rather than just simple task preparation, training ideally empowers trainees to make informed decisions and delegate tasks appropriately. This relates closely to open communication in the social-structural perspective and professional growth in the psychological perspective. While open communication involves receiving better information, training gives employees the know-how to use the information to make better decisions.

**Conclusion**

School leaders and administrators have clear and direct control over systems that could positively increase teacher empowerment and therefore have a clear influence over social-structural empowerment. However, through interpersonal skills, they may also influence the psychological empowerment of their employees. School administrators can be the mentors who encourage teachers to make decisions that impact their students, complete training to grow their professional knowledge, understand their own self-efficacy, or see their impact on their students. The next section explores what leadership behaviors an administrator may demonstrate which would positively impact both social-structural empowerment and psychological empowerment of their teachers.

## Empowerment and Leadership

The question being studied aims to discover the leadership behaviors that new administrators associate with empowerment. This question lends itself for further study in the social-structural perspective and may also allude to some domains of empowerment in the psychological perspective. Therefore, the next section will address transformational leadership and the behaviors of two types of school leaders: administrative leaders and teacher leaders. For the purpose of this paper, the phrases"administrative leaders" or "school leaders" refer to deans,

assistant principals or principals. The phrases “teacher leadership” or “teacher leaders” refer to teachers who take on a leadership role in their school, yet are not considered to be administrators. This can be in the form of leading committees, mentoring other teachers, or even more informal leadership.

**Transformational Leadership**

In recent years, literature in education has shifted from a focus on transactional leadership to transformational leadership (Eliophotou-Menon & Iannou, 2016; Hoxha, 2015). Transactional leadership “emphasizes on cost benefit, where the exchange of commodities [...] and doing [a] job based on task roles and requirements have been a main instrument to achieve organizational and job goals” (Ismail et al., 2011, p. 90). Transformational leadership can be described as a “leader’s behavior, influential traits, power and situational variables” that influence performance (Hoxha, 2015, p. 45). Transformational leadership relies on empowering individuals to serve in leadership roles.

Transformational leadership has been described in the literature as having four main features, as developed by Bass (1985): “intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, individualized attributed and individualized influence behavior” (Ismail et al., 2011, p. 90). A leader who values intelligence and rational problem solving is working within the intellectual stimulation domain. This type of leader encourages employees to challenge the status quo, use a novel approach, and consider logical reasoning before taking action. Individualized consideration is derived from genuine care for employees. A leader practicing this domain provides mentoring and continuous feedback while considering the needs of the employees and how they relate to the organizational goals. Individualized attributed behavior refers to leaders who practice open communication and motivate employees by clearly articulating the organization’s vision.

Individualized influenced traits are developed as a leader improves their capability of being a "role model" and "encouraging followers to do the work beyond their self interests" (Ismail et al., 2011, p. 91).

It has been shown that transformational leadership is closely linked to empowerment. "In a transformational leadership model, empowerment is viewed as a proactive and strategic management practice that exists in an organization that promotes high commitment" (Ismail et al., 2011, p. 91). Kim and Shin (2019) explored the effectiveness of transformational leadership in Korea. Transformational leadership behaviors were framed within two types: organization-related behaviors (OBs) and person-related behaviors (PBs) (Kim & Shin, 2019). Results from their survey of 491 employees showed that the structure of the organization itself impacts both types of leadership behaviors. For example, centralization of power negatively impacted the empowering process of PBs. Organization-related behaviors are to social-structural empowerment domains as the person-related behaviors are to psychological empowerment domains. There is a clear connection between transformational leadership and empowerment. This must be explored further to identify what leadership behaviors are associated with empowerment in schools.

***Administrative Leadership***

As schools shift to the transformational leadership model, principals are tasked with a multitude of responsibilities to establish supportive learning environments for both students and teachers. "A school principal is charged with a wide array of responsibilities, including the development of a shared vision for the school and stewardship of that vision, fostering an environment conducive to student learning, engaging all member of the school community, managing the organization, ensuring the effectiveness of the faculty, and doing these things with

integrity and fairness" (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015b, p. 2). The literature shows that trust plays a key role in teachers' perceived empowerment. Spreitzer (2007) posits that meaning and competence can be predicted by cognition-based trust, while impact can be predicted by affect-based trust. "Teachers who had higher interpersonal trust with their principals reported that they found their work more meaningful and had significant self-determination and impact" (Spreitzer, 2007, p. 15). Based on Spreitzer's (2007) work, it is clear that to be empowered, employees must also experience a positive, trusting relationship with their principal.

A study by Kõiv, Liik, and Heidmets (2019) found that "teachers' perception [and trust] of [their] principal's transformational leadership style was positively correlated with teachers' psychological empowerment" in terms of teachers' "sense of meaning", "competence", "autonomy", and "impact" (Kõiv et al., 2019, p. 1508). Additionally, as empowerment is closely related to job satisfaction, it is notable that this study also found that principals' leadership style was also positively correlated with job satisfaction (Kõiv et al., 2018). Principals and their leadership style play a key role in teacher empowerment and job satisfaction. However, it is important to recognize that principals are not the only leaders in a school building. Teachers often serve as school leaders as well. The next sections explore how school leaders can establish trust among their staff.

***Trust***

Trust is an integral component of achieving goals in the school setting. Trust comes into play whenever a relationship relies on interdependence and collaboration to achieve desired goals. Trust is an integral component of every educational environment. An administrator cannot achieve school goals without the teachers; and teachers cannot effectively achieve school-wide goals without the support of an administrator and a collaborative teaching team. Although there

are many elements of trust, when it comes to organizational effectiveness, reliability, competence, and kindness are the most relevant components. Will the person fulfill their promises? Will their performance meet the expectations of the working community? Will they understand the challenges and pressures of the school climate (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015b)?

**Benevolence.** For an administrator to earn trust, they must firstly show their followers that they *care.* This involves a level of vulnerability, openness, and commitment. The principal must demonstrate to students, teachers, and parents they are willing to work hard to support their needs. They must demonstrate a willingness to put aside personal gain for the good of their followers (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015a).

**Honesty.** The concept of honesty in this sense extends beyond the traditional sense of telling the truth and involves "integrity" and "authenticity" (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015a, p. 69). In the educational setting, this often implies the staff trust the principal is fair and does not "play favorites." The principal demonstrates authenticity in their willingness to be themselves, share their true thoughts, personality, and beliefs, and own up to mistakes when they make them (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015a).

**Openness.** It is no surprise that Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015a) suggest that trusting principals are open to sharing decision-making power with their staff. Trusting principals are also open when sharing information. This creates opportunities for teachers to be open about problems they may have, allowing for effective problem-solving. The more a principal can share information accurately with their teachers, the more likely they will be to see teachers doing the same with them, which leads to more effective teamwork and communication as the team works toward a common goal (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015a).

**Competence.** Teachers expect the principal to lead them in working toward a common vision. This includes assigning and completing tasks accurately, efficiently, and effectively. The principal must have the knowledge, experience, and skills to be an effective task manager. When principals demonstrate they are capable of completing tasks, teachers are more inclined to trust them in their leadership (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015a).

**Consistency.** Consistency is a key facet in building trust, as it refers to how reliably one is in demonstrating benevolence, honesty, openness, and competence. Trust is built when a principal demonstrates the other facets of trust consistently and dependably across time (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015a).

### *Teacher Leadership*

Teachers also play an increasingly important role in school leadership. Placing teachers in leadership roles lends itself to creating a democratic school environment which fosters a sense of community. Giving voice to teacher leaders allows them to share their expertise and serve as a school resource. Researchers believe that if teachers have a voice in curriculum design, they will have increased buy-in, and therefore deliver more effective programs (Hart, 1995; Muijs & Harris, 2003). In the early 2000s, there was a transition in the United States toward "collective leadership" or "shared leadership" in public schools, where teachers were given more informal leadership opportunities. This shifted sole leadership and power from the principal and shared it among teachers and other school personnel (Muijs & Harris, 2003).

A number of definitions of teacher leadership have been proposed in the literature. Some definitions center around the ability to encourage and motivate colleagues. Other definitions refer to contributing to the school community outside the classroom. However, three main facets of teacher leadership have been posed in the literature, which helps create a clearer

understanding of what teacher leadership means. Teacher leadership is leadership of students or other teachers perhaps as a facilitator, coach, or mentor. Teacher leadership could be leading operational tasks such as serving as a department head, organizing systems, or being in charge of a task. Teacher leadership could be exercised by participating in decision-making, for example through committees, leading communication with school stakeholders, or creating partnerships (Muijs & Harris, 2003).

A quantitative study by Cobanoglu (2020) provided evidence to support shared leadership having a positive effect on teacher empowerment. The study sampled 359 teachers from primary schools of the Ministry of Education in Malatya province, Turkey, in the 2019-2020 school year. Cobanoglu (2020) used a shared leadership scale developed by Wood (2005) and modified by Bstanci (2012) as well as the employee Psychological Empowerment Scale (PES) Spreitzer (1995) developed. There was a positive, statistically significant relationship between the school's shared leadership and employee empowerment. Additionally, these two factors can each predict innovativeness. To create a school where innovation and creative thinking is supported, teachers must be empowered, which entails their inclusion in shared decision-making processes.

**Accomplishments of Teacher Empowerment**

Transformational leadership has proven to be a key component of cultivating empowered teachers and creating teacher-leaders. While it is important for administrative leadership to demonstrate transformational leadership behaviors, when implemented correctly, empowerment may have a trickle-down effect from administrators to teacher-leaders to teachers. For this to occur, administrators and teachers must establish trust between each other. Teachers may then not only feel empowered within their traditional roles but also feel empowered to lead others or

take on additional responsibilities. Teacher empowerment can have tangible effects on school outcomes.

In Spreitzer et al.'s (2005) review of the literature and reflection of Spreitzer's (1995) four dimensions of psychological empowerment, they theorize that her four dimensions would have positive effects on effectiveness in the workplace. Empowerment will increase employee commitment to the organization and will improve operational efficiency. Employees will be more motivated to persist through challenging situations. Empowered employees will elevate their performance goals, which in turn will increase their performance. Employees will have an improved interest in their work and professional learning. When empowerment theories are applied to the school setting, researchers believe that empowered, collaborative cultures will increase student performance and school outcomes as a result of "leadership conceptualizations" (Hart, 1995, p. 11).

In a climate of growing concern for teacher and administrator retention, empowerment is critical. A 2021 survey by the National Association of Secondary School Principals stated "job satisfaction is at an ultimate low with almost 4 out of 10 principals (38%) expecting to leave the profession in the next three years" (NASSP, 2021). There are fewer principal candidates because "the principal pipeline is directly affected by the teacher shortage" (NASSP, 2021). As teachers are leaving the profession in droves, fewer teachers are seeking to become school administrators. There has also been a principal shortage over the years since 2020 (NASSP, 2021). If teachers felt empowered in their profession, job satisfaction would increase, leading to lower teacher attrition rates and therefore lower principal attrition rates.

**Conclusion**

Through the lenses of both social-structural empowerment and psychological

empowerment, it is possible to identify the transformational leadership behaviors and empowerment domains new administrators experienced while they were teachers and what transformational leadership strategies they employ to empower their staff as a new leader. As the literature shows, empowered teachers will have a trust-based, positive relationship with their principal and have opportunities for shared leadership. However, the research does not give sufficient insight into what empowered teachers to become school leaders. It is critical to explore educators' perceptions of empowerment in their schools because, as the literature shows, this will lead to increased job satisfaction, commitment to the school, reduced teacher turnover, and increased student academic achievement.

## Colorado Senate Bill 10-191

Colorado Senate Bill 10-191 is currently jeopardizing teacher empowerment in Colorado. The bill's system, a strict evaluation process, threatens teacher empowerment. This raises concerns in relation to both teachers and the administrators who seek to empower them.

The evaluation process the bill mandates applies to both administrators and teachers, but this paper will focus solely on the evaluation process for teachers. Half of a teacher's effectiveness will be evaluated through observations. Probationary teachers must receive at least two documented observations per academic year, while non-probationary teachers only need to receive one observation each year. During observations, teachers are rated and evaluated on Teacher Quality Standards defined by the Colorado Department of Education. Teacher Quality Standards outline the skills, knowledge, and beliefs necessary to be an effective teacher. The other half of a teacher's effectiveness will be evaluated through measures of student success including standardized test scores (Senate Bill 10-191, 2010).

Performance Evaluation Ratings for teachers are: "ineffective," "partially ineffective,"

"effective," and "highly effective" (Senate Bill 10-191, 2010). In addition to reforming the previous educator evaluation process, SB 191 also aims to eradicate true tenure. For a teacher to move from "probationary" to "non-probationary" they must demonstrate three consecutive years of "highly effective" or "effective" evaluations in a given district. They cannot transfer their evaluations from district to district. Teachers can lose non-probationary status by receiving two consecutive teacher effectiveness ratings of "ineffective" (Crandell & Boyce, 2014).

**Background**

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, enacted in 2001 under the Bush Administration, aimed to close the performance gap between students of low-income families and those of high-income families. NCLB uses high-stakes testing to measure the progress towards closing the performance gap. Due to NCLB, standardized testing increased throughout America (Bridich, 2016). Standardized testing remained and was reinforced with the introduction of the Race to the Top (RTTT) Fund by the Obama administration in 2009. Criteria detailed in the RTTT summary included how to improve teacher and principal effectiveness, requiring the measurement of student growth and the implementation of transparent and fair evaluation systems for educators (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). SB 191 was drafted in response to RTTT Fund requirements. Prior to SB 191, probationary teachers were evaluated annually, and, once they received non-probationary status, they were evaluated once every five years. Student growth had not been considered in teacher evaluations (McNeal, 2013). Historically situated just after NCLB and RTTT initiatives, SB 191 was designed with good intentions: to increase educator effectiveness in order to support student achievement. However, some externalities created in the process of SB 191's implementation have negative impacts on teachers and students.

## Empowerment

SB 191 has diminished teacher empowerment. In a study by Bridich (2013), a participant expressed that teachers appreciate using the evaluation model implemented by SB 191 as a benchmark to support growth and generate launching points for feedback. However, participants did not appreciate the use of this same information to determine which teachers are effective and which are not. The contradicting ideas of the evaluations being used for coaching and as a punitive measure inserts fear into the system, rendering it disempowering.

### *Decision-making*

Spreizter (2007) posits five domains of social-structural empowerment: decision-making, flat organizational structure, open communication, performance-based pay, and training. SB 191 negatively impacts all five of these domains, and enacts a system that is negatively impacted by a lack of training to uphold that system. Shared decision-making uses a democratic organizational structure to foster empowerment and teacher buy-in,, and helps teachers understand their impact (Hart, 1995). Although Senate Bill 10-191 (2010) does invite teachers, students, and parents to be on the committee to develop the evaluation model, it has administrators and policymakers representing the majority of the committee. Policymakers are given the power to determine what is tested. Those in charge, such as administrators and directors, perform evaluations based on rubrics. Policymakers are responsible for creating those rubrics (Bridich, 2013). There is very little room for input from teachers in the evaluation process that affects them directly (Bridich, 2016) and little room to stratify power among all stakeholders in creating assessments, developing the evaluation system, or evaluating effectiveness (Bridich, 2013). This system diminishes shared decision-making power and ultimately diminishes educator empowerment.

### *Flat Organizational Structure*

Flat organizational structures decentralize power in organizations. The opposite of this is centralization, where resources and information are guarded at the top of the organizational hierarchy, meaning decisions are also made at the top (Kim & Shin, 2019). SB 191 exacerbates the hierarchy in schools, placing administrators at the top and teachers at the bottom. By giving power to administrators to subjectively evaluate teachers based on a minimal snapshot of their teaching, and to make hiring decisions based on those evaluations, the bill gives substance to asymmetrical power dynamics. “This increasingly stratified power structure has the potential to negatively impact teachers’ inclination to use their voices within their school, for speaking one’s thoughts could carry higher consequences in the future” (Bridich, 2016, p. 5).

### *Open Communication*

Teacher empowerment relies heavily on open communication. This involves transparency, such as a top-down flow of information regarding organizational decisions, direction, and performance (Spreitzer, 2007). While SB 191 transparently describes whatColorado educators will be evaluated on, a participant in Bridich’s (2013) study claims that the data provided by statewide assessments was “mystery data” (p. 130). The participant explained that the Teacher Quality Standards used to guide the evaluation are difficult to interpret, teachers are not able to see the standardized assessments given to students, and the scoring system for the evaluation was not explained to teachers. Additionally, information from teacher observations and student test scores is not always shared with teachers (Smith & Kubacka, 2017). This shows that SB 191 has compromised open communication and limits educator empowerment.

SB 191 further compromises open communication because student growth on

standardized testing has created a competitive environment among teachers. Teachers have been more reluctant to share their materials in fear that it would help students of other teachers score higher (Warring, 2015). SB 191 has unintentionally created a system that stifles learning by disincentivizing teacher collaboration, disempowering teachers.

### *Performance-Based Pay*

Performance-based pay is a reliable way, supported by the literature, to increase employee empowerment. Performance-based pay compensates based on contributions to the growth of the organization (Ongori & Shunda, 2008; Spreitzer, 2007). In the case of school systems and SB 191, the performance-based pay is one's salary for the following year. If the teacher performs satisfactorily, they will be allowed to keep their job. However, when performance-based hiring is contingent on student achievement data, teachers may feel disempowered. A participant in Bridich's (2013) study explained that SB 191's rubrics are long and some teachers have difficulty determining exactly what is being measured. The same participant argued the rubrics do not prioritize the right metrics for education.

Evidence that the rubrics lead to improved student learning outcomes appears insufficient to support their use. According to Kane and Staiger (2012), while most teachers are rated as "exceptional" (or similar designations) on teacher evaluations, most students fall below the "exceptional" level on standardized assessments. There is a clear disparity between what is measured on teacher evaluation rubrics and what is measured to assess student achievement (Warring, 2015). The lack of clarity in SB 191's evaluation system and its impact on teacher compensation structures negatively impacts teacher empowerment.

### *Training*

In Ongori and Shunda's (2008) study, training was identified as a favored strategy to

increase employee empowerment and to make informed decisions. However, the implementation of SB 191 appears not to prioritize training. Principals have not been sufficiently trained to use the Teacher Quality Standard evaluation rubrics consistently (Warring, 2015). Teachers in Bridich's (2013) study also gripe that often the administrators performing the evaluations have had insufficient evaluation training and inconsistent backgrounds in regards to their subject. Teachers' ratings on the rubric are not helpful because the administrators do not have enough training to give valuable feedback and next steps. Specialty teachers in particular worry that the administrators lack the knowledge to recognize the techniques they are using in their classrooms. Teachers also express that they do not fully understand how the evaluation process works or how it will impact what they do. While many teachers of Bridich's (2013) study agree that the evaluation process implemented by SB 191 is a tool to assess their performance, many do not understand how to use it as a tool to improve their teaching practice.

There are also many misconceptions when it comes to the evaluation process, such as how tenure is affected (McNeal, 2013), and how standardized testing affects teacher employment (Crandell & Boyce, 2014). By compromising these five domains of empowerment through its evaluation system, SB 191 has disempowered teachers.

**Implications**

SB 191's evaluation system, which lacks reliability and validity, has had significant impacts on equity and inclusion. SB 191 emphasizes data and test scores, implying the only way to assess learning goals is through limited quantitative information. Assessment data goes toward half a teacher's evaluation and the other half includes a collection of other data points that, yet again, minimizes the importance of the whole child. (Bridich, 2013). .

SB 191's requirement to use standardized test data is based on the assumption that these

tests provide accurate information of students' capabilities. These one-off assessments are not a fair, accurate, or sufficient way to demonstrate student learning. Evaluating student growth based on these measures is inequitable because they do not account for differences in individual students or cultural or societal influences that may affect student learning. Factors outside of the school's control, that are not considered in standardized testing, are at play in these situations. (Warring, 2015).

**Student Demographics**. Empirical studies have shown a variety of reasons other than teacher performance that impact student performance. These tests do not consider a student's socio-economic status or other personal factors that typically affect student test scores (Warring, 2015). Key examples include inadequate funding for school resources, large class sizes, low parent involvement, rates of parents lacking formal education, and high populations of English Language Learners (Ballard & Bates, 2008; Barton, 2003; Jeynes, 2005). Additionally, statistics from statewide and nationwide standardized tests suggest that Black and Hispanic students consistently underachieve compared to White and Asian students. Similarly, female students produce lower scores than male students in math and science (Good et al., 2003). Standardized tests do not account for all these factors, and attempting to do so risks exacerbating the problem. Simply asking minority students demographic questions before testing can negatively impact how they achieve on standardized tests, and therefore, how their teacher rates on their evaluation (Warring, 2015). Policymakers have suggested adjusting the scoring for student demographics. However, Warren (2015) states this practice would be inequitable because it lowers the bar of achievement for some groups of students and not others.

**Low-Income Schools.** There is an existing association between low achievement on standardized tests and low-income communities (Warring, 2015). When low standardized test

scores lead to negative evaluations, directly impacting teacher pay and job security, better teachers are incentivized to work in more privileged environments. Low-income schools are also less likely to allocate limited funds towards multiple standardized tests, leaving them forced to rely on a single test. This exacerbates their testing disadvantages, discouraging teachers from wanting to teach in low-income schools (Warring, 2015).

Inequities are further perpetuated, particularly for low-income communities, when teachers feel compelled to "teach to the test." This requires teachers to curtail their current curriculum in order to directly, and often solely, focus on the material that will be tested. As seen when NCLB was implemented, teachers shifted toward teaching to the test instead of teaching their planned curriculum, particularly in areas of low socio-economic status (Stone & Lane, 2003). Ravitch (2010) claims this decreased actual learning by impeding students' ability to analyze and apply content. The students whose teachers taught to the test were less prepared to be successful in society. The implementation of SB 191's inequitable evaluation practices further perpetuates the students' circumstances, making it more difficult for them to rise into a higher socioeconomic class.

**Levels of Diversity.** The level of diversity in a classroom can also impact student and teacher performance. "In a single environment, learners and teachers themselves vary in beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, self-efficacy, motivation, learning styles, cultural influences, and demographics or social identities (e.g., sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability/disability, socio-economic status, religion/spirituality, etc.)" (Warring, 2015, p. 706). Standardized testing does not account for the many levels of diversity within these factors present in a single classroom. Schools lacking in diversity may find it easier to show growth on standardized tests because teachers have fewer external factors and student needs to consider when delivering

instruction. Teachers in less diverse schools, therefore, may unfairly score higher in their evaluations.

