

## Does Principal Leadership Style Matter in Retaining Teachers?

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### Abstract

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*The purpose of this quantitative survey research was to test the theories of transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership by comparing for differences in the traits of the three as perceived by the teachers from their principal to the stated retention intent of teachers at a single school district. Transformational leadership characteristics were found to universally support greater teacher retention. In contrast, participant scores for passive-avoidant leadership traits among their principals indicated a relationship between passive-avoidant characteristics and teachers intending to leave the district (turnover). Although one transactional trait, contingent reward, was found to support retention among the teacher population, management by exception was not found to be a significant variable. These findings support the idea that this district should train their principals in the use of transformational leadership toward attempting to raise the teacher retention rate.*

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**Keywords:** Turnover, Retention, Leadership

### 1. Introduction

Teacher retention rates have been a concern in the United States for some time (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008; Brooks-Young, 2007; Brown & Wynn, 2009; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Mihans, 2008). Increasing teacher turnover in the U.S. has resulted in increased financial costs to local governments, and by default, the U.S. taxpayer (Brown & Wynn, 2009). Although the associated cost estimates for high teacher turnover vary, national statistics suggest a cost of roughly 5 billion dollars annually (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005). In addition, new teachers are at an increased risk for turnover, with as much as 50% choosing to leave the field within the first three years of teaching (Brooks-Young, 2007; Colgan, 2004). Therefore, researchers have suggested that instead of focusing the majority of resources on recruitment of new teachers as a solution to vacancies, school district administrators should remain focused on retention of existing teachers (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008; Colgan, 2004; Gardner, 2010).

One area that has been shown to affect retention among our nation's teachers is leadership. Research has demonstrated strong, supportive leadership can increase teacher satisfaction and increase retention (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008; Easley, 2006; Mihans, 2008; Park, Henkin, & Egle, 2005). Certain traits of both the transformational and transactional leadership models have been noted to support teacher retention (Chin, 2007; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999), with a current focus on transformational leadership characteristics (Brooks-Young, 2007; Brown & Wynn, 2009; Easley, 2006; Gardner, 2010; Mihans, 2008). This study examines the elements of different leadership styles to identify the specific characteristics that support teacher retention toward developing an educational leadership model that can address the problem of decreased teacher retention and increased turnover.

### 2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to test the theories of transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership by comparing for differences in the individual traits for each of the three theories perceived by the teacher from their principal to the stated retention intent for teachers at a single school district. The independent variables were defined as the perceived transformational, transactional, or passive-avoidant leadership traits experienced by the teacher participant from their principal.

The dependent variable was defined as the teacher's self-reported retention intent. Identifying the principal leadership traits and associated style with a higher reported teacher retention intention decision could ultimately affect further research work to reduce turnover and the associated replacement costs.

### **3. Research Questions**

RQ 1: Are there differences in teacher retention decisions (stay or leave) based on the leadership style of the principal in one school district in Central Texas?

This first research question helped to establish whether there is a possible difference between the type of leadership encountered by the teacher from the principal, and their reported retention intentions. Establishing this difference made relevant the specific theory traits encountered by the teacher, and laid the foundation for question two.

RQ2: Which specific transformational (individualized consideration, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence), transactional (contingent reward and management by exception-active), or passive-avoidant (management by exception-passive and laissez-faire) leadership traits perceived by the teacher result in different retention intentions reported by teachers in one school district in Central Texas?

This second research question attempted to identify the specific transformational, transactional, or passive-avoidant leadership traits perceived by the teacher from the principal that result in a difference in the teacher's reported desire to retain (stay) or turnover (leave). For this second research question, multiple hypotheses were tested and will be presented later.

### **4. Transactional Leadership Model**

Burns (1978) described the relationship between the transactional leader and the follower as one that is enhanced by several understandings between the leader and the followers. These understandings create a mutual dependency, where the leader fills the needs of the follower in exchange for performing some task to standard. The leader in this scenario thus becomes dependent on the follower to get the work done. Mitchell and Tucker (1992) suggested that transactional leadership is most effective when both the leader and the followers know what should be done in a given work situation. Another argument for transactional methods came from Reitz (1971), who outlined that followers most appreciate leaders who praise acceptable and punish unacceptable behavior.

Employed appropriately, transactional leadership methods generate constructive behaviors and corrective responses (Burns, 1978). Avolio and Bass (2004), in a discussion of their Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, further classified transactional leadership behavior into two primary areas, contingent reward and management by exception-active. Burns (1978) and Bass (1990) disagreed on the relationship between transactional and transformational leadership. Burns viewed the transactional and transformational models as separate and distinct, while Bass viewed them as a continuum where both methods could be used in concert with each other.

### **5. Transformational Leadership Model**

The transformational leadership model is focused on four main interests. Those interests are individualized consideration, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence (Bass, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1990; Krishnan, 2001; Sarros & Santora, 2001). These four characteristics form a relationship between the leader and the led where the leader expects the led to subordinate their personal goals to the goals of the group (Banerji & Krishnan, 2000). It has also been shown in a study of 95 pairs of superiors and subordinates in a non-profit organization that transformational leaders have a better relationship with their own leaders than transactional leaders (Krishnan, 2001). This finding was echoed in the results of a meta-analysis considering teachers from both the U.S. and Taiwan (Chin, 2007). The primary method of teaching subordinates within the transformational leadership model is role modeling (Bass, 1999; Bass, 1990). Krishnan (2001) found that transformational leaders value the welfare of the group above their own, which then becomes the foundation for the leader to role model. Once again, the four traits of transformational leadership are individualized consideration, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence (Bass, 1999).

### **6. Passive-Avoidant Leadership Model**

The passive-avoidant leadership model is written about and studied much less often than are the transformational and transactional models. Bass (1990) defined passive-avoidant leadership as either management by exception-passive or laissez-faire in nature.

Bass (1985) reported that most survey research on leaders who employ this model found no significant increase in the subordinate's perception of the leader's effectiveness or their satisfaction with the leader. Likewise, Bass (1990, p. 546) stated that the laissez-faire leadership model has been found to be the "least satisfying and effective management style." With that in mind, perceptions of the passive-avoidant and laissez-faire leadership styles reported as having a positive relationship to teacher retention intentions was not expected.

## **7. Leadership and Teacher Turnover**

Researchers have suggested that a move from a traditional transactional leadership model in education to an inclusion of the transformational model will help increase the teacher retention rate (Chin, 2007; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). Supporting this assertion, prior research has shown transformational leadership behaviors in principals as supporting a positive effect on teacher retention (Blasé, 1990; Brooks-Young, 2007; Brown & Wynn, 2009; Easley, 2006; Ebmeier, 2003; Erez, 1987; Gardner, 2010; Hipp, 1997; Linotos, 1993; Mihans, 2008; Park, Henkin, & Egley, 2005; Sagor, 1992). This suggests that the historical use of the transactional leadership model alone in education may be partly to blame for the current higher than desired turnover rates. This point is significant to this study, and provides the impetus for a review of the transformational leadership model alongside of the transactional leadership model.

Boe et al. reported that the two main reasons that teachers turn-over were (a) leaving for a more desirable position, and (b) having a perceived lack of support from leadership. Mihans (2008) reported findings that teachers who perceive lower levels of support from their leadership experience higher levels of burnout and dissatisfaction, and that increased principal support of teachers is the most important thing that can be done to lower teacher turnover. In a meta-analysis, Chin (2007) found that teachers who experience higher levels of transformational leadership have higher levels of job satisfaction, school effectiveness as perceived by teachers, and student achievement. Chin's analysis appears to pull together the findings of many other studies where individual traits of leadership are the focus of increased levels of satisfaction. This is consistent with the other findings in the area of teacher retention.