**Intrinsic Motivation.** Regardless of student demographics, student motivation may also negatively impact teacher performance. It is difficult to measure and adjust for students' intrinsic motivation, which clearly affects performance on standardized tests. Students' intrinsic motivation will also affect their performance in the classroom when a teacher is being observed and evaluated. Teachers with already highly-motivated, high-achieving students tend to also receive higher observational evaluations. There is currently no practice to adjust for this bias (Warring, 2015).

### *Validity and Reliability*

Because SB 191's evaluations are based partially on standardized tests, the system lacks validity and reliability. McNeal (2013) explains, "Opponents of assessing teachers based on student test scores are supported by the broad consensus among economists, statisticians, and psychometricians who view the dependence on student test scores as unreliable and invalid indicators of teacher effectiveness, including when employing innovative statistical applications such as 'value-added modeling'" (p. 495). The validity and reliability of observations and rubrics based on Teacher Quality Standards is similarly questionable. In a study by Bridich (2013), one participant explained that the small snapshot an evaluator gains of a teacher's instruction (when the teacher is aware the evaluator is present and thus may change their behavior) is not enough to gauge their true abilities or evaluate their demonstration of the many Teacher Quality Standards. Warring (2015) explains that neither the test-based measures nor the scoring rubric for observations offer guidance on how to improve teacher training or performance. While they allow one to determine "effective" or "ineffective" teachers based on their standards, they are not

specific enough to determine the practices responsible for teachers' successes or failures.

### *Teacher and Administrator Retention*

In the immediate years following the induction of SB 191, teacher retention rates were alarmingly low. During these years, one third of teachers in their first three years were leaving the field of teaching (Crandell & Boyce, 2014). Many teachers attribute this to the implementation of the subjective and unfair evaluation model. SB 191's evaluation is used to determine if probationary teachers (those in their first three years of teaching) should have their contract renewed the following year. Therefore, probationary teachers in schools that perform historically low on state testing are already at a disadvantage when it comes to their evaluation. These schools struggle to hire and retain teachers in part due to SB 191's evaluation system (Crandell & Boyce, 2014).

In addition to satisfying RTTT requirements, SB 191 is part of a national movement toward anti-tenure laws. Prior to SB 191, there was a common misconception that tenure provided job security for life, although in reality, a tenured teacher could have been removed for sufficient cause: inadequate performance, failure to meet contractual duties, poor conduct, or insubordination. Prior to SB 191, if a teacher was removed for any of these reasons, they were entitled to due process. Now, if a principal wants to remove a teacher for any reason, they have the means to do so by simply giving them a low rating on their evaluation. These evaluations are subjective, and under SB 191, only need to be conducted by a single rater. SB 191 leaves teachers vulnerable to arbitrary dismissals, which leads to high teacher turnover, which negatively impacts student learning (McNeal, 2013).

SB 191 also negatively affects administrator retention. A 2021 study by the National Association of Secondary School Principals indicates that school principals are also leaving the

field in droves. While a large part of this is due to the COVID-19 pandemic, principals also report being overworked because of the teacher shortage. “68% of principals report being concerned about the teacher shortage in the 2021-2022 school year” (NASSP, 2021). Additionally, “18% of principals report that the most challenging aspect of their role is implementing district and state policies” (NASSP, 2021). SB 191 creates a domino effect which passes stress placed on teachers down to principals, making it harder to retain people at both levels. According to NASSP (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic, the political climate in certain states, limited resources and guidance, and low compensation have all contributed to the problem, but SB 191 exacerbates existing stressors.

**Conclusion**

The nationwide effort to increase student achievement has centered around making teacher evaluation systems more stringent, and SB 191 does this. However, SB 191 has had negative implications in all five domains of social-structural empowerment for teachers. It has decreased teacher involvement in decision making, discouraged a flat organizational structure, diminished open communication, generated fear around performance-based pay, and failed to provide sufficient training for the evaluation process to be successful. The standardized test system involved fails to account for the diversity in different classrooms. The use of this data in the evaluation system further perpetuates inequities in our society because SB 191 discourages teachers from working in low-income or otherwise low-achieving school districts. SB 191 implements an evaluation system that lacks validity and reliability. Several recommendations have been made in the literature that would improve the mandates enacted by SB 191. Policymakers could involve stakeholder voices more, create a more robust observation process, increase flexibility when it comes to the achievement data considered in evaluations, and help

teachers use the data to support student growth. These recommendations may help SB 191 more effectively achieve its learning goals.

## Summary

There are two recognized perspectives of empowerment: psychological empowerment and social-structural empowerment. Each perspective has its own domains. Psychological empowerment refers to the employees' work experiences and how they use their values to orient themselves within their work. Under psychological empowerment lies six domains: decision-making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy, and impact. Social-structural empowerment refers to how an organization is structured so employees may feel empowerment. Five domains lie under social structural empowerment: decision-making, performance-based pay, open communication, flat organizational structure, and training. While the role of school administrators may be to create and maintain systems that foster social-structural empowerment, their status may give them the power to influence the psychological empowerment of their staff should they employ transformational leadership behaviors appropriately.

Transformational leadership and empowerment have proven to have crossover throughout the literature. A transformational leader can empower their staff, yet a transformational leader needs to be empowered to have an impact. Transformational leaders demonstrate rational problem solving, challenge the status quo, show care for their employees, communicate openly and clearly, and are a champion of the organization's mission. Trust is a critical component to being a transformational leader and empowering one's followers. Trust is built on five facets: benevolence, honesty, openness, competence, and consistency. When trust is established between a school administrator and teachers, teachers may become school leaders themselves and support

the administrator in working toward a collective mission.

An abundance of literature makes it clear that a culture of empowerment in schools will have positive effects: teachers' increased commitment to their school, increased resilience during challenging situations, improved performance, elevated interest in work and professional learning, and greater job satisfaction. In the face of Colorado Senate Bill 191, schools need cultures of empowerment more than ever. School administrators need to be empowered to lead and teachers need to be empowered to take on leadership roles. However, the intersection between empowerment and transformational leadership lends itself to this study. In what ways were new administrators who have recently transitioned into their positions empowered to take on their role? In what ways do they empower their staff to be leaders?

# CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Combined with the disempowering SB 191 mandate in Colorado, the teacher shortage, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, could lead to a decrease in teacher leaders and school administrators in the upcoming years. To better inform districts and school leaders on how to empower teachers to take on leadership roles, more studies need to be conducted to provide insight on what leadership actions and behaviors inspire teachers to take on more responsibilities. The told stories of school administrators who have recently transitioned from teacher to administrator will help illuminate some key transformational leadership actions administrators can take to empower their teachers to become school leaders.

## Rationale for Research Approach

This study was conducted through a traditional qualitative approach based on constructivist epistemology, ontology, and methodology. The research consisted of interviews with five school administrators who are within their first three years as school leaders after having transitioned from a teaching role. This was designed to determine which transformational leadership strategies empowered them both psychologically and social-structurally as teachers and which strategies they now use to empower their staff.

### Background

Early studies of empowerment were rooted in quantitative models as the first attempts were made to integrate theory with empirical evidence and practice (Short & Rinehart, 1992; Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). While this provided the groundwork to establish and delineate dimensions of empowerment, more recent studies have shifted to qualitative methods.

Although Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) study is theoretical in nature, they claim to take a more "interpretive" approach, moving from objective external conditions as independent variables and integrating individuals' own interpretative processes as independent variables. In Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) research, the independent variables are considered individuals' "interpretive styles" (p. 668). They consider their model to apply "a soft constructionist perspective to intrinsic task motivation" (p. 669). While their research does not negate observable, verifiable external events, it also considers, for the first time in empowerment research, the cognitive judgements of individuals. The study "identifies three interpretive processes through which individuals add meaning to factual perceptions about tasks: evaluation, attribution, and envisioning" (p. 669). While individual interpretations do not change the facts of past events, they do impact task assessments and would therefore impact intrinsic motivation. With this consideration, they were able to build their cognitive model of empowerment. In this model, environmental events combined with interpretive styles lead to task assessments, in which individuals may evaluate the task for impact, competence, meaningfulness, and choice. This assessment directly impacts the individual's behavior. Although their study is not empirical, the interpretive lens is a key influence of the study's design. At the time of Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) study, empowerment research was still rooted in just the psychological perspective. Therefore, it is logical for participants' perceptions and meaning-making of external events to be considered in the research. However, even with a shift in focus from the psychological perspective to the social-structural perspective, interpretive and constructivist approaches are woven throughout the development of empowerment research (Fook et al., 2011).

Short and Rinehart's (1992) study is one of the earlier works that applies empowerment to school leadership. Though rooted in a quantitative and psychological empowerment lens, there

is a hint of interpretivism in the research objective. “The objective of this study was to investigate the relationship of participant perceptions of school climate and certain participant characteristics to participant perceptions of empowerment” (Short & Rinehart, 1992, pp. 7-8). Klecker and Loadman (1996) best describe empowerment as a “multi-dimensional construct” (p. 1) and set out to quantitatively describe and analyze the dimensions of empowerment proposed in Short and Rinehart’s (1992) study.

Spreitzer’s (1995) study aimed to develop and validate a measure of psychological empowerment in the workplace. At the time, “Researchers ha[d] not made previous attempts to measure psychological empowerment with a work context in mind” (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1442). Spreitzer’s (1995) work builds on Conger and Kanungo (1988)’s work as well as Thomas and Velthouse’s (1990) study. It attempts to quantitatively distinguish the four constructs of psychological empowerment proposed by Conger and Kanungo (1988) and Thomas and Velthouse (1990) as their own distinct components. The constructs are: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Spreitzer, 1995). These early studies are taking a quantitative approach on a topic that may best be studied in a constructivist lens.

***Qualitative Approach***

Muijs and Harris (2006) align the constructivist paradigm with qualitative methods. The researchers make the claim that, at the time, the literature and research on teacher leadership had been lacking in detail, and therefore were of little use to teachers and schools pursuing teacher leadership. Muijs and Harris (2006) used a case study approach to “explore the extent to which teacher leadership [...] has cogency in the UK” (p. 963). Their study explored teacher leadership in terms of teachers’ understandings, teachers’ insights, analysis of the benefits to classroom and school improvement, and conditions that would support or enhance it. A case study approach

was used because of the selection of the participating schools by the Local Education Authority. The researchers narrowed down the selection to ten schools that encompassed a wide range of variables. While the case study methodology does not allow the researchers to assess whether school leadership definitively leads to school improvement, it does allow them to uncover and assess teachers' perspectives on teacher leadership and how they believe it impacts improvement (Muijs & Harris, 2006).

Despite the many types of qualitative research, the work of Balyer et al. (2017) takes a traditional qualitative approach, focusing on structural empowerment in education. This study is critical to my research due to the alignment of purpose between the two studies. They state, "teachers' collective efforts are believed to have a direct influence on better student performance" and "rising demands for student success have changed the role of administrators regarding teacher empowerment" (Balyer et al., 2017, p. 2). The researchers advocate for qualitative research on empowerment in education. With the support of Creswell (2002), the researchers explain that qualitative research is best applied to this study because it aims to "describe, analyze, and interpret a group's common design on behaviors, beliefs, and language" (Balyer et al., 2017, p. 5). In qualitative research, the researcher becomes the instrument. In other words, the researcher's perspectives and biases cannot fully be separated from the research. While this may sometimes be a drawback of qualitative research, this study uses the perspectives of teachers to tell their stories. It is appropriate then, that I, as the researcher, become the instrument because I myself am an educator. The idea for my research was inspired by my own experiences in the field of education. Based on the literature, this study takes on a traditional qualitative approach that is constructivist in its ontology, epistemology, and methodology.

**Constructivism**

When considering the ontology of constructivism, researchers must consider three views Guba (1990) poses. The first view considers every belief of what makes "truth" to be equal. The second is the view that many truths may simultaneously coexist. "The third is the view that there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society - ours - uses in one or another area of inquiry" (Guba, 1990, p. 175).

The epistemology of a constructivist inquiry is one of co-created findings between the researcher and participants. "Realities exist in the form of multiple mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific, dependent for their form and content on the persons who hold them" (Guba, 1990, p. 27). Constructivism assumes that reality is created through meanings, interpretations, and understandings that have been shaped by the social influence and life experiences of both the participants and the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). "We construct knowledge through our lived experiences and through our interactions with other members of society. As such, as researchers, we must participate in the research process with our subjects to ensure we are producing knowledge that is reflective of their reality" (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 102). Guba (1990) explains through constructivist research, the inquirer and the inquired into cannot be separated. Findings, and therefore analysis, are created together by what and how the participants share and what the researcher sees.

Under the constructivist approach, the researcher approaches methodology by "aim[ing] to identify the variety of constructions that exist and bring them into as much consensus as possible" (Guba, 1990, p. 26). In alignment with the constructivist paradigm, the researcher aims to understand an experience lived or felt by the participants (Guba, 1990).

Based on what is understood about empowerment thus far through the literature, a natural conclusion for further research would be to root it in the constructivist paradigm in its ontology. There can be many truths in how one feels and experiences empowerment. I, as the researcher, co-constructed the findings along with the participants. Their narratives of how they have felt empowered and what leadership behaviors they associated with empowerment have been shaped by their own interactions with society. The findings from their narratives were then shaped by my own life experiences. As the researcher, I attempted to find commonalities between the lived experiences of the participants. This study, consistent with both the constructivist paradigm and the literature, was qualitative.

**Qualitative**

As Corbin and Strauss (2015) explain, qualitative research can explore the lived experiences and the meanings of those experiences created by the participants. It allows the researcher to more thoroughly understand an idea or topic and how the idea or topic affects individuals (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Wertz et al., 2011). Additionally, "Qualitative research is a form of research in which the researcher or a designated coresearcher collects and interprets data, making the researcher as much a part of the research process as the participants and the data they provide" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 4). Qualitative research may seek to understand the psychological aspects of a question and may provide context for how a belief, concept, or practice has come to be. Therefore, as this study explored the leadership strategies educators associate with empowerment, qualitative research best lent itself to give the context and understanding needed for interpreting the lived experiences of educators.

## Case Study

This study was best conducted as a case study. While ethnography attempts to study the culture of an entire group, "case study research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases in a bounded system" (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). More specifically, this study was an *instrumental* case study, where "the researcher focuses on an issue or concern, then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue" (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). In this study, the researcher selected the concern: what empowers new school administrators who have recently transitioned from a teaching role to take on a position of leadership? The case was then selected: new administrators who have recently transitioned from a teacher leadership role in 27J schools. This study borrows some features of ethnography. While a case study examines a particular event or activity, an ethnography examines the culture of a group (Creswell, 2007). The participants in this study did not all share the same event, but they all shared a culture of empowerment, whether that was developed through their experiences in 27J Schools or prior experiences.

## Research Questions

While this study aims to explore what leadership strategies educators associate with empowerment, the following questions helped guide the study: What does teacher empowerment mean to experienced teachers who have recently transitioned into school administration? What leadership behaviors do educators associate with empowerment? How do these educators narrate their experiences of the cultures of empowerment at their school?

## Setting

27J Schools is a school district located northeast of the Denver, Colorado metropolitan area. It encompasses about 212 square miles and serves a population of about 20,000 students.

Among 178 school districts, it is the fifteenth largest school district in Colorado by population. The district is made of 12 elementary schools, five middle schools, four high schools, and six charter schools. The mission of 27J is, "In partnership with our families and the community, 27J Schools empowers every student today to take control of their future tomorrow" (27J Schools). The district prides itself on its efforts to create equitable learning communities, serving over 1800 English Language Learners. The students of 27J speak over 55 languages, primarily Spanish (27J Schools). According to the Colorado Department of Education (2022a), in keeping with the state-wide trend, the staff turnover rate in the district between the 2020-2021 school year and the 2021-2022 school year was 16%. While 16% may seem high, this was still significantly lower than the turnover rate of the surrounding districts. In the 2021-2022 school year, out of the 56 principals and assistant principals, only two were Black or African American, seven Hispanic or Latino, one of two or more races; and the rest were White (Colorado Department of Education, 2022b). This aligns with the diversity levels of the teacher population. The same year, the population of American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and those representing two or more races were each less than 1% of the 966 total teachers. However, 11% of the teaching staff were Hispanic or Latino and 86% were White (Colorado Department of Education, 2022c). Although the district lacks diversity of its teaching and administrative staff, with a comparatively low turnover rate and focus on empowerment, 27J Schools offers itself as a rich field for an empowerment study.

## Participants

Because they will be asked to recall their experiences as a teacher, the participants must be within their first three years of transitioning to an administrative role in public schools and

have previously held a teaching position. Homogenous sampling selected for all 27J School District administrators who have transitioned from a teaching position to an administrative position in the last three years. Participants consisted of five new administrators at various schools throughout School District 27J in Brighton, Colorado.

Participant details are outlined in Table 1, describing the school each administrator leads and their role, the number of years of administration experience each leader has, race, and gender. All participants have transitioned from a teacher role to an administrative role between August 2020 and the time of the study.

Table 1

*Participant Details*

| Participant | Job Role | Years in Administration | Race | Gender |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alaina | Middle School Dean | .5 | White | F |
| Stanley | High School Assistant Principal (AP) | 2 | White | M |
| Daniel | Elementary AP | .5 | White | M |
| Kelly | Elementary Dean | 1 | White | F |
| Valerie | Elementary AP | 2 | Hispanic | F |

## Participant Recruitment

Approval from 27J Schools was gained on December 12, 2022 (Appendix A). A list of 27J administrators meeting the requirements was obtained from 27J Schools' Professional Learning Instructional Specialist. IRB approval for data collection was gained on December 18, 2022. Potential participants were then approached informally and informed about the research via email. My intention was to explain to them the purpose of the research on a one-to-one basis

and set up a time to interview with them. Once the participant agreed to an interview, I set up a Google Calendar invitation and sent the adult consent form (Appendix B). Prior to interviews, participants received more formal written information (Appendix C) about the research and how it would be used via email. The first interview was conducted on December 21, 2022.

## Rapport

It is important to note that I am also an administrator in this school district. While this may present a conflict of interest, it also means I have spent 16 months in the field building rapport with the participants. We have been meeting once a month on a Monday for a four-hour training session. We also met at an end-of-year administrator retreat (also four hours long). We have worked in small groups together during the district's professional learning sessions. These small groups were selected randomly, so I have gotten to know some participants better than others through our work together. However, all participants are familiar with me and professional trust has been established.

## Methodology

As part of the methodology, a literature review was conducted prior to interviews and data analysis.

### Literature Review

A literature review of existing research was conducted to inform this study. The search began with keywords: empowerment, trust, recognition, school leadership, and teacher-leadership. The researcher reviewed articles related to this search as well as student dissertations related to the topic. Common ideas that became the topic headings listed under Chapter 2. To further expand upon the topic headings, the search was revisited to find related articles for each heading. The researcher scanned the abstract to determine the type of research

conducted in the article and to gain a preliminary understanding of the methods and findings. If the article provided information pertinent to the research topic, the entire article was read and key information was integrated into the outline for this paper. Based on a review of the literature, the researcher drew the conclusion that there is a sufficient understanding of domains of empowerment and transformational leadership within quantitative contexts, but empowerment literature lacked qualitative understanding.

Once enough information was gathered to gain a rich understanding of existing literature and gaps in the literature, research questions were drafted and reviewed by the researcher's advisor. Based on the research questions, the advising committee created and edited interview questions. When the interview questions were finalized and approval was granted by the IRB and 27J Schools, interviews were conducted.

**Interviews**

Interviews were conducted via Zoom at the convenience of the participants. Because the study was approved and supported by 27J Schools and was in alignment with the goals of the school district, interviews were conducted during working hours. Prior to the participant interviews, a practice interview took place between the researcher and another 27J Schools administrator not participating in the study. The practice interview served to test the technology and ensure the questions were reliable in gaining the desired information. The interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes and included a combination of open-ended questions and probing questions, as detailed in the next sections. The interviews were recorded via Zoom and were transcribed through Otter.ai. The transcriptions were checked for accuracy following the interviews. As interviews were checked, any participants' identifiable information was removed. Any repeated words or phases that were not used for emphasis and any "filler words" such as "um" and "like"

were removed from the transcripts. A summary of the findings was sent to the participants interested in receiving it. Once the research was completed, the Zoom recordings and transcripts were deleted.

According to Crotty (2003), "Researchers tend to gather data by way of unstructured interviews in which only open-ended questions, if any, are asked" (p. 83). The interview protocol for this study is listed below, and care was taken to ensure the questions elicited open-ended responses.

***Research Question #1 Interview Questions***

What does teacher empowerment mean to experienced teachers who have recently transitioned into school administration?

1. If someone asked you how you would describe "empowerment," what are some words you would use to define it?
2. What empowers you as an individual?
3. Right now, do you feel you are an effective school leader?
4. What qualities do you believe you have that makes you an effective school leader?
    a. To what extent did that inspire you to transition from a teacher to administrator?
5. When you were a teacher, did you feel like you belonged to a culture of empowerment at your school? Why? Why not?
6. Describe a situation where you were empowered as a teacher.
7. Describe a situation where you were disempowered as a teacher.
8. When you were a teacher, in what ways did you take on leadership roles?
9. When you were a teacher, what motivated you to take on leadership roles?
10. To what extent has COVID-19 impacted your decision to transition from a teacher to a

school administrator?

***Research Question #2 Interview Questions***

What leadership behaviors do educators associate with empowerment?

1. What motivated you to become an administrator?
    a. How has your empowerment been fostered within your K-12 experience and/or outside of your K-12 experience?
2. Who were people who positively impacted your journey in becoming an administrator? What did they say or do that motivated you to transition into this role?
3. When did conversations about transitioning from a teacher to administrator begin? Were there any significant events that led to you considering the transition?
4. How did this person build your trust?
5. When you think about empowering your staff, what are some strategies or ideas that come to mind? How are you intentionally building a culture of empowerment?
6. How do you build trust with your staff to empower them?

***Research Question #3 Interview Questions***

How do these educators narrate their experiences of the cultures of empowerment at their school?

1. What does a culture of empowerment look like specifically at your school?
2. How do you know you are effective in empowering your staff? What do you see or hear?
3. What are your next steps in empowering your staff? Is there anyone or any group in particular you want to focus on?

**Data Analysis**

Theoretical thematic analysis was used in this study, which Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 84) describe as "driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytical interest in the area, and is thus more explicitly analyst-driven. This form of thematic analysis tends to provide less a rich description of the data overall, and a more detailed analysis of some aspect of the data."

Prior to the analysis process, the researcher employed memo writing by reading through copies of the transcripts and bracketed any initial reactions and memos in the margins. This served to help separate bias, but also noted any areas of future inquiry and initial insights. Then data were coded to better understand the themes presented by new administrators.

The initial coding process involved line-by-line coding to help the researcher immerse themselves in the data and discover what concepts the data offered (Glesne, 2016). Data was broken up by line and the "code [served as a] *category* of activity of which the piece coded [was] an example" (Glesne, 2016, p. 197). This coding technique was used to begin the analysis rather than for every individual line of data.

Once the researcher had a grasp on what was being presented in the data, open-coding was employed, in which codes captured content, frequently used words, and comparisons. As suggested by Glesne (2016), a codebook was created where sections of the data were listed alongside the "first coding" attempts. First codes were listed as gerunds to capture the specific action taking place. There were 109 first codes, which were reviewed and combined for commonalities where necessary. The data were reviewed again based on these new codes. These new codes were listed in the codebook as "later coding." These later codes were then grouped to create themes. The main themes that emerged from the data were transitioning to formal leadership, leadership qualities, leadership behaviors, building trust, creating a culture of

empowerment, and cultures of disempowerment. The themes were each tied to one of the research questions asked in the interview protocol. The data was visited once again to determine where each of these themes appeared. During this process, later codes and some first codes were used as subthemes to further explain the themes. Subthemes included informal leadership roles, accessing leadership pathways, being pushed outside your comfort zone, effective leadership qualities, psychological empowerment qualities, leading by example, vision and clarity, being present and visible, transparency and openness, trusting others, building authentic relationships, predictability and consistency, competence, caring, recognizing leadership, coaching, and sharing power. A comparative analysis was performed to find out what participants felt to be *dis*empowering. Those themes included lack of support, centralized power, lack of follow-through, misusing power, fear, seniority, and becoming political.

**Ethical Considerations**

It was a priority and the researcher's responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. All files related to this project were kept on the researcher's password protected computer, in a password protected account. All transcripts were edited to remove names or other identifiable information. Names of individuals and the names of schools were replaced with pseudonyms. In the data analysis and presentation of results, the researcher was careful to not include specific stories reported by the participants. After the study, all electronic files were moved into an encrypted folder on the researcher's private account on their password protected laptop. Paper copies of raw data were locked in a personal filing cabinet and will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

## Researcher Positionality

As of August 2021, the researcher joined 27J Schools as a Dean of Students, which is considered an administrator role in the district. In August 2022, she became the Assistant Principal of one of the middle schools in the school district. The researcher, as a new administrator who has recently transitioned from a teacher role, is in a similar position to the participants. While being so close to this research may present a bias, this bias may provide additional insight. Although the separation of the data and bias was not entirely possible due to the researcher's positionality, the researcher attempted to separate her initial reactions and biases in the analysis of the data as to not project these biases onto the participants' experiences or stories. Although 27J Schools supports this research and is looking for accurate, meaningful feedback, as an employee of the district who is doing research within the district, the researcher may feel pressure to present the district in a positive light.

## Limitations

There were many limitations to this study. Notably, the 27J Schools administrative leadership team has a lack of diversity in regards to race. Additionally, since most recent hires to the administrative teams were White, all but one of the participants in this study identified as White. This study did not sufficiently share the told stories of administrators of color. Additionally, because the researcher was a peer administrator, the participants may not have been fully comfortable in sharing their stories in a more formal manner than how they were used to interacting with the researcher. They may also have been hesitant to share their experiences knowing the other participants in this study were peer administrators who would see their responses.

## Criteria for Judging Quality

Lincoln and Guba (1986) proposed four criteria to support trustworthy research in the interpretive paradigm: dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Their aim was to provide criteria analogous to the criteria of truth in the positivistic paradigm.

### Dependability

Dependability can be compared to reliability in the positivistic approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). To ensure participants were giving their most honest responses, the researcher took steps to ensure they were comfortable in the interview process. Interviews were informal in nature. The interviews were conducted on Zoom, in a room of the participants' choice, so they would feel comfortable in their environment. Participants were reminded of their rights to confidentiality, their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and that, rather than "right" or "wrong" answers, they were free to respond in whatever way they felt was appropriate to answer the question.

### Credibility

According to Lincoln and Guba (1986), credibility can be compared to internal validity. To ensure the information being collected helped to illuminate concepts of empowerment, clarifying questions were frequently asked in the interviews to mitigate risk of the researcher misunderstanding the participants. The researcher also employed member-checking of the data and asked participants for their feedback in the analysis of the data. Participants had the opportunity to further clarify the meaning of things they said in the interview or confirm the interpretation was accurate. The inclusion of negative case analysis in this study was also intentional. The participants were asked specifically about environments that they found disempowering. This served to contrast the positive cases and support the conclusions made in

the data analysis. The most notable limitation in regards to credibility is the fact that participants knew their peer administrators who participated in the study would see their responses.

**Transferability**

Transferability is analogous to external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although the goal of this study was not to be able to make generalizations, the researcher aimed to obtain a meaningful understanding of how empowerment shows up in educators' lives today. To do this, the researcher interviewed people from several different schools. The age levels of the schools were different. The researcher sought to interview people with different backgrounds, ages, and administrative roles. The nature of the data analysis also served to support transferability. A summary sheet of each transcript and the coding process was retained for future use. With the use of a table, the process of how each preliminary code was grouped into themes was documented for clarity and transparency.

**Confirmability**

While confirmability is similar to objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), as the researcher, it is important to note that the researcher is a current administrator in School District 27J. Participants knew that this study was being undertaken to help the researcher learn and grow as a leader, and therefore, participants were willing to share many examples and experiences of leadership. However, participants may have been inclined to omit details of negative experiences if they occurred within the district. Additionally, the researcher has also recently transitioned from a teaching role to an administrative role. While every attempt was made to ensure the data gathering and analysis were "trustworthy" as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), it is also important to recognize that the researcher cannot shed their implicit bias as an administrator who had been empowered to transition into leadership.

## Summary

To gain insight on how teachers perceive acts of transformational leadership and empowerment from others, and how new administrators consequently employ transformational leadership and empowerment strategies, this study relied primarily on interviews as the data collection method. This study was framed in an interpretive lens, and used thematic analysis to make meaning of new administrators' lived experiences and perspectives. The methodological aims were not to make generalizations, but to illuminate what has motivated teachers to take on leadership roles, and to illuminate the strategies new administrators are taking to empower their employees. This study provides a glimpse into what forms of leadership teachers value, how they interact, and how they lead when given the opportunity.

# CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

For this study, five participants who have recently transitioned from a teaching role to a school administrator role in 27J schools were selected. Each participant was interviewed for 30 to 60 minutes. The purpose of the interviews were to uncover the participants' responses to the following questions: “What does teacher empowerment mean to experienced teachers who have recently transitioned into school administration?”, “What leadership behaviors do educators associate with empowerment?”, and “How do these educators narrate their experiences of the cultures of empowerment at their school?” This chapter shares quotes from the participants’ responses to these questions.

**Question 1: What does teacher empowerment mean to experienced teachers who have recently transitioned into school administration?**

The first question of the study aimed to understand what empowerment meant to the participants. Participants were asked to describe what empowerment meant to them, what they feel empowers them, situations where they were empowered, what leadership roles they took on as a teacher, and were asked several other probing questions described in the methodology. One theme emerged in the interviews that answered this question: transitioning to formal leadership. Participants shared stories of what brought them into formal leadership positions, including the informal leadership roles they filled before transitioning to be an administrator. They shared the pathways they took to become an administrator and how that was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant referred to how he was assigned a leadership role as his segue into school leadership. However, every participant noted that filling a leadership role of any kind involved taking risks and being pushed outside their comfort zone. These responses will be

elaborated upon in the next section.

This question also lends itself to address the question "What qualities do you believe you have that makes you an effective school leader?" Participants shared the qualities that made them effective. The themes that emerged from their responses are being proactive, being assertive, collaborating, listening, being flexible, and having integrity. While they felt these are the qualities that help them in their leadership roles, they also described qualities that helped them "take a risk" and transition into a school administration position. This informed the theme "self-efficacy." The participants described how they had a belief in themselves. They were passionate about their work. They continuously desired growth and improvement. They wanted to widen their impact. They had a network of peers, family, and mentors who supported and encouraged them as they considered the new role. These became themes that will be elaborated upon in the following section.

**Transitioning to Formal Leadership**

All participants shared that before becoming a school administrator, they filled a leadership role in a non-school related organization, belonged to committees at their school, or filled a teacher-leader role in some capacity. Although many participants felt they knew they always wanted to be a leader, they took risks by pursuing opportunities that became available to them, allowing them to transition into school administration. They also expressed how the COVID-19 pandemic allowed them the opportunities they needed to practice leadership or complete an administrative license program. All participants described how transitioning from a teacher role to an administrative role was a risk they needed to take. One participant shared that he was assigned a leadership role that he normally would not have sought out. Other participants shared similar sentiments. This next section provides quotes from participant interviews that

informed these themes and subthemes.

***Informal Leadership Roles***

Participants shared how their decision to transition to school administration was influenced by the informal leadership roles they had throughout their lives, whether that was on a sports team as an adolescent, or the informal roles they took on as professionals in schools. Daniel shared his experiences playing team sports growing up. He attributed many of his values as a leader to the values he gained from playing sports as part of a team:

> "I guess the only thing I can say is that I was… I did a lot of sports, a lot of team activity, a lot of team sports. And just being a part of the team taught you those values Even from a young age."

Alaina shared similar sentiments:

> "I've always kind of craved that leadership role, like team captains from middle school and high school, student council all throughout my elementary, middle school, and high school, but never through college, or my early years of teaching necessarily did I think I want to be an administrator. That rose from truly being empowered by my leaders I guess. That was never the end goal. I like leadership, but I never thought I would be into leadership at a school level."

However, she then had an opportunity to start a student leadership team at her school:

> "And then last year, I started the Student Leadership Team on our pod. So it was a pod-based student leadership team. And that definitely helped translate my individual leadership, but I also tried to empower students to take on their own leadership. And that was a different lens that I haven't had before, to talk to them about leadership roles, talk to them about ways they can impact their communities, kind of communicating the

leadership at that point."

According to the participants, having opportunities to lead others in a school setting is what allowed them to envision themselves in a school administrator position. Some participants shared how belonging to a school committee impacted their transition to formal school leadership. Some participants also shared that having even more informal opportunities to lead other teachers is what shaped their leadership journey.

**Belonging to Committees.** Each participant shared their transition to formal leadership in a school setting involved belonging to a school committee. Stanley, in an exaggeration, shared he was part of "thousands of committees":

> "I was a department head, I was on several committees, I helped write common assessments for the district. I was an instructional coach. I was Dean. I was a mentor for other teachers. I was on the… again, committee. There's 1000s of committees [I was on]."

Daniel shared similar experiences:

> "Yeah, I did quite a few committees. I feel like a lot of committee stuff. I did SAC [Student Advisory Committee], PBIS [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports], I was on leadership team. I helped just with different outside the classroom."

Valerie was on several committees as well:

> "I was on a lot of committees. I was my grade level rep. And so I was on CAT [Collaborative Advisory Team]. I was on our PST Committee, which is now our MTSS [Multi-Tiered System of Supports], which now I'm in charge of. So I go, "oh perfect" because I know what we're doing here. Yeah, I think just having that empowerment for [it]. There was a time when I was EL [English Language] leader for a while. "

Alaina also related to being on committees:

> “My principal and assistant principal nominated me to be on the, essentially "Cultures of Care" Committee. And this - I was around all veteran teachers, it was my first year teaching, I got nominated to be on there after the first month. And that really gave me a sense of voice, I felt included, I felt like I was a part of a committee that really had an impact. So once I felt a part of the school, I really just kind of dove headfirst in to see where I could help, when I could help, what we could do um... and whenever - and that really carried over to my the school I'm currently at - that any type of opportunity that led to leadership or led to me being more involved, I took that because I, I felt the same sense of belonging that I did at that previous school.”

Each of these participants shared how being on a committee was impactful to their transition to being a school leader.

**Teacher-leadership.** Alaina was the first to bring up how she had been a leader to other less experienced teachers. Alaina shared an experience from when she was a teacher-leader:

> “I loved teaching, I loved doing all of that, but also I would put myself out there if teachers were struggling with this [something]. [I’d say,] “Come to my class and I can model this, the redirect system, for you” or I was the leader of the data [for] the social studies data team, and I just loved leading adults and helping solve problems.”

These were not formal leadership roles. Alaina helped lead other teachers in a less formal way prior to transitioning to formal leadership.

Kelly agreed that having informal leadership roles helped empower her:

> “I've been in mentorship roles, I've been in team lead roles, I've been in classroom settings where I manage a team of paraprofessionals for several years.”

She explained her experience in these roles allowed her to hone her managerial leadership skills before transitioning into a more formal school leadership role. Having informal leadership roles such as serving as a teacher-leader or serving on committees was a common theme in all participants' interviews. These opportunities have allowed participants to see themselves in leadership positions and shaped their decisions to transition to formal leadership.

### *Accessing Leadership Pathways*

Participants shared that access to time and opportunities to learn to leave was crucial to their transitions into formal leadership. Alaina explained a problem she is currently facing in her school. There is a mentorship program for veteran teachers to mentor new teachers, but it faces a problem:

"The essence of that is time. What time do they get together? Where's the time? How do you create the time? And so just looking at what do we have and what can we do with that time?"

This statement details a common problem for the participants, where they want or wanted to have opportunities to lead, but simply lacked the time. Valerie explained that she had to stop participating in committees once she had children

"And then I had kids and I was like, I can't do too many things anymore."

However, when the participants were asked how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their leadership journey, many of the participants shared that it gave them the time and opportunities to lead.

**COVID-19 Pandemic-Related Opportunities.** The COVID-19 pandemic reduced the number of students that could be inside school buildings at a single time. In 27J Schools, students were "cohorted": half the class would come to school two days a week, and the other

half the class would come to school the other two days a week. Teachers had approximately fifteen students in their classrooms at a single time. Participants shared that having smaller class sizes and navigating the unprecedented situation of COVID-19 allowed them the chance to take on leadership and allowed them time to pursue leadership interests.

Alaina explained it this way:

> "My extent with COVID-19 and the impact on my decision to leave the classroom actually helped it. I would say it gave me the time to think about being a leader, [it] really gave me the time to sit back and think about what being a leader [...] truly looks like. Like I said, we had 18 kids, max, in our class. Kids didn't come for electives. So it really just gave me time. That's the year I started my masters. So it really gave me a lot of time to reflect but also [...] I saw the need for more than just administration being a leader. So I knew teacher leadership was super important at that time. Um, just kind of really being able to step back -step back and look at that."

Alaina shared how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the systems that were previously in place at her school:

> "[The COVID-19 pandemic] opened up so much of availability to us, when we only had… I mean, the max amount of students we could have in a classroom was 18. And what you could do with block learning and what you could do with breaks, or what you could do with that, or whatever, it really helped open my mind to more leadership roles. And that's actually when I started my Master's of Educational Leadership, because I felt so empowered, like I had the time, the space, the ideas to bring to that [principal] and think about- "okay, instead of this, can we do this, or I have a block of an hour, two hours and 20 minutes, what can we do? And what does that look like?" So that was definitely

that whole year in itself was just such a good opportunity to try and just like, if you fall, that's fine. You tried it with a different group the next day."

Daniel shared a similar sentiment. The COVID-19 pandemic did not negatively impact his decision to transition into school leadership and allowed him time to complete his Master's degree. The shift from in-person learning to virtual learning in his post-secondary education meant he did not have to travel to go to class. While Kelly always knew she wanted to be in school leadership, the COVID-19 pandemic influenced people in school administration to leave education or move schools. That meant an administration opportunity became available at her school, which she applied to and was selected for. Neither Valerie nor Stanley felt the COVID-19 pandemic swayed their journey of becoming a school administrator. The three participants the COVID-19 pandemic impacted received opportunities to demonstrate their leadership and time to complete formal leadership training.

### *Being Pushed Outside One's Comfort Zone*

Daniel was the only participant to share that he was assigned a leadership role. This example leads into the next subtheme: taking risks. Daniel shared that his school leaders approached him and put him in charge of the school PBIS (Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems) committee:

"Well I was forced into one of them, and then stayed doing it, but it helped, it was like… It pushed me, it was pushing me out of my comfort."

Although he did not seek out this leadership position, Daniel expressed that he was pushed outside his comfort zone by fulfilling the expectations of the leadership position. Taking on a leadership position seemed outside the comfort zones of each participant at first. They each felt they were taking a risk stepping into that role. They share their feelings around this theme

below.

**Taking Risks.** Alaina was first to share how she felt she was stepping outside of her comfort zone when applying to her first school administrator role:

"Honestly, if this position wouldn't have been open, I don't think I would have really liked taking the leap of that."

She knew she wanted to get into leadership, but debated with herself if she was ready to lead the classroom or become a school administrator. She often had not seen someone her age become a school administrator:

"In my classes, and the teachers, and the administrators I've had before …they weren't my age."

However, she reflected that she did have one administrator that transitioned into leadership as a young female, so when the opportunity arose and the Dean of Students position opened at her school, she "took the risk." She shared:

> "And just taking that risk, because you don't know or you don't see what you don't put yourself out there to see. So I think really just taking that risk. I mean, everyone takes a risk leaving the classroom and going to administration. That's a huge, huge leap."

The other administrators also shared they associated filling a formal school administration role with "taking a risk."

Daniel explained he knew he always wanted to be a school administrator, but then he got an email from a local university about a school administration licensure program:

"And then all of a sudden, I get this email, and it was on my mind. So I applied to DU. And then basically, it took off."

Similar to Alaina's story, an opportunity arose and Daniel took a risk. Likewise, Valerie

took a risk when a position opened at her school. She explained that she had never really thought about becoming an administrator:

> "I had never really thought about being an administrator and [to] be honest. I always thought like… I had been teaching for a while. I mean, I taught for 15 years, I always thought I would move into an instructional coach position. But then the opportunity arised when [Assistant Principal], she was actually our AP at south. So she moved into the principal position. She had two other APs before me, but when we went to hire the second one. It just kind of hit me. I was like, "I think I could do that. I should just do it. I'll just do the program, see what happens? Maybe, maybe I'll fail." And so I kind of just just did it."

In all three cases above, none of the participants sought out leadership positions. Both Alaina and Valerie expressed fears of leaving the classroom. However, once a leadership position opened at their school, all three participants took a risk and applied. This element of being pushed outside their comfort zone emerged in the data when participants were asked to share a situation when they felt empowered. This touches upon the questions, "What qualities do you believe you have that makes you an effective school leader?" and "To what extent did that inspire you to transition from a teacher to administrator?" The next section delves further into this question and specifically addresses the leadership qualities the participants mentioned.

**Leadership Qualities**

When asked what qualities the participants feel they have that make them effective school leaders, participants mentioned several qualities. However, a handful of qualities appeared as themes across all the participants' interviews. Kelly answered that question by listing "delegation [...] Choice...decision-making. Competence. Trust. Ownership." Stanley listed "communication

reflection, collaboration, transparency." While these words or phrases provided a starting point into the data, the themes that appeared across all interviews to be discussed are being proactive, being assertive, collaborating, listening, being flexible, and having integrity. When probed to consider the qualities they felt they had that inspired them to transition into a leadership role, participants shared further detail. The qualities that informed the themes and impacted their transition into leadership are self-efficacy, being passionate, desiring growth, and making an impact.

### *Effective Leadership Qualities*

Participants felt the following qualities made them effective school leaders: being proactive, being assertive, collaborating, listening, being flexible, and having integrity. Each quality is explained below.

**Proactive.** Each participant expressed that a reactive leader is undesirable. They explained they value proactive leaders and shared their intentions to try to be proactive leaders. Alaina critiqued herself when asked to what extent she feels she is an effective school leader:

"I would say that I'm doing the best I can, I think that one thing I can do is rather than be reactive, be more proactive." She added that being proactive leads to clarity (which will be discussed in a later section):

"Where I think with empowerment, there's such a deal of planning. [You] have to put out clarity in order for teachers to feel empowered to get to that end point."

**Assertive.** Being assertive appeared often in the data. Alaina shared how assertiveness is important to her leadership. Likewise, Kelly expressed her feeling that she is an effective leader because her assertiveness allows her to step into positions no one else is willing to step into

"I just naturally find myself in a place of wanting to lead a team. And if, [...] there's no

one else to step into that role, I will assert myself to take control and just make sure that things happen." Here Kelly associates assertiveness with taking the necessary control to lead a team to success.

Stanley, however, framed his perspective of what would make someone an *ineffective* leader: "If you're not able to deal with conflict and be assertive when necessary, you're gonna have a hard time."

**Collaborative.** Both male participants shared how being part of a team and being able to collaborate with others has made them an effective school leader. Daniel described collaborative leadership as "helping guide conversations and working together as a team, [and] being [part of] that team". He also shared he sees that quality in his staff:

"Like they're really good teammates. So like they work well, in our team, they try to help their team be better. [...] They don't have their own agenda. I feel like it's more of a team mindset as a school."

Collaboration is clearly an important quality for Daniel. Stanley agreed about the importance of working on a team:

> "But then when I came here, I was part of the biology team, which was a fantastic team. There was no ego, which is rare. And we just worked well together. And they wanted a lot of things to be uniform, which you can take here or there. But we managed to make it work. And the biggest part was we were very collaborative. We worked well together, and we just made it happen."

When Stanley transitioned into leadership, he explained that team mentality stuck with him. He explained that the administration team he is currently on "works very well together.":

"I work here with a really strong admin team, without a doubt everyone's got their

> strengths as a whole. We're all very flexible.[...] No one is trying to run over someone else."