## **8. Study Population and Sampling**

The sample frame (population) for this study included all K-12 teachers in the studied school district. The reported turnover rate for three recent school years (2009-2013) for this district has been steady at about 13%. The inclusion criteria for this sample included, participants must be a classroom teacher within the studied district, they must have at least two years of classroom teaching experience, and they must volunteer to participate in the study. The approach used for this quantitative study was census based on inclusion criteria. The focus was on teachers from one Central Texas school district (permission was granted). The selection of the specific school district from which to recruit teacher participants represented a convenience sample, but since all classroom teachers who meet the inclusion criteria were invited, the overall study is considered census sampling based on inclusion criteria.

The sample used for this study was homogeneous in that the sample included classroom teachers who are employed by the studied district. The sample frame for this study was about 900 (fluctuating number due to teacher turnover). The sample size was determined using a standard power analysis conducted through a recommended site from the US Department of Health and Human Services (<https://www.hrsa.gov/index.html>).

Given this information, this research study used a confidence level of 95% and a confidence interval of 10%. Based on these criteria, a minimum sample of eighty-seven observations was desirable to meet minimal sampling requirements. The actual number of usable responses was seventy-seven (see summary of results).

## **9. Instrumentation**

The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Form 5X Short) was the instrument used in this study—with one added question for the dependent variable. The MLQ5X Short consists of 45 questions. The MLQ has been validated by both the discriminatory and confirmatory factor analysis and is considered appropriate for both field and laboratory research (Avolio & Bass, 2004). The MLQ can be used to help explain the effect that different types of leaders (school principals) have on their teachers (Avolio & Bass, 1999), which supports the research questions in this study.

The MLQ5X Short instrument provided data related to principal leadership characteristics. The MLQ5X uses a five point Likert scale: 0 = *Not at all*, 1 = *Once in a while*, 2 = *Sometimes*, 3 = *Fairly often*, and 4 = *Frequently, if not always*. The data obtained served as the independent variable for this study. The MLQ5X data provided participant perceptions of their principal as either more transformational, transactional, or avoidant in nature (ordinal data). In addition, the data from the MLQ5X were further broken down by categories. Transformational type responses were broken down further into one of the four primary behaviors of individual consideration, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, or idealized influence. The transactional type responses were further broken down into either contingent reward or management by exception-active. Finally, the passive-avoidant type responses were broken down into either management by exception-passive or laissez-faire.

The additional question included on the survey was used to assess the level of intent to remain (retain) within the studied district. Each participant responded to this additional question as either intend to *retain* (value of 2), or intend to *turnover* (value of 1). This retention intention response was used as the dependent variable. The average response number was compared using *ANOVA* for each leadership style and leadership trait (see Data Analysis section).

The added question to assess retention intention was field tested by five expert panelists. The survey question elicited participant agreement (yes or no) with the following statement: “I plan to return to work as a teacher in the same district next year.” Each panelist had at least a Master’s level degree and had been teaching for at least 10 years. Each panelist was asked several questions about the above added survey question, which included (a) Is the question clear; (b) Does the question ask the teacher’s desire to stay in their current district; and (c) Do you think there will be reluctance to answering the question honestly? All five panelists answered the three questions the same with responses of “yes,” “yes,” and “no,” respectively. Therefore, no changes were made to the added survey question.

## 10. Data Collection

Prospective participants were asked to respond that they had met the inclusion criteria and that they agreed to respond to the survey. Once they indicated agreement with the implied informed consent form they were granted access to the online survey (MLQ5X Short plus one additional question to assess retention intention). The survey was completed online by way of Survey Monkey. Results of the survey were stored on the secure Survey Monkey server until downloaded by the researcher to a password protected personal computer for analysis.

## 11. Data Analysis

The primary statistical procedure used in this study is the one-way analysis of variance (*ANOVA*). This was the case for all of the hypotheses. Meltzoff (2004) described *ANOVA* as, “A statistical procedure used to determine whether the variation among the means of several levels of an independent variable, or the means of several individual variables and their interactions, vary more than would be expected by chance.” *ANOVA* was used to test the null hypotheses in that there is a difference in the independent variables of transformational leadership, transactional leadership and passive-avoidant leadership attributes as determined in the MLQ survey instrument in the two different responses available for the added question about retention (dependent variable).