The participants believe an effective leader can not only lead a team, but also be part of a team.

**Listening.** Each participant shared how they try to be an active listener for their staff. Stanley stated it most directly

> "The inactive listener when there's an issue, whether it's with a parent or a student…a teacher. Let them get out everything they need to and then see if they're open to dialogue."

Here he stressed how important active listening is and how much it plays a role, especially when a leader needs to engage in meaningful conversation. He explained a leader must understand the other person's perspective before responding.

**Flexible.** Alaina, Daniel, and Stanley all emphasized the importance of being flexible. They explained how the approach to meeting a goal can and should be flexible. Again, Stanley most directly addressed this:

> "But how you get there needs to be as flexible. As you know, like sand or water. Hey, Allie, you have a different way of doing things than me, you got a different personality, you've got a different background. If we can get to the same end result, why does it have to be the same as long as the objective is met?"

**Having Integrity.** The participants all mentioned or explained that having integrity was important to them. They all shared examples of when they had to make a difficult decision or have a difficult conversation in their jobs. As Stanley explained, "[Courage] can be physical, but honestly, [...] courage is mostly mental as far as being able to speak up when you see something's wrong, having the intestinal fortitude to have those difficult conversations with staff and others."

He went on to discuss that this is *integrity*. These are the qualities the participants bring

with them into their leadership roles they feel make them effective. However, they also had several qualities that helped them "take a risk" and transition from teaching into school administration.

### *Psychological Empowerment Qualities*

As previously presented, all the participants felt they were in some way "taking a risk" or "pushing outside their comfort zone" when transitioning into school leadership. The sections below explain the qualities that they felt they had that helped them take that risk. The qualities are self-efficacy, being passionate, desiring growth, wanting to make an impact, and having a support system.

**Self-efficacy.** Each of these participants attributed their transition partially to the belief they had in themselves. Valerie shared her story about how the Assistant Principal position opened at her school. However, prior to her applying for her position, the position was filled by someone, to which she sat on the interview committee for. She recounted her experience: "[When] I was in her interview committee, I'm listening to these interviews, and I'm like, damn, I could do this. You know, like, I should do this. I should try this. Why have I not done this?" Her belief in her capabilities as a leader is partially what led her to apply when the position later became available.

Daniel shares a story of listening to his teammates comment about how the school could be improved:

"We worked well together. And they were like, 'man [...] I wish our school could be more collaborative' or 'I wish…' Things like that. And I was like, 'One day. Yeah, I can help make that happen.'"

Daniel had previously shared he always *wanted* to be in school leadership, and it was in

these conversations that he realized he believed he could do it. Stanley expressed belief in himself more directly, saying “I saw others do it and I was like, I know I can do better.” He elaborated:

> “With what I do now, are there a lot of people that could do and as well as I can? No. And maybe that's egotistical, but it's like if someone comes up [and] goes, ‘Wow, do you think there's others that can do this?’ Oh, yeah. Or there's others that can do it as well as I can. A handful. But a big part of that is the passion, the work ethic, the reflection, the common sense to know I'm not always right, but when I am right, I know we're making a decision and to follow through with it. And that's, I think, more and more rare.”

His story reveals that Stanley both believes in his capability to succeed and has a deep passion for the work he does. That passion drives his work ethic and the reflection he puts into his work. This leads into the next section: being passionate.

**Passionate.** Every participant shared how a large part of the reason they were successful in transitioning from a teacher position to an administrator position is because they were passionate about the work they do. As Kelly put it, “I'm passionate about supporting kids, and so the conversations for supporting kids feels easy, especially in my role as Dean, because that's really my main purpose [...] so it's easy to lean into that.”

Stanley, when asked why he transitioned from a teacher to an administrator, shared the following:,

> “The reason I did it was I wanted to make a difference. I have a passion for this. And it's what I want out of life.”

He went as far as explaining that in his experience, administrators who take on the role without passion have not been successful. He felt people who do that do it for the “wrong

reasons" and emphasized that having a passion for this work is critical to being successful.

**Desiring Growth.** Each participant shared they had a deep desire to see change or growth which drove them to take the risk in transitioning to a leadership role. Valerie desired professional growth. She wanted to learn as much as she could:

> "I just wanted to know as much as I could, so that I could grow professionally, but also to help me be a better teacher."

She took every learning opportunity available to become "good" at teaching including learning about teaching English Language (EL) and reading instruction. She said she had such a desire to learn that anytime there was an opportunity, her leaders and peers knew she would take it.

Stanley shared a similar desire to learn and grow in his early career, which is what inspired him to get into school leadership. As a new teacher, he felt he was getting the feedback he desired and needed to grow as a professional:

> And then, honestly, my last three years, I don't even think I got an evaluation. And it was frustrating, because I wanted to continuously improve. And I was doing that on my own. But when told by an administrator, yeah, we're not worried about you at all. You're doing great. That's fine and dandy. But where's that attention?

Stanley shared the *lack* of attention he was receiving was what inspired him. He decided to learn on his own, which is what sparked his pathway into school administration. Now, as a leader, he aspires to ensure his staff receive quality feedback from him and he strives to grow their weaknesses:

> "If you attack those areas that you're not as strong or you're not as comfortable in, that reflection and that growth is important. And as a leader, I'm helping to empower people that

way”.

**Making an Impact.** All participants took the risk to transition into leadership because they wanted to make an impact. Alaina explained how impact empowers her:

“[Just] feeling like I'm making a difference. That's definitely what keeps me an education is feeling like you've done something or feeling like you've made a good, kind of an impact on someone, specifically students.”

When asked what motivated him to take on leadership roles as a teacher, Daniel explained “After becoming a teacher, it was just like… pretty clear. I wanted to do more. And so there's not ways to move up in the teaching world [e]xcept for [...] transitioning over to administration. [...] I wanted to have [...] a bigger footprint.” Daniel elaborated when asked:

> I think for me, it was, as a teacher, you're getting that role for the kids and for the students. So I felt like I was doing a really good job towards the end, being comfortable in that spot with the students in my classroom, and I affected my 25 to 30 kids every year. And honestly, I wanted to do more. I wanted to impact an entire school. Maybe one day even further, but [...] I wanted my values and my beliefs to not just be inside the classroom. I wanted to share that and hope that it can transfer to adults.

The participants wanted to become administrators to expand their impact from their classroom to an entire school building. Kelly shared these beliefs:,

> I was motivated to become an administrator, partially because the opportunity was available, and the opportunity to make a wider impact. Impacting the small group of kids in my classroom was awesome, but the opportunity to impact social-emotional and behavior change at a building level, and just impact those systems was pretty motivating for me.

When speaking of empowering others, Stanley recognized he wanted his mentees to increase their impact:

> "Their skills are unbelievable. [L]et's not only utilize that for our school in our district, but let's make sure that they're empowered to be able to have the biggest impact that they can have."

**Support System.** The presence of a support system was a prominent theme in all the participants' interviews. Their support systems influenced their decision to "take the risk" required to leave their teaching roles and become a school administrator. The support systems consisted of peers, family, mentors, and school leaders. A few participants mentioned a specific mentor that influenced their leadership journey.

***Peers.*** Each participant shared they were positively influenced by the encouragement of their colleagues when they were in a teaching position. Alaina explained how her peers influenced her leadership journey:

> I would say conversations definitely with one of my trusted friends who was a teacher with me last year [when I was looking] potentially for an opportunity and just conversations with like my trusted group about if something opens at this place, should I should I go for it?

As previously described, Daniel explained that he would hear peers on his team talk about ways the school could improve and get encouragement from them. Daniel elaborated on how they impacted his journey:

"I would say my teammates, here's a few specific ones that I had for like five years, [...] they just -they would push me." He explained, due to the encouragement he received from peers at work, he took the necessary leap to put himself in a position where he could create change.

Kelly shared that she felt she had a lot of support from her building team when she was considering the transition into administration. She received support from her counselors, the school psychologist, and teachers. She appreciated "that encouragement and [them] checking in to be like, 'hey, [...] I think you'd be a great fit for this role. Is that something you're interested in?' Although she already had high self-efficacy, she acknowledged that those conversations were encouraging for her. The belief her team had in her helped her see herself in an administrative position.

***Family.*** From knowing the participants, the researcher knew four of the five participants have family or partners in education. Some explained having this influence around them is also what encouraged them to take on a leadership role. Daniel explained the role his family plays in his support system:

> "I was a teacher, my wife's a teacher, my mom's a teacher, a lot of teachers in the family. And I hear all the time, just about their leaders. [...] So my family is definitely one."

Similarly, Stanley responded to this question by saying, "My wife, we're both educators, which goes a long way as far as being able to bounce ideas off each other."

Valerie's support system was her father. She shared a touching story of how he passed away just before she transitioned into school administration:

> And like, just in my heart of hearts, like I knew that that's something my dad would want me to do. Like, I think he would be very supportive and be like, Oh, my God, you should totally do it, you know? Yeah. And I think that's what pushed me to do it. [crying] I'm sorry. Like, honestly, like, I think that's what pushed me to do it more than anything.

These examples show how the theme of family emerged when participants spoke of their support system and how it impacted their psychological empowerment.

***Mentors.*** Three of the participants had a designated mentor that supported their transition into school administration. Valerie shared that her predecessor became her mentor and served as an example for her. Valerie explained how she values her predecessor's ideas: "I'm like, You're so smart! [...] I think she's been an amazing mentor for me, too. And I've kind of grabbed my inspiration from her."

Valerie and her mentor still get to work together and share ideas with one another. Kelly also has a designated mentor who had been a previous supervisor. Likewise, Kelly looks to her work as an example for what she should do:

> "She was a great mentor for [...] leadership and team management, and team culture, which I feel like has been a big part of my role."

However, Kelly also finds mentorship in her colleagues. She acknowledges the school counselors had been "huge mentors just in how to advocate for kids and what supporting kids with all sorts of needs look like at a building level." She sees these mentors as people whose work she tries to emulate.

Stanley tells of his mentor (a previous professor that he met in college). His mentor wanted Stanley to get his Doctorate in Exercise Physiology and become a professor at the college. However, when Stanley told him of his goal to become an educator at the secondary level, his mentor was "shocked that I didn't want to take this full ride and become a professor." But Stanley "looked up and said, 'you've always told me we need good educators at all levels.' And then he was sold on it." Stanley's mentor has "been [his] biggest advocate" in getting into teaching and then school administration.

Each of these participants shared a story of a mentor they have had in a professional setting. They attribute having their mentors as their support system to navigating the risk that

came with their decisions to transition into leadership. All participants felt they took the "risk" because they had high self-efficacy, a desire to grow and learn, were passionate about their work, wanted to grow their impact from the classroom level to a building level, and had a strong support system.

**Conclusion**

The data presented in this section aims to address the question "What does teacher empowerment mean to experienced teachers who have recently transitioned into school administration?" Participants were empowered by informal leadership opportunities such as belonging to committees and serving as a teacher-leader. They were empowered by the opportunities that came with the COVID-19 pandemic, such as more opportunities for leadership and increased time to pursue a leadership degree. They all felt a sense of empowerment when they were pushed out of their comfort zone and took a risk in applying to a leadership position. They acknowledged the qualities they feel make them effective leaders, including being proactive, being assertive, collaborating, listening, being flexible, and having integrity. They felt the qualities of self-efficacy, being passionate, desiring growth, wanting to make an impact, and having a support system are what inspired them to make the leap between teacher and administrator. While this section addressed the qualities the participants felt they had to make them successful leaders, the next section will specifically address leadership behaviors that the participants associate with empowerment.

**Question 2: What leadership behaviors do educators associate with empowerment?**

This next question aimed to uncover what leadership behaviors educators associated with empowerment, so that administrative leaders could take actions accordingly to empower their educators. Participants described ways leaders act, such as leading by example and having a

vision. The largest theme that emerged from this section is that leaders build trust. They do so by being present and visible, being transparent and open, putting trust in others, building authentic relationships, being predictable and consistent and following through, and by being competent. To demonstrate competence, a leader must have expertise. The largest subtheme was being caring. To demonstrate care, a leader must be compassionate, show empathy, understand others' perspectives, and create safety. All these themes and subthemes inform the leadership behaviors educators associate with empowerment.

## Empowering Leadership Behaviors

The following sections address leadership behaviors that educators associate with empowerment. These can include behaviors participants have seen a leader demonstrate which empowered them, or they can be behaviors that the participants try to demonstrate to empower others.

### *Leading by Example*

Participants are empowered by leaders who "lead by example." Stanley made a more generalized statement:"[M]y core values are honor, courage, and commitment. But they're all encompassed by leadership by example."

Alaina tries to work with new teachers by modeling classroom management strategies herself or by pairing new teachers with veteran teachers that can model strategies for them:

> So what I've been doing a lot this year is working with a couple of new teachers and modeling or just going to observe certain students and helping with strategies or pairing a new teacher with a veteran teacher that had a struggling student before, just little things that can help them know that, "hey, I'm here for you, but this is this is on you." So I'll help you with the strategies, I'll help you with the ideas, model, I'll do all of this.

### *Vision and Clarity*

There was an emphasis in the interviews about a school leader needing to have a clear vision. A clear vision behind a given task empowered the participants. The participants then tried to emulate this theme in their own leadership. Alaina expressed the view that clarity was an important element of her leadership:

> "I'd say empowerment from a school-wide lens is a lot based off of staff clarity, teacher clarity, and leadership clarity."

Stanley added to this:

"I feel that if you have a purpose, you have a reason behind what you do and you do want to serve others. I think it makes you the best type of leader."

Daniel also shared a leader having a strong "why" was important. He shared that he had leaders in the past that would ask him his opinion, and even if they did not take his suggestions, they would give their "why": He said, "I feel like the biggest thing -if you're not going their way, well I hope there's a good 'why' or at least a 'why' behind their decision, that at least you can understand where their thought process is."

Alaina, Stanley, and Daniel value leaders who have clarity in their own purpose and ensure their staff have clarity in the reasons behind their decisions as well.

### Building Trust

While leading by example and having a clear vision are clear themes within the data, the largest theme among behaviors participants associated with empowerment was "building trust." When asked, Stanley said, "I think that comes down to leadership and trust [...] building." Participants' answers illuminated ways in which leaders can build trust. This includes being present and visible, being transparent and open, placing trust in others, building authentic

relationships, being predictable and consistent, maintaining confidentiality, demonstrating competence, and caring. Demonstrating competence and caring were the two largest subthemes in this section.

***Being Visibly Present***

When asked what behaviors they demonstrate to build trust, almost every participant said they try to be present and visible for their staff. Alaina's exact response was "I think I'm present. I think a lot of times students and staff see me, so I make myself visible enough for them to trust what I'm doing." Daniel responded similarly: "I feel like 'being present.' I feel like that's a big one." He explained leaders are "not just they're isolated in their room."

Valerie is recognized by her staff for being present and visible:

"I've heard them say, just like, 'wow, [...] when we call you come. Like you're available, [...] you walk us through it.'"

Likewise, Kelly acknowledges the importance of being present not just physically, but also mentally. She says she empowers staff by "just showing up as much as I can. When I'm there, being present and turning off my radio when [...] we're in a meeting as much as I can."

Each of these administrators reported that being physically or mentally present was critical in building trust with their staff.

***Transparency and Openness***

For administrators to build trust, Alaina reported they must be effective and transparent communicators:

> "I think I'm an effective communicator. What I say comes across well, it doesn't come across with any undertones, but it's also direct on what the school needs and what I need."

She explained she never wants her staff to feel unsure about what she means, but she also shared the importance of transparency in building trust. “I think a big trust builder is just being open with them. Honest, with them.”

This idea of openness was also present in Daniel’s interview:

“I feel like I'm pretty open. And I'm pretty transparent with them.” He reiterated this again later by saying, “I feel like transparency is a big one [...] for the staff, so they know why we're making the decisions we're making.”

When reflecting upon how leaders build trust with him, Daniel shared he also had leaders that “would ask[your] opinion, and even if they didn't always go your way, they would be transparent and tell you why.” For Daniel, having a leader with a clear vision and who is transparent about their decisions that support the vision builds trust.

Kelly also strives for transparency with her teachers. As a Dean of Students, Kelly’s job involves removing students with disciplinary concerns from the classroom. However, she prioritized “just being able to circle back and have the conversation with them and check in with them to make sure that the things that transpired feel like it's meaningful for them [...] just looping them in as much as possible.” Like Alaina and Daniel, Kelly strives to ensure her team has all the information possible, contributing to transparency and openness.

***Trusting Others***

The participants acknowledged throughout their interviews that being trusted with responsibilities was empowering for them. Because of this, they recognized that to receive trust, a leader must place trust in others. Alaina explains it best:

“[I]f a leader trusts you, or puts trust in you, [you] feel empowered, I know that's a big thing. Like whenever someone tells me that they trust me to do this, or, ‘hey, I trust that you're

gonna do your job' that empowers me to get to that end result."

Kelly elaborates:

"I feel empowered when there's trust from [...]someone who is like, above me or the team member that I might be working with in another position."

Therefore, participants know one way to empower staff is to trust them. Valerie shared her example of how she tried to empower a staff member by trusting that person with an important task. She observed that people were recognizing that staff member for their work. Therefore, Valeria decided to delegate an important task to this person (managing state testing):

> "I've heard people say, [...] 'I have seen how well this teacher is doing with this.' So I'm like [to that teacher], 'Hey, you should totally take charge of this. I will help you.' [...] So that's where I started going with things. [...] Like, for example, we have two new instructional coaches. And one of them is a CLD coach. [...] And so I said, 'Hey, would you be interested in just like, kind of being our SAC [State Assessment Coordinator] and having to do like the ACCESS [state assessment] stuff?' And she's like, 'Oh…I mean…sure?' I was like, 'No, it'll be fine.' [...] 'I will totally help you. I have everything ready to go, we have slides, [...] we can totally do it together.' And it's been really, really good. [...] I feel like, I'm building that relationship with her. And I hope she knows that. Like, I can trust her with these things. Like I can have that confidence in her."

This example illuminates how Valerie built trust with an individual by showing that she trusted them first. Valerie reflected on this situation:

"I think with empowerment, there is a lot of belief, like just really having the confidence in other people, and being able to trust [...] they are going to be able to do what you ask of them."

### *Building Authentic Relationships*

Participants recognize how being authentic and vulnerable builds trust. Daniel explains how when he was a teacher he would build strong relationships with students. He recognized that even though he didn't consider himself "that good at teaching," the students would listen to him. He tries to transfer this to his leadership:

"It's not that I was good at giving the information [to my students], but they listened to that information. So yeah, I want to transfer that to a building."

Valerie explains how she tried to build trust by building authentic relationships with staff. She would check in with as many staff members in the morning as possible or ask about their weekend. She asks about their kids and they ask about hers. As Valerie put it, "I try to just like, keep those, those natural conversations that I would have, if I were still a teacher with them, you know?"

### *Predictability and Consistency*

Another theme that emerged in the data that illuminates how to build trust to empower staff is being predictable and consistent. Kelly builds trust "through predictability and results." She elaborated on what makes her successful in working with her team:

"most of those people expect predictability and results in the same way that I do. And so [...] if something was asked of us we would show up and predictably produce whatever it was that was asked of us."

This lends itself somewhat to the theme of being competent, presented in the next section. When asked how he builds trust, Stanley shared he strives for predictability and consistency in his actions and by creating consistent systems that can outlast their personnel:

So what happens with that is, let's say I leave, and I've got two others already doing this,

> and we bring a new AP on, well, then they can train that AP up and say, "Hey, this is the way we do it. This is our system, this is how it looks." If one of the Deans leaves me and the other Dean helped train that person up, then the system never falls apart. And it's not just a system on paper, it's fluid, you can see how it works. And then it's something that lasts.

He explained how he is trying to select and train his potential successors now, so that if a member of his team leaves, their systems remain consistent:

"I think the way to be successful in anything is consistency. [...] But if you're changing constantly, you're not seeing any gains. And then when you try to compare data, you're comparing apples and oranges."

Stanley stresses the importance of being a consistent leader, and for him, part of being a consistent leader is creating systems that can remain consistent.

**Following Through.** Follow-through was important for the participants to believe their leaders were competent or to convince their followers they were competent leaders. Alaina elaborated:

> For example, if there's an issue with the students, and I say there's going to be a consequence then I follow through with that consequence; or if I say I'm going to be at this meeting, I'm going to be at this meeting. Just the small things build big trust.

When asking Daniel how he builds trust he said, "doing what I'm saying I'm gonna do, doing it efficiently, asking for help if I need to." Both participants here emphasized the importance of following through to build trust with their staff.

***Competence***

Participants broadly agreed on the importance of demonstrating competence to build trust

with staff. For Kelly, this was an area of growth:

"just that competence piece as a leader in the building, [I am] still working through what that looks like and feels like."

However, as part of being competent, the participants shared that a leader should have expertise. The participants shared that having expertise comes from having experience. When reflecting on how competence is an area of growth for her, Kelly shared, "I think that I have experience." She reflected upon her experiences that made her believe she had expertise:

> "Our principal did a really good job of letting me be the expert in our area, I was the teacher in our Learning Center. And so it was a very particular role and responsibility. And there's just like a lot of things that came along with that. And so she did a really nice job of you know, letting me lead when I needed to."

Kelly followed up by sharing that her principal did not tell her what to do, but was there to support her when she had questions.

***Caring***

Participants expressed that to build trust with their followers, they must show them they care. Valerie prioritizes this:

> "I'm gonna sound redundant, but I really do feel like just caring about people [...] Just like being able to relate and trying just to [...] reach as many people as possible is important to me."

Overall, "care" is a large theme. Participants gave examples of how care can be shown between a leader and their followers.

**Compassion.** Alaina and Daniel both mentioned compassion. Alaina said, "I feel like I am assertive, but with a compassionate lens." Daniel elaborated:

“There's a difference between just being assertive and telling people what to do, rather than really understanding where they're at right now. Like kind of compassion and empathy all wrapped in one.”.