The chi-square test also was used to compare the results of the additional retention question (dependent variable) with the overall classification of leadership type garnered from the scored MLQ survey providing one of three leadership styles encountered (categorical independent variable). The goal was to either reject or accept the null hypotheses with a confidence level of 95%. Data were analyzed using SPSS software. Missing independent variable data were handled based on the MLQ guidelines. Any participant data with missing dependent variable data were excluded from the study.

## 12. Summary of Results

Seventy-seven usable surveys were analyzed in the results. Due to small sample sizes in the sub-groups in the sample, demonstration of normal distribution as an assumption for the inferential statistics was difficult to ascertain. The *ANOVA* analyses were, therefore, supported by the use of a non-parametric alternative. The results of both *ANOVA* and non-parametric analysis were similar, confirming the results of the study. The Likert-scaled items were operationalized as being continuous by utilizing a sum or average of the scores received from each item on the questionnaire. A summary of the results for each research question and hypothesis is provided.

RQ 1: Data analysis of the three leadership style tendency scores (sum of scores for each leadership characteristic by associated leadership style) and retention intention using *ANOVA* revealed significant differences in mean scores for transformational and passive-avoidant leadership tendencies ( $p < .001$ ). Transactional leadership tendency score did not demonstrate a significant difference in retention intentions of the teachers ( $p = .214$ ). Using chi square analysis of a created categorical variable of leadership style based on the highest leadership style tendency score for each participant against retention intentions (retain or turnover) revealed a significant relationship and difference in the strongest leadership style tendency and teacher retention intentions ( $p = 0.10$ ).

RQ2: To answer the second research question, asking which specific transformational (individualized consideration, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence), transactional (contingent reward and management by exception-active), or passive-avoidant (management by exception-passive and laissez-faire) leadership traits perceived from the principal result in different retention intentions reported by teachers in one school district in Central Texas, the following eight hypotheses were addressed:

H1: A significant difference was found in the reported scores offered by the teacher participants related to transformational characteristic of individualized consideration in their principal and the teachers' reported intention to retain or turnover. Teachers who reported an intention to retain demonstrated higher scores in individualized consideration for their principals compared to teachers who reported an intention to turnover.

H2: A significant difference was found in the reported scores offered by the teacher participants related to transformational characteristic of inspiration in their principal and the teachers' reported intention to retain or turnover. Teachers who reported an intention to retain demonstrated higher scores in inspiration for their principals compared to teachers who reported an intention to turnover.

H3: A significant difference was found in the reported scores offered by the teacher participants related to transformational characteristic of intellectual stimulation in their principal and the teachers' reported intention to retain or turnover. Teachers who reported an intention to retain demonstrated higher scores in intellectual stimulation for their principals compared to teachers who reported an intention to turnover.

H4: A significant difference was found in the reported scores offered by the teacher participants related to transformational characteristic of idealized influence (both attributed and behavior) in their principal and the teachers' reported intention to retain or turnover. Teachers who reported an intention to retain demonstrated higher scores in idealized influence for their principals compared to teachers who reported an intention to turnover.

H5: A significant difference was found in the reported scores offered by the teacher participants related to the transactional characteristic of contingent reward in their principal and the teachers' reported intention to retain or turnover. Teachers who reported an intention to retain demonstrated higher scores in contingent reward for their principals compared to teachers who reported an intention to turnover.

H6: No significant difference was found in the reported scores offered by the teacher participants related to the transactional characteristic of management by exception (active) in their principal and the teachers' reported intention to retain or turnover.

H7: A significant difference was found in the reported scores offered by the teacher participants related to the passive-avoidant characteristic of management by exception (passive) in their principal and the teachers' reported intention to retain or turnover. Teachers who reported an intention to turnover demonstrated higher scores in management by exception (passive) for their principals compared to teachers who reported an intention to retain, whose scores were significantly lower.

H8: A significant difference was found in the reported scores offered by the teacher participants related to the passive-avoidant characteristic of laissez-faire in their principal and the teachers' reported intention to retain or turnover. Teachers who reported an intention to turnover demonstrated higher scores in laissez-faire for their principals compared to teachers who reported an intention to retain, whose scores were significantly lower.

Related to the first research question, the data analysis revealed significant differences in mean scores for transformational and passive-avoidant leadership tendencies by retention intention ( $p < .001$ ); however, the transactional leadership tendency score did not demonstrate a significant difference in retention intentions of the teachers ( $p = .214$ ). Using the highest leadership tendency score to delineate leadership style, the chi square analysis of leadership style and retention intentions supported a significant relationship ( $p = 0.10$ ).

To address the second research question, a total of eight hypotheses were tested, providing significant results. A significant difference was found in the reported scores offered by the teacher participants related to their principals' transformational characteristics of individualized consideration, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence and the teachers' reported intention to retain or turnover. Higher scores for these perceived principal characteristics were evident among teachers who reported an intention to retain (H1, H2, H3, H4). Contrasting results were found related to the passive-avoidant characteristics of management by exception (passive) and laissez-faire; higher scores for these perceived principal characteristics were evident among teachers who reported an intention to turnover, or leave the position (H7, H8). The results for characteristics associated with transactional leadership were split, with the characteristic of contingent reward demonstrating significantly higher scores among teachers with an intention to retain (H5), and the characteristic of management by exception (active) demonstrating no significant differences based on retention intention (H6).

### 13. Discussion

The study results identified significant differences in teacher retention based on the perception of principal transformational leadership style, which supported teacher retention intentions, and passive-avoidant leadership style, which supported teacher turnover intentions. However, transactional leadership style tendencies were not found to be significantly related to teacher retention intentions.

Breaking down the leadership styles by characteristics provided insight into the different aspects of leadership that support retention, highlighting the positive effects of transformational leadership characteristics. Results of this study show that all measured characteristics associated with transformational leadership (individual consideration, inspiration motivation, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence - both attributed and behavior variants) supported higher teacher retention intentions. Individualized consideration by definition entails coaching of subordinates through the assignment of growth opportunities within the work environment (Bass, 1999). Within the concept of individualized consideration, the subordinate understands that the leader values them as a member of a team, and that their concerns and needs are important to the leader and the organization (Sarros & Santora, 2001). This result supported the assertion of Park et al. (2005), who found that principals who promote higher levels of teamwork and resultant stronger feelings of team belonging tend to have higher teacher retention rates. This also relates to meeting the needs of teachers in terms of providing support, a key variable related to teacher turnover in the literature.

Transformational leadership characteristics of inspiration and idealized influence relate to the leader as an example and role model, respectively (Bass, 1999; Sarros & Santora, 2001). Transformational leadership requires ethical role modeling, promoting understanding of acceptable methods and behaviors within the organization (Bass, 1999). The findings of this study support the conclusion that transformational characteristics supporting leading by example and role models are related to teacher retention through providing support to the new and existing teachers. Bennis and Nanus (1985) and Easley (2006) similarly posited that leaders should model high standards of behavior (or moral leadership), and therefore, through transformational leadership, a caring environment is created in which people challenge each other toward enhanced performance (Bass, 1999). Easley (2006) indicated a significant relationship between the moral leadership of principals and teacher retention, and suggested the importance of transformational leadership traits.

This type of caring and stimulating environment also relates to another transformational characteristic that was found in this study to relate to teacher retention, that of intellectual stimulation. Leaders who enable their subordinates to become more creative and innovative are intellectually stimulating their team members (Bass, 1999; Sarros & Santora, 2001).

In the present study, results indicate a positive relationship between transformational leadership characteristics and teacher retention, a finding that supports the analysis offered by Chin (2007). According to Chin (2007) teachers who experience higher levels of transformational leadership have higher levels of job satisfaction, school effectiveness as perceived by teachers, and student achievement, pulling together prior research on leadership and job satisfaction. Thus, transformational leadership tends to increase job satisfaction and teacher commitment, factors which decrease teacher turnover intentions (Chin, 2007).