**Empathy.** Alaina explains in detail how showing empathy comes up in education:

> “In education, like everyone's going through this weird struggle and time in their lives at the same time. No teacher is having a perfect day. No administrator’s having a perfect day. So it's like this common understanding of like, we know what we're going through because we've had tough days together. Like everyone knows that the week before break, or the day after a full moon or anything crazy, it's that eye contact. You're like, ‘I got it, I got you if you need help. I got you.’ Or just the small things that teachers do for each other is like, ‘Hey, I'm gonna go to the restroom, can you check on my classroom?’ ‘Hey, I'm gonna do this.’ It's like, colleague, teacher, colleague, relationships are different than friends that you have outside of the school. It's like this similar educational grind that you go through.”

Alaina elaborates how in education, people share similar struggles, so showing empathy is vital to building trust and showing care. She gave examples of ways people show empathy in education, such as covering a colleague’s class so they can use the restroom, or just offering help where needed.

**Understanding Others' Perspectives.** Stanley explains that to build trust and care, one must understand the perspectives of the individuals on their team. He explains that as a leader, you don’t always have to take their suggestion, but they need to know that you understood them. Stanley recognizes this:

> “I know people get upset with me sometimes when they go, ‘I think it should have gone

this way' or 'I think we should do this one.' [I say,] 'Okay, I hear you [...] but I don't see it your way. And I respect and hear where you're coming from. But that's not what we're going to do.' And sometimes people get aggravated with that.

While he recognizes people sometimes get aggravated when they don't get their way, Stanley went on to explain he prioritizes making it obvious to his staff that he truly heard them and understood their perspective.

To go along with this theme, Valerie shared a story of how she asked "specials" teachers their preference of when the first fire drill of the year would be conducted:

> "And then I also just try to [...] give them that voice, take them into consideration. [F]or example, the specials teachers, I remember, the first fire drill we did [...]. I always tell them "This will be the first one so be ready, get your kids ready, have the conversation with thim, blah, blah, blah." And so I went to the specials teachers. I was like, "Hey, I was planning on having it at this time. Would that work? Is that a crazy grade level for you to handle?" I wouldn't do it the first day of kindergarten because that's mean. And they were like, "Really? You're asking us? You would want to know what we think?" And I'm like, "Yeah, I was wondering." And so I think like I said, those little things where you help them feel the love, help them feel like they, you know, they are heard."

Specials teachers see each elementary class once per week at Valerie's school. Since it was the first drill of the year, and the Specials teachers work under unique circumstances, Valerie wanted their opinion on which grade level would be easiest for them. She wanted the elective teachers to know she valued them enough to want to hear their perspective.

**Creating Safety.** Each participant spoke of creating safety in some way to help show their staff they care for them, such as making it acceptable to take risks. Alaina knows she has

built trust with her staff when she "see[s] staff talking to each other about taking risks. You see in classrooms, them doing something that they normally wouldn't do, knowing that if it fails, it's okay."

Another way the participants create safety is by making it acceptable to be vulnerable. Daniel shares he wants to be a safe place for his staff to come and talk:

> "They know what they're gonna get from me. I'm effective because I'm [a] safe place they can go to. They don't really get different versions of me. They get calm, cool, collected… So having a safe place for them to come so they can push themselves."

Valerie echoed this in her response:

> [She knows she has built trust when] "people are starting to get to the point where they feel like they can communicate. I try as hard as I can just to let them know, if you need something, just ask, just come and talk to me."

Valerie creates a safe space by being approachable and letting her teachers know they do not need to fear a negative reaction from her. Similarly, Kelly creates safety by maintaining confidentiality when teachers speak to her about something:

> "If they do share something with me, or [...] use me as a safe space, [I keep] those conversations in that moment, and [don't go] sharing things that were said [...] to the rest of the school."

She strives to create a safe space by "honoring that dignity and privacy." In these examples, participants refer to safety in a social-emotional sense. They want teachers to know they can speak to them freely and voice concerns without fear of retaliation. However, participants also strive to create safety in a physical sense. Kelly shares how they often would check on one another in her previous role, especially in times of crisis, to ensure their teammates

were safe:

> "And even in times of need, in times of crisis, [...] we were always able to show up for each other. I think that was one of the biggest ways, especially in my previous role that trust was built. Just because we do support students who are engaging in some pretty significant challenging behaviors, and safety can be a concern. And so when you can see that someone will show up and make sure that you're safe, that makes sure that you're okay, that trust is really quick to build."

Kelly's school also gives teachers the opportunity to take breaks as needed. If a teacher calls for support or if they need a break, they know an administrator will show up to relieve them for a few minutes:

> "We give teachers kind of the opportunity to say, 'I need a break from the student.' [...] They have this way to ask with no questions."

These are just a few ways the participants shared they build trust through creating safety within their school.

**Conclusion**

This section addresses the second research question: "What leadership behaviors do educators associate with empowerment?" Participants expressed they find it empowering when a leader leads by example. Their leader should model a strategy and demonstrate a "do as I do" approach. Participants associate empowerment with a leader having a vision and clarity. When a leader makes a decision, participants appreciate when they can justify their decision through their vision and explain the reasoning behind that decision to their followers. Building trust is a leadership behavior associated with empowerment. Leaders can build trust by being mentally and physically present, being transparent and open with information, placing trust in others,

building authentic relationships, being predictable and consistent, demonstrating competence, and caring. The data shows having expertise and following through on what a leader says they are going to do builds competence. A leader can show they care by being compassionate, showing empathy, understanding others' perspectives, and creating both physical and emotional safety. The next section will address the third research question: themes related to creating cultures of empowerment.

**Question 3: How do these educators narrate their experiences of the cultures of empowerment at their school?**

The final overarching research question aimed to understand how the participants narrate their experiences of cultures of empowerment at their schools. The goal was to reveal what cultures of empowerment look like at their schools, how the participants determine that they are effective in empowering their staff, and what their next steps in empowerment are. The following section addresses these questions through the data shared by participants.

**Creating a Culture of Empowerment**

Participants shared that a large part of the culture of empowerment at their schools is recognizing leadership, strengths, and potential. Some schools do this more formally with a recognition system, while in others, it is part of the culture to informally recognize what others are doing well. One participant addressed the need for appropriate financial compensation as a form of recognition. Participants also described staff coaching, another facet of cultures of empowerment. This includes giving and receiving feedback and providing mentorship. Participants shared examples of how power is shared in cultures of empowerment through managed autonomy, making shared decisions, and providing staff with resources and opportunities to improve or work autonomously.

### *Recognizing Leadership, Strengths, and Potential*

Recognition in some form proved to be a critical theme within the data. Participants explained that receiving recognition for their work from their leaders or peers is empowering. When discussing cultures of empowerment, Alaina said, “I've had really good leaders in the past that have told me explicitly that they've seen some similar leadership skills.” In the following example, Alaina explains how that recognition had a domino effect. Once her principal started recognizing her leadership skills, her peers started explicitly recognizing them as well:

> “I would say my first principal, at my first school, [was] very explicit like, "[Alaina], we see you as a leader. You've been here for a month. Would you mind being on Cultures of Care?" And then once I get onto that one committee, then I'm being recognized by my peers as "you're doing a great job, holy cow, can you take on this with me?" ”

Gaining recognition from both her leaders and her peers for her leadership qualities was empowering for Alaina.. Similarly, Valerie shared how her peers at work would recognize her for her leadership skills, which would lead her to taking on more responsibilities:

> I have a lot of people who [...] would always just say, ‘Oh, I think you would be so good at this’ [Or] ‘you're really good with this. I think you could do this really well.’ But I think just even with my colleagues, like I said, even with my teacher friends, [...] they would tell me, ‘Oh, my God, you should totally do this.’

This form of informal recognition is woven throughout the stories of the participants. Often peers or leaders would recognize where a colleague excels and encourage them to pursue that strength. Stanley presented an example of this as well. He told about a staff member at his school who serves as the attendance liaison. This staff member demonstrated his competence in helping with discipline. The typical pathway to become a Dean of Students involves, at minimum, holding a

bachelor's degree. Stanley encouraged this individual to get his degree so that he could have a chance at becoming a Dean.

Recognition also takes the form of formal recognition. Valerie described "the first time [she] felt "super empowered". She received an award in 27J Schools for being a Hispanic leader. The reason she felt super empowered was "because you get nominated by your colleagues." She said, "So the fact that I was nominated, and then actually got the award, I was like, 'wow, people believe in me, people think that I can do more."

Some schools, such as Valerie's, have systems that allow colleagues to recognize each other. While this is not a formal nomination, it is a formal system that invites informal recognition:

"We do note cards where we write notes to staff, like 'hey, you did great' or like 'thank you for letting me in your classroom.' [J]ust little things like that. And then [we] put them in their boxes." Similar to student PBIS systems, Valerie's school also does staff pride tickets. "[J]ust as we have student pride tickets, where they win prizes, we have staff pride tickets."

Both Valerie's school and Alaina's school do staff shoutouts. Valerie explains this system:

> "And then we also do what we call staff shoutouts. So I just send out an email saying, 'Hey, do you have any staff shoutouts?' you'd like to send out to, you know, staff. And people are really good about responding just like, 'hey, thanks to Mr. [name], [...] for touching base with the student this week.' Or 'thanks for the treats in the lounge.' You know, like little things like that. So I think that's how we kind of tried to just help build [...] climate and culture."

The data gave several examples of ways schools build cultures of empowerment through recognition. Informal recognition seems commonplace for many schools, where staff simply

recognize the strengths in others and encourage each other. Recognition can also be more formal, requiring a nomination. Many schools have systems built into their culture so staff may recognize one another. Another important form of recognition is under the district's control: financial compensation.

**Financial Compensation.** Daniel shares that a large reason he moved into school administration was due to financial reasons. Between he and his wife being teachers, and having a new child, their financial situation was "tight:"

> "Another [reason] was definitely financial reasons. Like, it's hard to live with -my wife's a teacher. It been a tough, five to eight years of financial stuff, so getting into admin pays little, and having a new kid... it takes some pressure off."

Administrators tend to get paid more than teachers, which was a significant motivating factor for Daniel to make the transition into leadership.

However, Stanley shares news that might negatively impact the motivating aspect of financial compensation for school leaders in 27J Schools. A Mill Levy Override that passed in late 2022 means that teachers will receive a pay raise, but administrators will not. This brings the salary difference between a teacher and administrator so close that some veteran teachers will be making just as much, if not more, than novice administrators. While Stanley emphasized he did not become an administrator solely for the financial compensation, he shares how this financial incentive system will disempower teachers to transition into administration:

> "If you've got a teacher that's been teaching 15 years with the same amount of education, and they have a stipend, and now they're making four or five grand more than I am, that's disheartening."

These stories and explanations demonstrate that financial compensation plays a role in

recognizing the work an administrator does for a school.

### *Coaching*

Providing coaching opportunities lends itself to a culture of empowerment. Participants expressed they saw coaching as a form of support. Stanley shared how if a teacher is "coachable, work on one or two things, and grow from there." Coaching can come in several forms, such as giving feedback or providing mentorship.

**Giving Feedback.** Participants shared that giving feedback may be one of the most difficult aspects of leadership, but they recognized it is necessary to build a culture of empowerment. While Alaina recognized, "it feels good to to get that positive feedback," Daniel said,

> "I feel like my next step is being a better coach, being better at giving feedback. [...] Like, I have a teacher's heart. I go into meetings and I always keep the teacher perspective in the forefront. That's important, but when I do that, I lose sight of why things are going the way they are. And I need to be more objective and just base it on facts. So I guess my next steps are coaching."

Daniel grapples with being caring and considering the teachers' perspectives while being objective and giving critical feedback.

Stanley explains why giving critical feedback is so important to create a culture of empowerment:

> "[Y]ou hold them accountable [through coaching] in the sense of 'you got to work on this.' [...] [As an administrator], you have to have these difficult conversations. And if you're not, in that mindset, if you're like, 'well, I don't like that,' well then change. Change what you do, because it's unacceptable to be like, 'Well, I'm just gonna let this

slide by.' "

Stanley further explained that administrators need to have these critical coaching conversations especially when someone is underperforming because it is "unacceptable" to allow a teacher to "slide." He explained it is disempowering for the other staff members to see that happening. To create a culture of empowerment, Stanley believes an administrator must have coaching conversations to improve the performance of all staff. He makes it clear those conversations may not always be easy.

**Mentoring Teachers.** Similar to coaching and having critical conversations with teachers, is the theme of mentoring teachers. Daniel feels his purpose as a mentor and coach, as he explains,

> "Is to collaborate with you and see what your needs are. So I feel like that conversation, I really try to make it purposeful. So I feel like I try to have them lead it, [have] them tell me what they're trying to work on and me trying to be [like] 'I'm trying to help you get better, [what do] you want to do and make it about?' So they feel that [they] got that growth mindset and [...] we're both trying to get better."

As a mentor, Daniel feels his role is to have a collaborative conversation with his mentees. He determines what they're trying to work on and allows them to lead the conversation. Stanley adds that when he has these kinds of mentoring conversations, they sound like, "Okay, you dealt with it this way? How would you deal with it differently? What went well, what didn't go well? How would you change it?"

As a mentor, Stanley prioritizes being supportive. In his mentoring conversations, he'll say, "Hey, I want to support you, but this is what we're going with. What can I do to help? [...] That doesn't mean I'm going to do the work for you. But I will help you with it." Stanley clearly

explains the direction the team is going and offers support as a mentor to ensure his staff can follow that direction.

***Sharing Power***

Power-sharing lends itself to a culture of empowerment. Participants felt schools where power is shared had a greater culture of empowerment. Part of sharing power is knowing each other's roles. As Stanley explains, "if you're an assistant principal, if your other assistant principals are gone and your principal is gone, and there's an emergency, you should know the role that you have to take in that position."

Stanley explained through the theme "being predictable and consistent" that he prioritizes creating lasting systems that can continue even if a team member leaves. He also emphasizes the importance of knowing one another's roles because it helps people consider the next steps in their career:

"So I think it's really important to be always looking at that next position. And that really helps with empowerment to be like, 'Hey, where are you at? Where do you want to be?'"

However, sharing power does not only look like knowing the roles of your teammates. Sharing power can also take the form of "managed autonomy."

**Managed Autonomy.** 27J Schools believes in"managed autonomy", meaning a leader gives their team a goal and parameters, but the decision-making power and flexibility to meet their goal however they see fit. They have autonomy over what processes they will pursue to fulfill the obligations set by the leader. Many participants, including Stanley (below), spoke to this throughout their interviews:

"[If] you're a principal, [and] you see someone with these qualities that are amazing, [...] don't try to put them in a box. [G]ive him the ball and say, 'run in this direction, because I

know you've got the energy.' [G]ive him some parameters on the sides to bump and go like a ping pong ball, maybe, but don't don't box him in and don't try to don't try to close them down or shut him down. Let them grow and let them run with it with that passion they have."

When asked what empowers her, Kelly said, "I also feel empowered when there's a structure or system in place. So when there's some sort of outline to follow." Although she did not directly mention "managed autonomy," this fits the definition.

Kelly elaborated about how her school puts systems in place for staff to feel empowered. At her school, they tell the staff which committees are available, and they allow the teachers to decide which members of the team would best serve on which committees:

"We give staff the opportunity to decide what committee or team feels best for their team. So they get to decide which members join which committee."

While it is a requirement at her school to support students of concern, "Teachers have the opportunity to collect data and bring students of concern to the team rather than [the administrators] being like, 'here's the data we see you need to do something about it.'" The administrative team at Kelly's school would give teachers "the opportunity to present ideas, or make a choice or make a decision." Teachers were encouraged to manage the communication around those decisions. As Kelly said, they prioritize "giving them those opportunities to have ownership in the process." Kelly explained her intention behind giving teachers power over the decision-making process is to empower them.

Stanley also spoke about the power of managed autonomy in creating cultures of empowerment. When he joined 27J Schools, his administrators allowed him to implement a curriculum he used to use and so was comfortable with. He said, "[They said] 'hey, if you got a

curriculum you want to run with and you know it works…' They let me do it. And then the proof was in the pudding."

Stanley shared he was empowered by having the choice to use his preferred curriculum and worked hard to ensure it met the intended impact. He was "bought-in" because he had the choice. Stanley tries to empower his staff through managed autonomy as well:

"I think that empowerment [is] looking at those people that have that aptitude, that passion, and giving them that chance."

As Stanley runs his team, he ensures every team member has the skills, tools, and power to support students:

> Even my security guards, [...] they're allowed to do low level mediations between kids, they're allowed to check into things. [...] But just giving them the chance to run with something, and when they make a mistake, as long as they're honest, there's no reason to get down on someone else. [...] Okay, you made a mistake. What do we learn from it?

Stanley highlights how, through managed autonomy, staff have the power to make decisions and even make mistakes.

**Making Shared Decisions.** Making shared decisions is related to managed autonomy. Unlike managed autonomy, where an individual may solely make decisions, this theme emphasizes the importance of making decisions as a team. Daniel describes "making shared decisions" as "having [...] that voice in the school, and helping make decisions to push your building, your school, further and in the direction where you are going." Part of making shared decisions is having a voice in those decisions.

Daniel shared how he and his school will look at data together and decide next steps based on the data together:

"We decided, as a team as a staff, what next steps need to be taken and how we think we can make the most growth for our students. [...] And I feel like we do it really well as a staff."

Daniel feels this goes well because not a single person is "outspoken," but everyone "does have a voice."

Valerie invites the voices of her staff when making a decision. She hears, "Well, maybe we should do this, or maybe we should try this." She responds to their suggestions by asking, "Alright, so how would we do that? What would you do?" When speaking of empowering her staff, she explains she "trie[s] to give them that voice, like take them into consideration."

If a decision has to be made without the opportunity to invite staff input, Kelly invites staff to give her feedback on that decision later:

"We also often just give teachers the opportunity to at least provide feedback on a decision. [O]ur team really relies on feedback, whether that's through a survey or just department level feedback, we often seek that from our teachers."

Daniel, Valerie, and Kelly all emphasized the importance of inviting their staff's voices when making a decision and aiming to either make decisions as a team or get the team's feedback when a decision has already been made.

**Providing Resources and Opportunities.** Throughout their interviews, the participants shared how they try to empower staff by providing them opportunities and resources, such as training, so that their staff can make decisions more autonomously. For example, Valerie speaks of how she trains the school paraprofessionals (paras):

> "They have about 30 to 40 minutes after school before they clock out. We're like, 'okay, we can do a quick, three days of Lexia training' so that they know how to read the lessons and how to prepare for them. [...] If [the] teacher comes in and says, 'Do this

lesson for me,' they know what to do, and not just like, 'Wait, what am I doing?' [A] lot of them were like, 'That's cool. Thanks. I would love to do the training. I would love to know how to assess dibbles and do other things.' "

Valerie empowers her staff by ensuring they have the knowledge to be successful in their roles. The staff responded with gratitude.

Similarly, Kelly is also trying to empower the paraprofessionals at her school:

"I'm working on empowering our paraprofessionals to be able to lead out in just in their strategies, and being able to support students, whether that's in our learning center or in a classroom, but just trying to empower them that they have the skills and the knowledge to make decisions and support kids how they see fit without having to check in with the teacher first, or sitting back and not doing anything because the teacher is not there, but just kind of giving them some of that power to make decisions and support kids using their skills and strategies."

Kelly emphasizes giving the paraprofessionals the tools, skills, and knowledge to make appropriate decisions without the teacher. Kelly elaborates on how she knows when she's effectively empowered her staff:

"[When] I see or hear them talking about systems or strategies to support students in their classroom. Hearing them talk about SEL strategies they're using, or seeing them be like, 'Oh, I noticed this concern, here's how I'm trying to address it.' [This] tells me that they've been kind of listening to our [professional development] and our conversations, and trying at least to use those strategies on their own in their classroom. And that shows me that they feel confident, and that they have the ownership to kind of make some of those decisions without having to call or ask me, not for permission, but like before

having to check in with me."

Participants recognized having the right skills and training as a key aspect of creating cultures of empowerment. Part of creating cultures of empowerment is providing people with the training, time, tools, and opportunities to excel in their roles.

**Conclusion**

This section aimed to present the data that answered the question, "How do educators narrate their experiences of cultures of empowerment at their school?" Clear themes emerged from this question, including recognizing leadership, strengths, and potential. This could be in the form of informal recognition such as telling a peer or staff member something they did well. It can be in the form of formal recognition, such as nominating someone for an award. It can also be through a school-wide recognition system, such as "staff shoutouts" or "pride tickets." A critical piece of recognition for some of the participants, however, was receiving appropriate financial compensation for the work they do.

Coaching can also support cultures of empowerment. A coach's job is to give feedback to help mentees reach their goals. The participants recognized that this can be difficult when it is necessary to hold staff accountable. Power sharing and managed autonomy can also support staff as they pursue educational goals. This works best when making decisions as a team and allowing everyone a voice. That means providing staff the appropriate resources to excel at their jobs and to autonomously make decisions pertaining to their jobs. While these themes illuminate how these educators who have recently transitioned into an administrative role build cultures of empowerment at their schools, they also discussed what cultures of disempowerment look like.

## Cultures of Disempowerment

A subquestion in the interview protocol involved asking participants to share about a time

they felt disempowered. It was also not uncommon for participants to give these negative examples throughout their interview to contrast versus their examples of empowerment. The main themes that emerged from these negative examples were lack of support, centralized power, lack of follow-through, misusing power, fear, seniority, and becoming political. To protect confidentiality, the participants will not be referred to directly in this section.

**Lack of Support**

Participants shared they felt disempowered when they were not supported in decisions they made. One participant shared that they felt "brought down" as a teacher when a leader or even a parent would overrule a decision they made in their classroom:

> "I would say a situation that I felt empowered is more just kind of a blanket statement. It would be specifically in the classroom when your voice as a teacher wasn't heard. Maybe if there was something that had to go above you, and you weren't necessarily supported, not only by leadership, but by parents as well. You know, that kind of cuts you down a little bit. [Y]ou have this idea, you have this concept, and you're just brought down a few notches. And you're still trying to get to that end goal. But the process isn't exactly what everyone thinks it should be. And you're brought down specifically for that."

Another participant described an example of not feeling supported. As a teacher, this participant felt they were doing everything they could to support a student struggling with behavior. They felt they gave the student multiple chances:

> "And when you give a student chance after chance after chance and then being overridden, [...] "Hey, I need you to give this kid another shot or hey, you need to make this work." Then you do it. And I've had that happen a couple of times where it's like, okay, and I closed the door and said, "Okay, I disagree with this." "

In another scenario, one of the participants shared how they witnessed an administrator allow a parent to yell at a teacher. While it was not their own story, they shared:

> "I know that's happened to teachers where an administrator won't defend them, or the administrator isn't the buffer between the teacher and the parent, I think that's our job. Our job is to filter stuff down from the district for teachers. And then when you have an angry parent or whatever, that's not the teacher's job to take that."

**Centralized Power**

Another way participants feel disempowered is when opportunities for shared ownership are removed. For example, at one of the participant's schools, the teachers were trying a co-teaching model for the first time. They spent the summer doing training and a book study about this new concept. The participant went in with a "fail forward" approach and a positive attitude, willing to give it a try. However, the participant's colleague came in with a more authoritative approach, and began telling everyone what they were going to do and how to do it. The participant said any idea they had got immediately shot down by their colleague. They felt they had no opportunity to engage in the process of integrating this new co-teaching strategy. The participant expressed they felt like they just had to do what their colleague said and there was no opportunity for ideas or collaborative problem solving:

> "We had been starting kind of the whole [...] co teaching. [...] So we did a whole book study over the summer and everything. And so the next year when we came in, our SpEd teacher, she was very adamant about that. "This is how you do it, this is how you do it." And we were just trying it, so in my head, I was thinking, "what's the big deal? Like, we're going to try it, if it doesn't work, kind of fail forward." You know? "If it doesn't work, we'll fix it, or we'll tweak it or we'll do it differently next year." But basically any

idea I had, I kept getting shot down. And she was like, "No, that's not how we do it. No, that's not what we're doing. No." So I remember just having that feeling of… I just want to try it, let's just try it. And the fact that I wasn't supported in that was really hurtful."

Taking away control a teacher has is also considered to be disempowering. Similarly to the example above where a teacher's decision was overturned by an administrator or parent, participants are disempowered when their decision-making power is removed entirely:

"I was supporting a student who has had some pretty significant needs in our program, and our SpEd leadership got involved, as they should have. That was needed. But they really took control over making decisions and didn't communicate what those decisions were, and removed me from a lot of the decision making in the day to day communication and just kind of put me kind of on the outside of the situation. I would like to think with the intent to help and to support me, but it still felt like I had lost all control of the situation and lost the ability to make decisions to support a student that I felt as if I knew best, since I was one who worked with them on a daily basis. [...] And that removal of control without a conversation really felt disempowering in that moment."

When asked about a situation that felt empowering, the participant described the removal of shared ownership over decisions and outcomes. Participants feel it is disempowering when opportunities for autonomy or shared ownership are removed, when there is no opportunity for choice, or when their voices are not heard.

**Lack of Follow-through**

Whether a colleague does not follow through on their promises or a leader fails to follow through, a lack of follow-through can play a key role in disempowerment. One participant

previously described how they prioritized following through to build trust with their staff. However, another participant told a story of how they felt disempowered when an administrator continued to not follow through:

> "The principal didn't communicate well with me. He forgot all the time. We make a decision, I put three or four work weeks worth of work in, [...] and somebody goes 'oh, we're going with a different decision.' [I said,] 'Why do you make me do all this work?' [The principal said,] 'Oh, I forgot to tell you.' But he was very forgetful like that. [...] So head in the clouds, very non-dependable, so that was just difficult."

In this story, the participant expressed their disappointment when their administrator failed to follow through on decisions that were previously made. They felt they wasted their time doing work to fulfill the obligations of the first decision, only to find their principal made a new decision without telling them. They shared this story as an example of disempowerment.

**Misusing Power**

Participants gave examples of being disempowered by a leader or administrator who only took on the role for the power. One has "noticed a couple different ways people have a purpose. People want to make a difference…and then other people want the power." Another participant described an ineffective leader as being a "dictator." The theme that comes forth here are leaders who misuse their power. One participant shared they felt disempowered "when the principal was like, on their agenda, no sway." These types of leaders tell others what to do for the sake of being in command, and as one participant described, are "driven by ego."

**Fear**

Participants brought up examples of when they feared their leader or witnessed other people fearing their leader. They reported this fear led to cultures of disempowerment. One

participant described how they and their colleagues felt about a principal:

"People were scared at some point, and that did not create a positive culture and it didn't really empower." Because of that experience, this participant prioritizes being approachable and creating safety for their staff to speak to them:

"If people are scared to come to me and talk with me, I feel like I'm not doing a very good job."

Another participant shared they once felt their principal was fearful of their district leaders. The participant shared how the principal's "hands were tied" and although she wanted to make different decisions, she felt she couldn't:

"She was afraid to tell the district 'no.'"

The theme of fear applied to fearing both one's leader and failure. One participant directly shared, "I think it's the fear of failure. Sometimes that really holds people back." Whether one fears their leader or fears failure, fear appears to lead to cultures of disempowerment.

**Seniority**

Participants found seniority-based dynamics  disempowering. A participant explained that often when people are in the same role for a long time, they can get stagnant, which is disempowering to their colleagues. They expressed disappointment for a common situation in education where new teachers are assigned the most difficult classes to manage, while teachers with more "seniority" get assigned the easier to manage classes:

"And it's interesting, as a lot of times, we'll have a brand new teacher, we give them the most difficult classes in a school. And I'm not saying we shouldn't have a mixture. But when you look at that, that's logically incorrect. Wouldn't we want to have our more

> experienced, or better teachers doing that? However, there's also that, “hey, I've paid my dues” thing. And “I'd like to do some different things.” But when you have a teacher that has taught seniors for the last eight years, and nothing else, first off, that is… it's stagnant, especially if it's the high school, because they haven't had to work with the other levels. But how fair is that to another teacher that's had to work with freshmen for four or five in a row? And that's all they work with. That's not growth, though, either. And so I think it's really important to look at those balances and give people the chance to teach things they want.”

The participant suggested each teacher should have a mixture of these types of classes because the teacher receiving the “easier” classes is not growing. They explained when a teacher is not growing, there is no room for empowerment. They attributed high attrition rates in education to this theme of seniority:

> “And I think that could be a part of, when you look at attrition, you could attribute part of that in the first five years why we have over 50% quit.”

The participant explained that new teachers feel disempowered by the theme of seniority in education.

**Becoming Political**

Participants felt when schools or districts became too political, they felt disempowered. One participant shared they left a school district because the political arena negatively impacted their sense of empowerment. The participant shared, “the district got really political.” They told of a time district administrators made a promise to get them to stay another year. They felt the district was only using them because their work served the district’s agenda. However, the district went back on that promise when they felt they could no longer use the participant. The

participant reflected:

"It's politics and a lot of times if you're not going with the theme of what they want, regardless of what's right or wrong, they may tell you to go."

This type of political arena created a negative environment that participants found disempowering. Although only one participant shared a story about this directly, all the participants alluded to the negativity of politics in their responses.

## Summary

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews illuminate the experiences of five novice administrators who have recently transitioned from a teaching role into a formal leadership role. The data describes the participants' experiences of empowerment and what leadership qualities and behaviors they associate with empowerment. Common themes emerged through their interviews as to what creates a culture of empowerment and what empowered the participants to make a career change from teacher to school administrator. The findings showed having opportunities to take on informal leadership as a teacher was empowering for the participants. They all had experiences of being part of committees and leading other teachers before becoming an administrator. While participants posited some qualities that make an effective leader, their responses also illuminated qualities they felt they had which made their transitions into school administration successful. All participants agreed that to build a culture of empowerment, a leader must establish trust with their followers. An empowering leader is a form of coach. They recognize the hard work and leadership of others, share power, make shared decisions, and welcome the voices of others. The participants' responses of what makes an empowering leader and a culture of empowerment can be used to make suggestions for other educational leaders. The findings and suggestions will be discussed in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore what empowered school administrators who have recently transitioned from a teaching role to take on a position of formal leadership. A case group of novice school administrators was selected from 27J schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to better understand the participants' experiences surrounding empowerment and what leadership qualities and behaviors the participants associated with empowerment. Thematic analysis of the participants' responses provided themes that described what the participants found to be empowering, such as holding informal leadership roles, belonging to committees, leading other teachers, and being pushed outside one's comfort zone. Themes also emerged that described the qualities that make an effective leader and qualities of psychological empowerment the participants felt had that helped them to transition into a leadership position: being proactive, being assertive, collaborating, listening, being flexible, having integrity, having high self-efficacy, being passionate, desiring growth, wanting to make an impact, and having a support system. The interviews uncovered themes that describe leadership behaviors and actions one can take to empower others: leading by example, having a vision and clarity, building trust, being present and visible, being transparent and open, placing trust in others, building authentic relationships, being predictable and consistent, demonstrating competence, and caring. The interviews illuminated themes that describe what it means to belong to a culture of empowerment and a culture of *dis*empowerment. A culture of empowerment means recognizing leadership in others, coaching others, and sharing power. Disempowerment would involve people not feeling supported, removing opportunities for shared leadership, leaders not following through on their commitments, misusing power, creating fear, seniority-related power dynamics, and political

power structures dominating educational spaces.

This dissertation is structured into five chapters. Chapter One outlined the problem. Chapter Two presented the literature review, which synthesized research around domains of empowerment, transformational leadership, outcomes of empowerment, and challenges to empowerment. Chapter Three explained the methodology of this study: the participants, setting, method of data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations. Chapter Four detailed the findings from the participant interviews and presented the themes uncovered via data analysis. This chapter, Chapter 5, will discuss the findings, how they relate to the literature, what implications they suggest for future practice, and what recommendations for future research these findings support.

**Transitioning to Formal Leadership**

Participants were asked, "What does teacher empowerment mean to experienced teachers who have recently transitioned into school administration?" They all described experiences they had in their lives, as both teachers and participants in other organizations, where they felt empowered to lead. Both Daniel and Alaina described empowerment through a sports team or school club they participated in their younger years. However, for Daniel it seemed that being part of the team was empowering in itself. According to him, "just being a part of the team taught you those values."

In a sense, this speaks to the domain "flat organizational structure," of social-structural empowerment. Kim and Shin (2019) describe this as the decentralization of power or the minimization of an organizational hierarchy. Although a team may have some form of hierarchy, such as team captain or a varsity versus junior varsity division, Daniel's wording of "being part of the team" implies that instead of a hierarchy, teammates worked together to accomplish a

goal. Daniel's response also supports Leithwood and Jantzi's (2008) model, where one of the four behaviors of successful leadership is "redesigning the organization." As explained in the literature review, this involves a leader strengthening culture by modifying the existing structures to enable collaboration. Team membership supports the goal of redesigning an organization for empowerment. This supports school administrators investing time and energy to ensure teachers can work collaboratively with teams.

Alaina's story of being able to start the Student Leadership Team is supported by aspects of the literature. Alaina recounted how she created the Student Leadership Team to address negative student behaviors, such as racism and graffiti. She saw a need in her community and created the Student Leadership Team to address the problem. Bass's (1985) four dimensions of transformational leadership includes intellectual stimulation, where the leader challenges followers to reframe their thinking and reframe problems to generate innovative solutions. Whether Alaina innately possessed this domain of leadership or her principal encouraged it, having the opportunity to create the Student Leadership Team intellectually stimulated Alaina, empowering her. This story is also related to Leech and Fulton's (2008) list of leadership practices including "enabling others to act." When Alaina saw the problematic student behavior, she created the Student Leadership Team, which she found empowering. School leaders may similarly be able to empower educators to find innovative solutions to problems and enable them to act on those solutions.

**Belonging to Committees.** Stanley, Daniel, Valerie, and Alaina shared how their involvement in committees empowered them. This reflects how schools in the United States have shifted to collective or shared leadership as Muijs and Harris (2003) proposed. Muijs and Harris (2003) posit three facets of teacher leadership. Belonging to committees is part of the third facet:

participating in decision making. Belonging to committees supports both the decision-making dimension of psychological empowerment, where teachers have the power to make decisions affecting their roles (Tindowen, 2019), and the decision-making dimension of social-structural empowerment where "shared governance" in an organization lets stakeholders understand their impact (Hart, 1995). When one belongs to a committee, they are often focusing on working to improve a single aspect of the school. Being part of or leading a committee allows one to have both an active role in making decisions that impact the school and a greater impact outside the classroom, as Daniel mentions.

Alaina mentioned how being part of a committee provides a pathway for one's voice to be heard:"that really gave me a sense of voice, I felt included, I felt like I was part of a committee that really had an impact."

Being part of a committee can also help one feel a sense of belonging within their school. Alaina explained that once she "felt a part of the school" she started seeking other opportunities to help and lead. Committees are a powerful tool to foster empowerment at a school. They allow shared decision-making, give participants a change to increase their impact, give members a voice, and foster a sense of belonging. All of these aspects lead to empowerment.

**Teacher-leadership.** In Muijs and Harris's (2003) three facets of teacher-leadership, the first facet is leading students or other teachers as a facilitator, coach, or mentor and thesecond facet is leading operational tasks, such as serving as a department head. Alaina exemplified what it meant to be a teacher-leader through mentorship as she modeled strategies and helped struggling teachers. Kelly and Stanley also served in mentorship roles. Kelly explained that she created schedules as she managed a team of paraprofessionals. Stanley mentioned he was a department head and helped write common assessments for the district. Those components of

teacher-leadership used to be roles for the principal (Muijs & Harris, 2003). When the participants were teachers, they would not have had access to these opportunities if not for a principal willing to delegate them. School administrators should intentionally delegate mentorship roles and leadership tasks to their staff. This empowers teachers by making them feel trusted and valued.

### *Accessing Leadership Pathways*

While administrators *should* delegate tasks and intentionally give teachers greater responsibilities and place them in leadership roles, they must also be mindful not to excessively delegate to mitigate risk of teacher burnout. The participants mentioned one of the barriers to entering into leadership, both for informal teacher leadership roles and formal transitions to school administration, was the lack of time. Alaina described how there was no time for teacher mentors to meet with their mentees in her school. Valerie mentioned she had to stop participating in so many committees once she had children. However, the COVID-19 pandemic made time for the participants to pursue available opportunities.

**COVID-19 Pandemic Opportunities.** Although the NASSP (2021) survey indicated that there would be an "exodus" of principals due to the COVID-19 pandemic, participants in this research said it did not have a negative impact on their transition into school leadership. Alaina implied the COVID-19 pandemic had a positive impact on her transition into school leadership. The unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic provided opportunity for innovation within archaic systems. As she put it, "I had the time, the space, the ideas to bring to [that] principal."

Alaina's self-efficacy will be subsequently addressed, but this self-efficacy allowed her to see the opportunities to lead that the COVID-19 pandemic created. Zainal and Mohd Matore

(2021) claim that self-efficacy contributes to innovative behaviors demonstrated by teachers. The COVID-19 pandemic facilitated this innovation. While the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for change in school systems, schools are in constant need of dynamic, innovative solutions. Administrators should often highlight areas of growth, needs, and other problems to their staff, then consider the solutions those individuals propose.

The participants also said the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic gave them the time to take necessary steps towards transitioning into formal leadership. There is no reason for these opportunities to disappear with other pandemic-era innovations. Administrator preparation programs should continue to offer online options so that teachers looking to transition into administrator roles can more easily access them. Accessibility for leadership roles and administrator preparation programs are key to empowering educators to make the transition from teacher to administrator.

In the interviews, participants attributed "being pushed outside your comfort zone" and taking risks as an aspect of their transition to school administrator roles. Upon further examination, these themes truly arise because of their self-efficacy, which is discussed in the next section.

**Leadership Qualities**

According to Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015b), "A school principal is charged with a wide array of responsibilities, including the development of a shared vision for the school and stewardship of that vision, fostering an environment conducive to student learning, engaging all member of the school community, managing the organization, ensuring the effectiveness of the faculty, and doing these things with integrity and fairness" (p. 2). This statement outlines a few of the leadership qualities participants feel make an effective school leader. However, limited

further literature discusses what qualities followers feel make an effective school leader.

The participants in this study discuss those qualities. For example, they feel an effective leader is proactive. Alaina critiques herself and explains that she wants to work on being more proactive as a leader, instead of being reactive. This speaks to the development and stewardship of a shared vision that Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) mention. Leaders must plan for the future.

Participants frequently referred to assertiveness. They value a leader that can take control of a situation. This relates to Tschannen-Moran and Gareis's (2015b) statement about "ensuring the effectiveness of the faculty." While sometimes, ensuring effectiveness can take a softer approach, an effective leader needs to know when to be assertive. This also relates to the dimension of self-determination in Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) four dimensions of psychological empowerment. Thomas and Velthouse view self-determination as one's initiative to take action when there is a need in the workplace. Participants agree that an effective leader must have high self-determination.

Participants shared the view that being an effective collaborator is vital to being an effective leader. Daniel referred to how being a good teammate makes him an effective leader. Stanley mentioned a time he was on a team and they all "worked well together. And they wanted a lot of things to be uniform." Stanley said the team mentality stuck with him when transitioning into leadership. This "all for one, one for all" mentality addresses the need for a leader to both have high self-efficacy, and support collective efficacy on a team. Understanding the strengths of the individuals on one's team and being able to compensate for their weaknesses contributes to collective efficacy. An effective leader must also know when to step in to help their team.

Participants saw active listening as essential for effective school leadership. Kõiv et al.'s

(2019) study indicated that teachers should experience their voices and opinions being considered. Since one's voice cannot be heard if the recipient is not actively listening, administrators should practice active listening skills so their followers feel listened to.

Participants feel a good leader can be flexible. Stanley described how he would approach a situation, allowing his followers to take whatever approach they need to accomplish a desired task. "If we can get to the same end result, why does it have to be the same as long as the objective is met?" Participants feel the best leaders help followers enjoy a sense of autonomy in their roles. Klecker and Loadman (1996), Tindowen (2019), and Ma et al. (2021) all explain the need for a sense of autonomy and self-determination for teachers to feel empowered in their roles.

The participants supported Tschannen-Moran and Gareis's (2015b) position that an effective leader must have integrity and be fair. They explained how they often have to make difficult decisions or have difficult conversations as part of their jobs. While it may be easier for a leader to not have a difficult conversation or deflect a difficult decision, a leader with the integrity to prioritize the team will be far more effective.

### *Psychological Empowerment Qualities*

Many components of empowerment can be learned, and some can even be directly taught. A few vital qualities, however, must be developed within each leader: qualities of psychological empowerment. Participants attributed these qualities to their decision to transition into a leadership role. The participants felt they had developed high self-efficacy, they were passionate about their jobs, they desired growth, they wanted to make an impact, and they had a strong support system to encourage them in their transition into administrative leadership.

**Self-efficacy.** As previously mentioned, the data indicated that Alaina had the capacity to

take the “leap” into school administration due to her high self-efficacy. Unsurprisingly, this theme is interwoven into several aspects of the data. Tindowen (2019) found self-efficacy can predict organizational behaviors. Zainal and Mohd Matore (2021) explained that teachers with higher self-efficacy are more inclined to take risks and exert more effort to ensure tasks are carried out properly. They have higher motivation, belief in themselves, and confidence, and are more empowered to take on leadership roles. The data supports this.

Participants provided explicit stories of the moments they came to believe they could be school administrators. Valerie was a teacher sitting in interviews to hire another Assistant Principal when she realized she could fill that role. Daniel was hearing his colleagues dream of a better workplace and realized “I can help make that happen.” Stanley “saw others do it and I was like, I know I can do better.” These statements demonstrate the participants’ belief in themselves. This belief is what motivated them to take the “leap,” in Alaina’s words, to become a school administrator. Part of self-efficacy is innate by nature. Self-efficacy is belief in *oneself,* not a leader’s belief in their followers. It is a dimension of *psychological empowerment*, not social-structural empowerment, and is to some degree intrinsic.

However, like the time Daniel was “forced” into a committee, self-efficacy can be developed to an extent. Conger and Kanungo (1988) suggest how leaders can help foster self-efficacy in their followers. Daniel’s example also suggests methods school leaders could use to increase their staff’s self-efficacy.

The literature overwhelmingly suggested the COVID-19 pandemic would have a negative impact on teachers seeking roles in school administration (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Dos Santos, 2021; Lieberman & Will, 2022; NASSP, 2021). However, these participants claimed COVID-19 did not have a negative impact on their transition into school administration. This is

because these participants already had high self-efficacy and other qualities of psychological empowerment that made them see themselves as leaders. Due to their high self-efficacy, COVID-19 was seen by the participants as an *opportunity* more so than an obstacle in their path to school leadership.

***Being Pushed Outside Your Comfort Zone.*** Daniel provided an example where he was assigned a leadership role. He explained how this forced him to see himself as a leader. His self-efficacy may have been lower prior to this experience, but his leader believed in him and "forced him" into a committee. Ugwu et al.'s (2019) study indicated that employees feel greater empowerment when their bosses seek their input and trust their decision making judgment, such as how Daniel's boss treated him. While he acknowledges he was "pushed out of his comfort [zone]" and he may have been reluctant at first to fill this role, his principal demonstrated transformational leadership behavior that ultimately empowered Daniel. Many staff members would similarly benefit from administrators motivating them to take on leadership roles

**Taking Risks.** Participants perceived risk in their transitions to school administration. Alaina told of her internal debate over if she was ready to leave the classroom or not. Daniel and Valerie also acknowledged the element of risk-taking in making the transition from teacher to administrator. Valerie's internal dialogue indicated that she recognized the chance that she *could* fail, but her self-efficacy was high enough that she took the risk and applied to an administrator preparation program.

Alaina presented an interesting idea during her reflection of taking risks:

"In my classes, and the teachers, and the administrators I've had before …they weren't my age."

This is relevant because of one of Bass's (1985) four dimensions of transformational

leadership: idealized influence, meaning the leader serves as a role model. For best results, followers should see themselves in a leader. If a follower never sees a leader that looks like them or shares similar experiences, it could negatively impact their ability to see themselves as a leader. In Alaina's case, she hadn't had a young female leader until that year, so she struggled to believe in herself as a young leader. Administrator preparation programs may benefit from partnering with districts to develop and recruit leaders from diverse backgrounds such as age, gender, culture, and race. Bass's (1985) study indicates that seeing leaders that represent the demographics of their followers will increase those followers' self-efficacy to become leaders.

**Being Passionate.** Kõiv et al. (2019)'s domain of "meaning" posits that psychological empowerment is closely associated with a teacher's sense of meaning in their work. A successful leader finds their work fulfilling on a psychological level. When asked what made them successful in transitioning into a leadership role, Kelly and Stanley attributed their success to their passion. As Kelly said, "I'm passionate about supporting kids, and so the conversations for supporting kids feels easy." The data implies that enjoyment for one's work makes work feel "easier", meaning enjoyment for one's work increases self-efficacy, which therefore increases empowerment.

**Desiring Growth.** Short and Rinehart (1992), Klecker and Loadman (1996), Tindowen (2019), and Peng and Nair (2022) all suggest that teachers feel empowered through professional growth or training. The finding that a desire to grow, a quality of psychological empowerment, helped the participants transition from a teaching role to a leadership role, was therefore unsurprising. People are empowered by professional growth and empowered people both seek professional growth and encourage it in others, creating an upward spiral. Valerie explained that she sought to "learn as much as [she] could" to become a better teacher. This directly relates to

Peng and Nair's (2022) study, in which Chinese teachers felt professional development was a pathway to improving their job performance and therefore improving their odds at a potential promotion.

In contrast, Stanley had been disempowered by not receiving opportunities for growth, but due to his self-efficacy, that experience motivated him. He went on to become a leader because he recognized his desire for growth and sought to ensure other teachers received feedback so they too could grow. Stanley's story represents the way empowered people both desire growth and encourage it in others. Administrators should provide teachers with learning opportunities and feedback to help them continue to grow.

**Making an Impact.** One of the four dimensions of psychological empowerment Thomas and Velthouse (1990) posit is impact, defined here as the extent one's influence affects outcomes in the workplace. (Klecker and Loadman (1996) suggest that the dimension of impact also refers to the recognition one receives for their outcomes). Participants in this study wanted to "[feel] like [they are] making a difference," as Alaina describes. The participants' psychological empowerment quality of seeking impact meant they wanted to know their work has a direct positive effect on the people they work with.

Daniel wanted to expand his impact outside the classroom. He already knew he had a positive impact on his students in the classroom, but he "wanted to have a bigger footprint." He "wanted to do more." Kelly views "the opportunity to make a wider impact" as a motivating factor in her decision to become an administrator. Stanley recognized the need for empowering leaders to ensure their followers "have the biggest impact that they can have." It is clear through participants' responses that seeking impact is a key psychological quality of an empowered leader. Administrators should strive to make the connection between educators' efforts and

outcomes as explicit as possible to motivate their staff.

**Support System.** Participants described the presence of a support system as a vital quality of psychological empowerment which helped them transition from a teaching position to an administrative position. Tyre (2015) explained that supportive leadership, a key component of a support system, is one of the top reasons teachers remain in the classroom. A support system can also come from peers, family, and mentors. Kanter (1977) posits opportunity, information, resources, and support are the tools to social-structural empowerment. A support system is clearly critical to being empowered. None of the participants in this study sought out a support system. The people around them simply noticed their hard work and capabilities, believed in their ability to make change, and shared that belief with them. This increased participants' psychological empowerment.

For example, Alaina's support system included a teacher on her team. When she considered applying to become an administrator, she turned to this teacher for support. Alaina did not purposely build a "support system". She gained one unintentionally, which subsequently encouraged her to transition into leadership. Daniel saw his colleagues as his teammates, and he said they were the people who pushed him to become an administrator. Kelly received encouragement from the counselor, school psychologist, and teachers she worked with. In each of these cases, encouragement came from the people participants worked most closely with. These were the people that were most able to see what the participants were capable of in the workplace. Receiving encouragement from these people helped build the necessary self-efficacy to make the transition. Administrators should therefore intentionally create systems for peers to recognize each other's work in the workplace and build a school culture where teachers are expected to collaborate.

Family was also a key support system for some of the participants. Daniel explained that his wife and mother are both teachers, which has helped him understand educational leadership. Stanley shared that he and his wife (who is also a teacher) "bounce ideas off each other", allowing him to openly discuss ideas and hear from an honest perspective. However, when asked about her support system, Valerie mentioned her father, who was not an educator. Valerie's story suggests her father's deep belief in her evolved into her own belief in herself. Having family within their support systems allowed the participants to build their self-efficacy and think through ideas openly, facilitating empowerment.

Participants felt mentorship, which they relied on in their careers, empowered them. Valerie, Kelly, and Stanley each had a mentor in their career who once served as their leader and whose leadership skills they later sought to emulate. Leech and Fulton (2008) cite "modeling the way" as one of the four identified practices of leadership, which is exactly what these mentors did for the participants. As Spreitzer (2007) notes, these relationships are contingent on a positive, trusting relationship with the leader. Sergiovanni (1990) states, "The successful leader, then, is one who builds-up the leadership of others and who strives to become a leader of leaders" (p. 27). These mentors modeled successful leadership, facilitating growth among the participants. Although one can become a successful school leader without mentorship, the participants found having a mentor who modeled leadership was pivotal in their journey to become school administrator.

**Empowering Leadership Behaviors**

The second question of this study was "What leadership behaviors do educators associate with empowerment?" The literature suggests a plethora of behaviors a leader should demonstrate to be effective. Bass (1985) explains transformational leaders should demonstrate idealized

influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) explain that school leaders should set directions, develop people, redesign the organization, and improve the instructional program. They should allow staff to work autonomously, but with a common goal and shared vision (Raquib et al., 2010). Leech and Fulton (2008) say leaders should challenge the process, inspire a shared vision, encourage the heart, and enable others to act. The participants' responses relate to several of these behaviors. The themes that emerged from the participants were leading by example, having a vision and clarity, building trust, being present and visible, being transparent and open, placing trust in others, building authentic relationships, being predictable and consistent, demonstrating competence and caring. Recommendations for practice based on participants' responses will be made in the following section.

***Leading by Example***

The work of Bass (1985) and Leech and Fulton (2008) speaks to the theme "leading by example." One of Bass's (1985) four dimensions of transformational leadership includes "idealized influence" where the leader serves as a role model and demonstrates high values and standards. Leech and Fulton (2008) include "modeling the way" as one of their leadership behaviors. Their work is also relevant to mentorship, but there is a subtle difference between mentorship and leading by example. Mentorship refers to a relationship between a mentor and mentee which relies on trust. In the case of "leading by example," idealized influence and modeling the way means a leader should specifically demonstrate the behaviors they want their followers to do. In other words, "do as I do", whether or not the leader is specifically providing mentorship to a given individual. This may include modeling strategies, as Alaina mentioned. If a leader wants their followers to be more present in the hallways, the leader should demonstrate

that behavior by also being in the hallways. Although leading by example is a way to build trust, it is dependent not on trust but on integrity.

### *Vision and Clarity*

Participants recognized the importance of leaders having a vision. Alaina felt empowered when administrators provided clarity to all relevant stakeholders. She spoke to the importance of having a vision and clarity on an organizational level. Stanley spoke to the importance of having a personal vision for wanting to be a leader. Daniel referred to the need to have a "why" on a more micro-level, such as having reasons to support the decisions one makes as a leader. The literature frequently recognizes the importance of having a clear, purposeful vision (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012). The participant responses relate to Bass (1985)'s transformational leadership dimensions . Inspirational motivation constitutes visionary leadership and the way a leader inspires their followers to buy into the vision. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) explain that "setting direction" involves unifying the school under a shared vision. In Ismail et al.'s (2011) study, they posit that individualized attributed behavior refers to leaders who can, through open communication and clearly articulating the organization's vision,  motivate employees. Participants view setting and articulating clear organizational and personal visions as key traits which empowered them and which they now use to empower their staff. This theme relates directly to building trust.

### Building Trust

Participants mentioned the importance of trust between a leader and their followers. Their responses described what they felt best builds trust and acknowledged that trust takes time for administrators to build. Tyre (2015) states, "But effective school leaders also need time - usually about five years - to build trust with faculty and parents, set a vision for improvement, and hire

the right people." Participants viewed being present and visible, being open and transparent, placing trust in others, building authentic relationships, demonstrating competence, and being caring as effective ways to build trust.

### *Being Visibly Present*

Participants strive to be visibly present, and want the same from their leaders. Alaina explained how visibility is important in building trust with her staff because she wants her staff to see what she is doing. If staff do not see their administrators, they are left to guess what they are doing in their office. Are they working? Are they browsing the internet? They may be particularly frustrated when they need an administrator who is not present. Daniel agrees that leaders should not be "isolated in their room." "Researchers say that getting principals out of the front office and into the classroom is central to driving schools forward today" (Tyre, 2015). Administrators should be visibly present in hallways and classrooms as much as possible. However, being present refers to both being physically and mentally present. (This connects to the theme of being an active listener). Administrators should remove distractions and avoid disruptions to be mentally focused when speaking with their staff. This helps teachers see that their voices are being truly considered in decision-making, leading to higher psychological empowerment.

### *Transparency and Openness*

Participants attempt to communicate effectively as leaders. Alaina, Daniel, and Kelly strive to build trust by being open and honest with their followers. Daniel always tries to explain to his teachers why he made a decision. Kelly keeps lines of communication open by "circling back" to see how teachers feel about a situation and the outcome. As Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015a) explain, that level of honesty involves integrity. A leader must be willing to share

their true thoughts and beliefs, including owning up when they make mistakes. Kelly checks in with her staff to ensure she doesn't make avoidable or fixable mistakes.

Openness is also a facet of trust building. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015a) explain how principals who openly share information create a dialogue between themselves and teachers which leads to more effective problem-solving. Open communication, constituting information sharing from both the top-down and bottom-up, is a dimension of social-structural empowerment (Spreitzer, 2007). By being transparent about their decisions, Alaina and Daniel demonstrate how they are creating cultures of empowerment in their schools. They present a problem, the information they had, and the path they chose to solve that problem. By being transparent in this process with their staff, they open themselves to dialogue with teachers. This may make teachers more comfortable doing the same with their administrators: sharing problems, gathering information, and making informed decisions to solve their problems. To empower their staff, administrators should be transparent about their decisions and the information that informed those decisions, then welcome staff input.

***Trusting Others***

The participants described placing trust in others as a way to demonstrate they trust their followers to complete tasks effectively -- as, essentially, a form of recognition. When a principal trusts employees with a task, they are trusting in the employees' competence: the knowledge, skills, and experience to manage the task effectively (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015a). This supports the decision-making dimensions of both psychological empowerment and social-structural empowerment. When principals trust teachers with additional responsibilities, they're empowering those teachers by allowing them to make decisions that affect their work (Tindowen, 2019). This fosters employee buy-in and commitment to their work (Hart, 1995).

Alaina and Kelly felt empowered when their leaders tasked them with something beyond their roles as classroom teachers. Valerie shared a story of how she tries to empower her staff by giving them additional responsibilities. In her story, she trusted a staff member to facilitate state testing, a huge responsibility, but also a huge honor that Valerie believed that staff member was capable of doing so. Administrators should be able to effectively delegate responsibilities to trusted staff members to complete tasks that impact the school outside the classroom.

***Building Authentic Relationships***

Participants sought to build trust through authentic relationships. Leaders must be willing to be vulnerable to be authentic. Building relationships involves benevolence, which Tschannen-Moran & Gareis (2015a) define as a level of vulnerability, openness, and commitment. As Valerie explains, building authentic relationships involves sharing personal information with staff, allowing them to see one's "human side" beyond the workplace. For example, Valerie asks staff about their weekends, she knows about their kids, and they know about hers. Valerie builds a professional "friendship" with her staff by showing care for them outside of school. Administrators should be willing to share glimpses of their personal life with their staff and learn about their teachers' lives outside of school. Building these relationships helps build trust between a principal and their teachers, which leads to empowerment.

***Predictability and Consistency***

Kelly and Stanley both prioritize consistency, but in different ways. Kelly strives to be consistent and predictable in her actions. She noted she valued that in a team she previously belonged to, so she strives to demonstrate similar competence now. Competence includes assigning and completing tasks accurately, efficiently, and effectively (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015a). Because she demonstrates her competence over the long term, Kelly is also

demonstrating consistency (the fifth aspect of trust according to Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015a) ). Administrators should strive to demonstrate consistency in their actions, including showing up dependably and predictably.

Stanley strives for consistency within systems. Stanley described how he seeks to create lasting systems by being open about job responsibilities and training his staff to fill each other's roles if needed. Stanley is open to sharing decision-making power with his staff and is open to sharing information. This speaks to the third aspect of trust-building as suggested by Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015a): openness. Stanley seeks to build this openness over the long term to create systemic consistency. Administrators should create consistency in their systems by sharing information about existing systems or job roles so the systems may outlast the personnel. Everyone on the team should be proficient in the systems relevant to their role, including knowing how to perform the jobs of others on their team.

Following through is vital to being predictable and consistent. Alaina explains if she says she's going to give a student a consequence, she ensures she does. If she says she will attend a meeting, she is there. Daniel describes follow-through as "doing what I'm saying I'm gonna do, doing it efficiently, and asking for help if I need to." This relates directly to the two facets of trust-building: competence and consistency. To build trust with staff and create a culture of empowerment, administrators must follow through on what they say and do.

***Competence***

Competence is having the knowledge, experience, and skills to be effective in one's role (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015a). Participants feel demonstrating competence makes them effective leaders and helps them build trust with their staff. Kelly described how she showed her principal her expertise in Special Education, which led her principal to trust her with greater

responsibilities. This allowed her to gain further experience as a leader.

Competence relates closely to an effective leader's psychological empowerment quality of growth-seeking. If Kelly did not pursue growth, she would not have learned the nuances of her role in the Learning Center. Valerie similarly strived to learn as much as she could to be the best teacher she could be: gaining expertise. Administrators could help their teachers gain expertise by offering training relevant to their roles so they may become experts in their fields. This would also build teachers' competence, trust, and self-efficacy.

***Caring***

Participants view care as essential to building trust. Being compassionate and empathetic demonstrates care. Both Daniel and Alaina described how they interact with their staff through a lens of compassion. Alaina elaborates on this idea in her example of how, when she was a teacher, she understood the struggle her fellow teachers were going through. Her team showed one another empathy and helped each other wherever possible. The comradery developed in her team was empowering because teammates understood and would help each other.

Part of empathizing with someone is understanding their perspective. Stanley explained that when he has conversations with teachers, he reassures them that he understands their perspective even if he has to make a decision contradicting it. Valerie detailed how she understood and empathized with the specials teachers' unique challenges, so she asked their opinion on when it would be best to conduct a fire drill. This would not have occurred without Valerie actively listening, but "understanding others' perspectives" extends beyond just listening to include empathy and care. To understand their teachers' perspectives from a true place of empathy, administrators should volunteer occasionally in the classroom and put themselves in other situations that remind them what it is like to be a teacher. Showing empathy and truly

understanding their staff's perspectives will help administrators build trust with their staff. This is vital to creating safety.

Creating safety can refer to both emotional and physical safety, such as making it easier to take risks or be vulnerable. When a leader demonstrates openness, opening the door for dialogue with their staff, they are creating safety. Daniel tries to be someone his staff can come to for help. He is consistent in how he responds to his staff: "calm, cool, and collected." For him, openness and consistency are ways of showing care, which creates a sense of safety and trust for staff. Valerie echoed this in her response, and Kelly added that she both tries to be approachable and builds trust by keeping confidential conversations private. Participants build trust with their staff by creating channels for dialogue, showing consistency and care to every staff member, and creating a safe space for staff. Administrators should also build trust by prioritizing physical safety. Participants check on their staff to make sure they are safe, show up to support in times of crisis, and step in to provide staff breaks when required.

**Creating a Culture of Empowerment**

The final question of this study was, "How do these educators narrate their experiences of the cultures of empowerment at their school?" Participants discussed recognition systems, cultures of "coaching" and mentorship, and shared power. Part of sharing power is fostering managed autonomy, making shared decisions, and providing resources and opportunities for staff to become experts in their roles. The participants' responses illuminated aspects of cultures of empowerment that administrators should strive to create.

***Recognizing Leadership, Strengths, and Potential***

Conger and Kanungo (1988) explain that a leader must make it clear to their followers that their efforts will lead to results. Leaders must explicitly recognize their followers' actions.

Alaina noted how she appreciated when her leaders "told [her] explicitly that they've seen some similar leadership skills" in her. She added that once her leader recognized her, she started to be recognized by her peers, who encouraged her to take opportunities that came up. Both of these examples were a form of informal recognition, a component of "status" in psychological empowerment. Status refers to the recognition a teacher may receive from their colleagues for their contributions to an organization (Tindowen, 2019). Teachers with higher status in their schools are more likely to be more committed to their school, invest more time on work beyond their role, and demonstrate higher commitment to the profession (Tindowen, 2019; Zembylas & Papanastasiou, 2005). Although school administrators cannot effectively force their staff to recognize the work of their peers, they can lead by example by explicitly, publicly, and frequently recognizing the positive contributions of their staff.

Valerie gave an example from when she was nominated for a formal award. Although Valerie was nominated for this award by her peers, principals could set the example by nominating their staff for potential awards. Valerie also shared her school's system for staff to recognize each other: pride tickets and staff shoutouts. Principals should create recognition systems to encourage colleagues to recognize their peers' contributions. Gaining recognition contributes to both the dimension of "status" in psychological empowerment, but also increases one's self-efficacy. Additionally, recognizing employees for their contributions highlights the impact they have on organizational outcomes.

**Financial Compensation.** Financial compensation is an important component of recognition. Pay was a relevant motivator for Daniel's transition into school administration. Daniel was already working hard: he sat on committees, took on additional responsibilities, and was an effective teacher. However, as a teacher, he was not receiving the level of financial

compensation he wanted for his hard work. The transition into leadership would mean he would be compensated appropriately for the work he does within the school.

Stanley also expressed concerns over financial compensation, but for different reasons. In 27J Schools, teachers were promised a significant pay raise for the 2023-2024 school year. Stanley explained that this meant some new administrators would be getting paid less than some teachers. In his words, "that's disheartening." Participants indicated they have greater responsibilities  than they did when they were teachers. On that basis, they want to be compensated appropriately. This relates to the "performance-based pay" dimension of social-structural empowerment, in which compensation is offered for contributions to the growth of the organization. Ongori and Shunda's (2008) study supports that performance-based pay increases an employee's sense of empowerment. On the contrary, insufficient compensation relative to one's contributions is disempowering. School districts should offer appropriate, competitive salaries for school administrators.

***Coaching***

Creating a culture of empowerment includes creating opportunities for staff to both give and receive feedback. Participants shared how they sometimes struggled to give feedback. While Alaina likes giving and receiving positive feedback, Daniel notes that he is trying to get better at coaching and giving critical feedback. Stanley understands the value of giving critical feedback, part of which is holding staff accountable to the shared vision. As Bass (1985) explains, one of the four features of transformational leadership is individualized consideration, meaning the leader provides mentoring and continuous feedback while considering the needs of the employees and how they relate to the organizational goals. Coaching and feedback is a critical component to leadership and empowerment. SB 191's evaluation rubric, a punitive tool as

opposed to a coaching tool, is therefore concerning.

Daniel mentions that an administrator should serve as a coach and mentor. This involves giving critical feedback in a supportive way. A mentor should understand the goals of their mentees and offer support to help them achieve those goals. As Stanley mentions, if a mentee makes a mistake, a mentor should be supportive and, rather than chastise them, focus on the learning opportunity that comes from the mistake. Administrators who are effective coaches and are skilled at giving feedback can help build teachers' expertise and increase their self-efficacy. Administrators should practice coaching by giving regular critical and supportive feedback to help their teachers achieve their professional goals in alignment with the organization's vision.

### *Sharing Power*

Sharing power was mentioned frequently in the literature, so it was not a surprise it came up for the participants as well. As previously discussed, Stanley explained how he tries to create consistent systems by sharing information openly, allowing someone else to step into a given role if they need to. Sharing information about one's role is sharing power because, should that position become available, having that information can create opportunities for others. Opaque job roles and responsibilities, on the other hand, can contribute to problematic power structures. This is not the only way to share power. Participants discussed 27J Schools' culture of "managed autonomy," making shared decisions, and providing resources and opportunities.

**Managed Autonomy.** Klecker and Loadman (1996) describe autonomy as one of the dimensions of psychological empowerment. Autonomy is the power an employee has to make decisions in their daily jobs. Tindowen's (2019) study indicated that greater autonomy supports a more positive relationship with one's supervisor. Managed autonomy, as implemented in 27J Schools, means leaders set clear, defined goals connected to their missions, but the employees

have significant discretion in how they choose to accomplish the goal. Stanley shared how he gives someone a general direction and lets them "run." He may set "parameters" and let someone "bump and go like a ping pong ball." Similarly at Kelly's school, there are systems to help teachers meet requirements, but they may approach that system in different ways. The key to a successful execution of "managed autonomy" is that employees are aware of it. 27J Schools made it known to their staff that they want to use this approach with their principals, and it is the approach they want their principals to use with their staff. This is a clear component of the 27J Schools culture. District leaders should establish a culture of managed autonomy in which leaders set clear, measurable goals with defined parameters for their followers, but their followers are given the power to use whatever strategy they feel would best accomplish those goals. This speaks to sharing power, but also dips into making shared decisions.

**Making Shared Decisions.** Participants emphasized the importance of making decisions as a team. Daniel seeks to empower his staff by presenting them with relevant data and allowing them to have a voice in decisions made with that data. Valerie shared how she actively seeks feedback from her staff.In cases where she cannot get staff input before making a decision, Kelly gives her staff a chance to give her feedback on the decision afterward. Making shared decisions is part of the "decision-making" dimensions of both psychological and social-structural empowerment. Decision-making autonomy and participation in shared decision-making empower educators. Allowing employees to "have a voice" in making decisions is a high-value strategy to increase employee empowerment and encourage staff buy-in to decisions. Administrators should create a shared decision-making model so it is clear to employees which decisions will be made solely by administrators, which decisions administrators will seek input on, and which decisions will be truly shared via a democratic process.

**Providing Resources and Opportunities.** One of the empowerment dimensions least discussed thus far is the dimension of training as part of social-structural empowerment. Training provides employees with the skills and knowledge to carry out their roles autonomously (Spretizer, 2007). Ongori and Shunda (2008) found training was the second most favored strategy to increase empowerment. The theme of "providing resources and opportunities" builds on the dimension of "training".

Valerie discussed providing training to paraprofessionals by offering professional development on Lexia, a reading platform. She shared that the paraprofessionals were grateful for the information. This training would allow the paraprofessionals to work more autonomously in their role and make decisions based on the data from Lexia. They would no longer have to wait for directions from the Special Education teacher.

Kelly seeks to "empower [paraprofessionals] that they have the skills and knowledge to make divisions and support kids how they see fit without having to check in with the teacher first." This is a perfect example of intent and impact of training as a dimension of empowerment. When employees are given the information they need to perform tasks and make decisions on their own, they feel empowered. Administrators should provide frequent training to staff so they may gain the necessary skills to perform their jobs more autonomously. Training is another example of sharing power in a culture of empowerment. Instead of guarding information to create barriers in the decision-making process, administrators should share information as freely as possible to support an empowering environment.

While training may be one resource educators need to feel empowered, they may also need sufficient physical resources to get their job done well. A leader must provide their employees with the correct tools to complete their job. For example, when a task must be

completed on a computer, but provided computers are unable to complete the task, or computers aren't provided at all, employees will feel disempowered. Additionally, leaders must create opportunities for employees to demonstrate their expertise and leadership skills. Providing training is most beneficial when principals give their teachers opportunities to use that training. For example, attending a training session about a new classroom management strategy, but then not being given the time to integrate the strategy effectively in the classroom, would be disempowering rather than empowering. Administrators should both provide training to employees so they can effectively and autonomously perform their jobs and ensure they have the resources and opportunities to implement the training in their classrooms.

Creating a culture of empowerment is an intentional task. One must incorporate practices of recognizing others, coaching, and sharing power. Unfortunately, it is easy to unintentionally create a culture of disempowerment. Administrators must be aware of this and take action to address aspects of cultures of disempowerment.

**Cultures of Disempowerment**

Participants shared examples throughout their interviews of what they considered disempowering. The themes that emerged were not feeling supported, removing opportunities for shared ownership, not following through, misusing power, fear, seniority, and becoming political.

***Lack of Support***

A participant shared how they felt disempowered when they felt they were not supported by administrators in a decision they made as a teacher in the classroom. They felt their voice was not heard. This touches upon a few of the dimensions of empowerment and transformational leadership. When one's decision is not supported by their leader, it compromises shared decision-making and autonomy. Trust is broken because the teacher feels the administrator does

not view them as competent decision makers.

In the example where the participant had already given a student several chances, and their administrator told them they needed to give the student another chance, the participant felt disempowered because they were not supported by their principal. The participant said that the situation felt disempowering because they felt the administrator did not appreciate the many things they already did to help the student. Making matters worse, the participant did not receive help in managing the student's behavior and was told they had to allow the behavior to continue.

The administrator allowed a parent to yell at the teacher similarly let their teacher continue to struggle. It was disempowering to both the teacher being yelled at and their peers that knew of the situation. The administrator's low self-determination and assertiveness was exposed to their followers. Once staff realize their leader will not or cannot take control of a situation, a culture of disempowerment starts to develop. "Researchers say that [...] lack of professional support poses enduring problems" (Tyre, 2015). Administrators should step in and support their teachers whenever necessary, and if necessary, have a conversation in private about how the teacher could improve next time to avoid another situation where the administrator needs to take control.

***Centralized Power***

The removal of managed autonomy or opportunities for shared ownership over processes or outcomes is disempowering. Bass (1985) speaks of intellectual stimulation where, as part of transformational leadership, a leader encourages their employees to challenge the status quo and think of innovative solutions. When participants have been made to feel afraid to fail or had their creativity squashed, it damaged their perceptions of their schools as safe spaces, which was disempowering. Administrators must actively work to avoid situations like this, create a culture

where innovative solutions are celebrated, and individuals seeking to centralize power receive coaching on more effective ways to achieve educational goals.

The story of how Special Education leadership got involved in a participant's work and removed them from the decision-making process provides an example of how opportunities for shared ownership can be removed. While the SpEd leadership was demonstrating their assertiveness and self-determination, the lack of communication or inclusion of the participant in the decisions compromised her involvement in the shared decision-making process and negatively impacted her sense of autonomy and self-efficacy. This situation may have created distrust because the leader's inability to invite the participant's voice suggests they did not have full confidence in the participant's competence. The lack of communication may have caused the participant to lose trust in their leaders. While being assertive has its place, administrators should avoid completely taking over a situation and removing teachers from decision-making processes that directly impacts them.

***Lack of Follow-through***

Not following through is the exact opposite of consistency, which is one of five key facets to building trust (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015a). The participant shared an example of where their administrator kept changing their mind or forgetting they had made a decision at all, and then failing to communicate with the participant about updated decisions. These actions compromised both the team's trust and collective efficacy. The leader may have lacked a clear vision and therefore struggled to make decisions with consistency. Regardless of the reasons, a lack of follow-through is disempowering.

***Misusing Power***

Passion is a key quality of psychological empowerment for most successful leaders.

However, when that passion dwindles or perhaps never existed, one is left to wonder why a leader is in their role. Participants shared examples of leaders from their pasts who have misused their power. One describes their leader as being a "dictator" and another as "driven by ego." One made the assumption that while some people go into leadership to make a difference, others do it for power. Spreitzer (2007) describes power as authority. Comments like these allude to leaders who micromanage instead of relinquishing any amount of power or control. This misuse of power breeds a culture of fear\. When districts identify leaders who misuse power, they should remove them from their positions immediately.

***Fear***

The opposite of creating safety is using fear.. In "creating safety," administrators trying to be approachable foster emotional safety, provide their staff a space to be open with them, and make mistakes acceptable. When leaders use fear, employees are afraid to speak openly with them, make mistakes, or experience failure.  This can apply to both teachers fearing their principal and principals fearing their district leaders. When one lives in fear, they cannot take the necessary risks required to take on leadership roles. A culture of fear is a culture of disempowerment.

***Seniority***

Seniority-based power dynamics lead to disempowerment. A participant shared in their example how more senior teachers get to have "easier" or their preferred classes, while newer teachers are given the more difficult ones. This construct of seniority undoes the work of creating a flat organizational structure. Administrators should ensure both veteran and novice teachers have a mixture of preferred opportunities in comparison to less preferred opportunities.

### *Becoming Political*

Public school systems are political by nature due to how they are funded. Compounded with the demands of SB 191, the political arena is difficult to navigate. However, schools themselves can become political arenas, as can school districts, which often leads to problematic power dynamics. This can create incentives for leaders not to follow through on their promises and make decisions for personal gain rather than the organization's vision. This can also lead to information not being shared openly or transparently. Administrators should be aware of when there is a culture of information not being openly shared and when decisions are not shared in their district and work to ensure that culture does not transpire to their school.

Although the participants did not mention SB 191 in their responses, a review of the literature makes it clear the bill is jeopardizing educator empowerment. The political arena in the state of Colorado is negatively impacting educators' decisions to not only stay in the profession but also to move into leadership positions (Bridich, 2013; Bridich, 2015; Crandell & Boyce, 2014; McNeal, 2013; NASSP, 2021; Smith & Kubacka, 2017; Warring, 2015). The fact the participants in this study did not mention the negative impacts of SB 191 on their journey of school leadership supports how critical high self-efficacy is. Due to the participants' high self-efficacy, SB 191 has merely been an obstacle for these participants to navigate. However, the literature makes it clear the negative impacts of SB 191 cannot be ignored. Therefore, school leaders and mentors *must* continue to build the self-efficacy of their peers and followers if they hope to see educators stay in the profession and in leadership roles.

## Implications for Practice

In combination with the literature, the findings support recommendations for school administrators, administrator preparation programs, and school districts. To make the

recommendations more accessible to practitioners, the recommendations have been organized in Figure 1 by ways to improve psychological empowerment, social-structural empowerment, transformational leadership, and trust.

| Social-Structrual Empowerment |
| --- |
| **Recommendations for School Administrators**<br>• Redesign the organizational structures of schools to ensure teachers may work collaboratively as teams<br>• Create committees in the school system for teachers to participate in and lead, allowing them to have a voice in decisions that impact the school<br>• Be transparent about decisions, and the information that informed those decisions, and welcome staff input when making decisions<br>• Create consistency in systems by sharing information about existing systems or job roles so that the systems may outlast the personnel<br>• Offer training relevant to teachers' roles so they may become experts in an area<br>• Practice coaching staff by giving regular critical and supportive feedback to help them achieve their professional goals in alignment with the organization's vision<br>• Create a shared decision-making model so it is clear to employees which decisions will be made solely by administrators, which decisions administrators will seek input on, and which decisions will be made via a democratic process<br>• Provide training to employees so they can effectively and autonomously perform their jobs and ensure employees have the resources and opportunities to implement the training in the classroom<br>• Be aware of problematic power dynamics and work to prevent cultures of disempowerment from developing<br><br>**Recommendations for Administrator Preparation Programs**<br>• Continue to offer online options, even after a post-pandemic return to normalcy, to make the program more accessible to aspiring administrators.<br>• Partner with districts to develop and recruit leaders from diverse backgrounds<br><br>**Recommendations for School Districts**<br>• Offer appropriate,competitive salaries for school administrators<br>• District leaders should establish a culture of "managed autonomy", in which the leader is taxed with setting clear, measurable goals and defining parameters for their followers, but their followers are given the power to use whatever strategy they feel is most appropriate to accomplish those goals<br>• Be aware of school administrators who are motivated for the wrong reasons and remove them from their roles |

**Figure 1**

*Recommendations for Practitioners*

**Psychological Empowerment**

**Recommendations for School Administrators**

- Encourage staff to take on leadership roles outside of their "comfort zone" and support them when they do
- Provide empowered teachers with learning opportunities and feedback to fuel their desire to grow
- Strive to make the impact of individuals clear by making the connection between their efforts and their outcomes explicit
- Develop formal and informal systems for peers to give each other positive recognition in the workplace
- Explicitly, publicly, and frequently recognize the positive contributions of staff
- Ensure both veteran and novice teachers have a mixture of "easy" and "challenging" tasks to provide opportunities for growth at all levels
- Step in to support teachers, and if necessary, have a conversation in private with the teacher on how they could avoid future situations where the administrator needs to take control

**Transformational Leadership**

**Recommendations for School Administrators**

- Intellectually stimulate educators by encouraging them to find innovative solutions to current problems and enable them to act on those solutions
- Be able to plan for the future
- Learn when to allow others to lead and when to be assertive and take control
- Understand and use one's own strengths and the strengths of team members to increase collective efficacy
- Practice and demonstrate active listening
- Have the integrity to have difficult conversations with stakeholders and make difficult decisions to grow the team toward their goals
- Build up the leadership of others and strive to become "a leader of leaders"
- Lead by example and demonstrate desired behaviors
- Set and articulate clear personal and collective visions
- Strike a balance between being assertive and collaborating with teachers in the decision-making process

**Figure 1** (continued)

| Trust |
| --- |
| **Recommendations for School Administrators**<br>• Intentionally delegate mentorship roles, tasks, and other responsibilities to teacher-leaders to demonstrate trust and recognize their capabilities, while being mindful to not delegate so much that teachers experience burnout<br>• Be visibly present in hallways and classrooms as much as possible<br>• Be mentally present when speaking with teachers by removing distractions and avoiding disruptions<br>• Build authentic relationships with staff by being vulnerable and open<br>• Give teachers insight to who you are outside of school and learn about their lives outside of school<br>• Demonstrate consistency through actions, such as by showing up dependably and predictably<br>• Follow through on promises<br>• Build trust with staff by volunteering in the classrooms to better understand teacher perspectives<br>• Create a safe space for staff to ask for help and share ideas by demonstrating openness and being consistently caring in response to teachers' concerns<br>• Prioritize teachers' physical safety by checking on them to ensure they are safe, showing up to support in times of crisis, and stepping in to provide staff breaks as needed |

**Figure 1** (continued)

## Implications for Future Research

The limitations of this study stem largely from the time spent in the field, the sample, and experience of the researcher, which suggests more detailed, longitudinal studies should be conducted before the findings of this research can be applied to other populations. This study was conducted over a relatively short period, which limited opportunities of triangulation and crystallization. This study could have been enhanced by enlarging the sample size, observing the participants in the field, or through observing the participants' growth over time. Because the case study used a convenience sample, the relationship the participants had with the researcher, and the relationship the participants had with each other, researcher subjectivity played a greater role than desired.

Additional research is needed to explore the different factors that affect teacher motivation to transition into school leadership in different demographic regions and educational systems. Factors associated with different school cultures may limit or encourage opportunities

for leadership practices at given schools. 27J Schools is unique in that it has a small district leadership team, district leadership provides close support to its administrators, and district leadership prioritizes empowerment. Conducting this same study in larger districts, or in districts where the political arena plays a greater role on staff, may therefore produce different results.

It is also important to explore various methodological strategies around leadership (Eliophotou-Menon & Ioannou, 2016). For example, a quantitative approach could serve to investigate how strongly the school's culture affects feelings of trust and empowerment. Employing various methodologies could more effectively inspect various aspects of teacher leadership and serve as a comparison for the findings in this study.

This study also brought up additional questions to be explored. Cultures of disempowerment and some dimensions of disempowerment were discussed throughout the interviews. A further study could explore cultures of disempowerment to produce further suggestions for administrators who need to turn a culture of disempowerment to one of empowerment.

## Summary

This study illuminated the experiences of school administrators who have recently transitioned from a teaching role into an administrative one to identify the leadership behaviors and actions they found empowering and the leadership behaviors and actions they use to create cultures of empowerment at their own schools. This study was designed to identify the leadership actions and behaviors that school administrators who have recently transitioned from a teaching position associated with empowerment. Semi-structured interviews elicited the participants' experiences of empowerment and disempowerment and how they work to create cultures of empowerment at their schools. The participants illuminated their experiences of

empowerment as they became leaders. They shared the transformational leadership behaviors they witnessed in others and fostered in themselves as they created cultures of empowerment in their own schools.

This study found transitioning to formal leadership includes being empowered through informal leadership roles such as committees or being a teacher-leader, having access to pathways to become a leader such as job opportunities or time to pursue an administrator license program, and being pushed outside one's comfort zone. Participants described the qualities effective leaders possess and the qualities of psychological empowerment one must have to take the necessary risks to become a school leader. Effective leaders should be proactive, assertive, collaborative, and flexible. They should be active listeners and have integrity. Leaders also have qualities of psychological empowerment that make them effective. They have high self-efficacy, they are passionate, they have a desire to grow, and they intend to make an impact. They often have a support system of peers, family, or mentors.

To build cultures of empowerment, participants shared how they lead by example, have a vision, and build trust. Building trust was a key finding involving several facets: being present and visible, being transparent and open, trusting others, building authentic relationships, being predictable and consistent, and demonstrating competence and care. Creating a culture of empowerment involves recognizing the strengths of others, coaching one's staff through feedback and mentorship, and sharing power, which is implemented through managed autonomy, shared decision-making, and providing resources and opportunities.

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# APPENDIX A: 27J APPROVAL

SCHOOL DISTRICT 27J
*"Reaching Out In All Directions"*
18551 East 160th Avenue
Brighton, CO 80601-3295
(303) 655-2900 FAX (303) 655-2870
Chris Fiedler, Ed.D., Superintendent

December 16, 2022

Colorado State University
Institutional Review Board
321 General Services Building
Campus Delivery 2011
Fort Collins, CO 80523-2011
Attention: IRB Office

Dear IRB;

I am aware that Alessandra Schiavone, a graduate student in the School of Education at Colorado State University, is conducting a research study entitled: "The Intersection Between Transformational Leadership and Empowerment: The Role it Plays on Educators in Public Schools Post-COVID," and she has shared with me the details of the study. 27J Schools understand the study and feel comfortable that the participants in this study will be adequately protected, and I give Alessandra permission to conduct this study in our district.

Alessandra has access to the participants' email addresses so she may make contact explaining the study and set up an interview.

27J Schools requests that the district name and identifiers of its employees be kept confidential in the research results. Alessandra has agreed to provide my office a copy of the CSU IRB approval document before beginning recruitment.

If there are any questions, please contact my office at 303-655-2941.

Sincerely,

Karla J Reider

Karla Reider
Director of Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction

# APPENDIX B: ADULT CONSENT FORM

**ADULT PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT**

**Department of School of Education**

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**Participant Study Title:**

***The Intersection Between Transformational Leadership and Empowerment: The Role it Plays on Educators in Public Schools Post-COVID***

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Donna Cooner, EdD**

**STUDENT INVESTIGATOR(S)**: Alessandra Schiavone, Co-Principal Investigator

**WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?**

For questions or concerns about the study, you may contact **Alessandra Schiavone, Co-Principal Investigator** at **570-242-3048.**

For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted, contact the CSU Institutional Review Board at: CSU_IRB@colostate.edu; 970-491-1553.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate teachers' perspectives of how acts of transformational leadership fosters empowerment in school settings. Although much research has been done on strategies to empower teachers in theory, educators' perspectives on these strategies have yet to be considered. Little is also known about how empowerment is woven into the daily actions of administrators and teacher-leaders and how they empower their colleagues. This study set out to understand what specific experiences educators value in their journey of empowerment.

**WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?**

You are being invited to participate in the study because you fit these criteria: You currently work in 27J Schools and have in the last three years transitioned from a teaching role to an administrative role.

**WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?**

The interview will take place over Zoom and will last 30 to 60 minutes.

**WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

Answer several open-ended questions around what empowerment means to you, ways you have been empowered, and ways you seek to empower your staff.

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

There is no direct benefit to you as a participant in this study, but we hope to learn more about the intersection between transformational leadership and empowerment and may help to empower teachers to become teacher leaders in the future. Participants will be able to reflect on their own experiences and may gain insight on how to empower their staff.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**

While the level of risk of loss of confidentiality is minimal, you may become uncomfortable with some questions related to your lived experiences regarding empowerment being shared with the district in which you are employed.

It should be known that the researcher is currently also employed by 27J schools. This information is being disclosed to all participants and will be reported in the final dissertation.

Approval from 27J schools to conduct this research has been granted. Participants may share negative commentary about the school district, which may cause a reputational risk to the employee. To mitigate this risk, pseudonyms will be used and names of schools will be omitted from the study. Additionally negative commentary will only be used for comparative analysis of what empowerment is and what empowerment is not. This is for the researcher's purposes only. When findings are reported, negative commentary will not be included and only described as, "a comparative analysis of the coded dated found empowerment is/is not..."

**WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**
You will be compensated $25 for participating in this research.

**WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?**
All information gathered in this study will be kept as confidential as possible. Your privacy is very important to us, and the researchers will take every measure to protect it. Your information may be given out if required by law, as the researcher is a mandated reporter, for example, for example, the law may require us to show your information to a court OR *to tell authorities if we believe you have abused a child, or you pose a danger to yourself or someone else.* However, otherwise, the researchers will do their best to make sure that any information that is released will not identify you. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. For this study, we will assign a code to your data so that the only place your name will appear in our records is on the consent and in our data spreadsheet which links you to your code. Only the research team will have access to the link between you, your code, and your data. All records will be stored in an encrypted folder on a password protected laptop for three years after completion of the study. After the storage time, the information gathered will be destroyed. Your information collected as part of this research will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

We may be asked to share the research files with the sponsor or the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee for auditing purposes. Your identity/record of receiving compensation (NOT your data) may be made available to CSU officials for financial audits.

You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people.

The findings of participant responses will be shared with 27J Schools in the form of a dissertation.

**DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?**
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decline to take part in the project. You can decline to answer any questions and are free to stop taking part in the project at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate in the research and whether or not you choose to answer any questions or

continue participating in the project, there will be no penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me at *570-242-3048* or *allieschiavone@gmail.com.* You may also contact Donna Cooner at donna.cooner@colostate.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at: 970-491-1553, or e-mail CSU_IRB@colostate.edu .

**PERMISSION TO AUDIOTAPE/VIDEO TAPE INTERVIEWS OR INTERVENTIONS**

The researchers would like to audiotape your interview to be sure that your comments are accurately recorded. Only our research team will have access to the audiotapes, and they will be destroyed when we have them transcribed.

CONSENT

Do you consent for your interview to be audiotaped?

___Yes

___No

If you wish to participate in this study, please sign and date below. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your own records.

**Participant Consent:**

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and voluntarily wish to participate in this research. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing __ pages.

_____ _____

Signature of participant Date

_____

Name of participant

_____ _____

Signature of person providing information Date

_____

Name of person providing information

# APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

*Colorado State University – School of Education*
450 W Pitkin St; Fort Collins, CO 80521
(970) 491-6317
soeinfo@colostate.edu | chhs.colostate.edu/soe

December 23, 2022
Dear Participant,

My name is Alessandra Schiavone and I am a researcher from Colorado State University in the School of Education department. We are conducting a research study on the transformational leadership behaviors that empower teachers to transition from a teaching role into a school administrative role. The title of our project is *The Intersection Between Transformational Leadership and Empowerment: The Role it Plays on Educators in Public Schools Post-COVID.* The Principal Investigator is Donna Cooner and the Co-Principal Investigator is Alessandra Schiavone.

We invite you to partake in an interview, telling of your lived experiences regarding empowerment as you transitioned from a teacher to administrator role. The interviews will take place via Zoom at a time that suits your schedule. Participation will take approximately 30 – 60. minutes. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty.

Your confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study. Pseudonyms will be employed, and the recording of your interview will be secured on a password protected laptop. While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge on how to empower teachers to become school leaders and retain them in the field of education. For your time, you will be compensated $25.

There are limited risks to the participants in this study. 27J Schools is aware this research is taking place and the findings will be shared with the Director of Curriculum and Assessment. Although every effort will be taken to ensure confidentiality, loss of confidentiality is always a risk. Therefore, as the participant, you may wish to consider the risks involved in sharing your lived experiences within the district.

If you would like to participate or have any questions, please contact Alessandra Schiavone at allieschiavone@gmail.com or Donna Cooner at donna.cooner@colostate.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: CSU_IRB@colostate.edu; 970-491-1553.

Sincerely,

Donna Cooner (EdD)
Professor

Alessandra Schiavone
PhD Candidate