Important factors noted in prior research to relate to teacher retention were the sense of support and motivation (Boe et al., 2008; Colgan, 2004; Garner, 2010; Mancuso, Roberts, & White, 2012; Mihans, 2008). Looking more closely at the issue of leadership support, Mancuso et al. (2012) identified the characteristics defining teacher perceptions of leadership support to be generally associated with transformational and distributed leadership. Boe et al. (2008) reported that one reason that teachers turnover was having a perceived lack of support from leadership. The opposite was also true, as a lower perceived level of support has been found to correlate to higher levels of burnout and dissatisfaction (Garner, 2010; Mihans, 2008). Indeed, Garner (2010) and Mihans (2008) contended that increased principal support of teachers is the most important thing that can be done to lower teacher turnover.

In contrast, and as expected, to these characteristics associated with transformational leadership and the relationship with teacher retention, the two leadership characteristics associated with passive-avoidant leadership, namely management by exception (passive) and laissez-faire, were found to support teacher turnover intentions. The passive management by exception leader is characterized by providing negative reinforcement in spite of giving no clear direction (Avolio et al., 1999).

The transactional characteristics (contingent reward and management by exception-active) were found to be split in terms of the relationship to retention; contingent reward was found to support teacher retention (rated higher among teachers intending to retain), whereas, management by exception (active) failed to support turnover or retention intention, although this characteristic was rated highest among teachers intending to turnover, albeit not statistically significant.

Whereas contingent reward works on positive reinforcement in the form of leader exchanges of rewards and/or recognition for effort, management by exception is based on negative reinforcement (Avolio et al., 1999) and involves the leaders' critiquing undesired follower behavior actively, in which the leader actively looks for behaviors that need to be addressed (Avolio et al., 1999). The split among the two traits associated with transactional leadership style may explain why the transactional leadership style failed to demonstrate a significant relationship with teacher retention intentions in this study. It is noted that the results of this analysis demonstrated that the more positive form of transactional characteristic of contingent reward was positively related to retention, while the negative characteristic was related to teacher turnover, suggesting that the more positive environment promotes retention.

Researchers have suggested that a move from a traditional transactional leadership model in education to an inclusion of the transformational model will help increase the teacher retention rate (Chin, 2007; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). This assertion has been supported by the results of this present research as well as other prior research demonstrating a positive relationship between transformational leadership traits in principals and teacher retention (Blasé, 1990; Brooks-Young, 2007; Brown & Wynn, 2009; Easley, 2006; Ebmeier, 2003; Erez, 1987; Gardner, 2010; Hipp, 1997; Linotos, 1993; Mihans, 2008; Park et al., 2005; Sagor, 1992). The findings of this study support the notion that the historical use of the transactional leadership model in education may be contributing to the problem of teacher turnover and substantiate conclusions that the use of transformational leadership characteristics along with contingent rewards of the transactional leadership model may improve teacher retention. However, additional research is necessary to support this assertion.

#### **14. Limitations**

This study was designed to examine the relationship between teacher retention intentions and the various characteristics of three types of leadership (transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant) among school principals, as perceived by the teachers. The retention intention data collected remained focused only on voluntary retention or turnover. The sample population was limited to a single public school district in Central Texas. Participants were voluntary and therefore may represent a biased sample, as teachers willing to participate may demonstrate particularly strong opinions with regard to school leadership.

Therefore, the results of this study may be generalizeable only to the district and similar districts in this geographic area.

## 15. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to identify leadership characteristics that support teacher retention. Transformational leadership characteristics were found to universally support greater teacher retention with scores significantly higher among teachers intending to retain. In contrast, participant scores for passive-avoidant leadership traits among their principals indicated a relationship between passive-avoidant characteristics and teacher turnover, with higher scores common among teachers intending to leave. Perhaps critical to the findings of this study is the result related to the traditionally used transactional leadership traits in the educational setting. Although one transactional trait, contingent reward, was found to support retention among the teacher population, management by exception was not found to be a significant variable, with scores for this characteristic higher among teachers planning to turnover and lower among teachers planning to retain, although not significantly. The findings of this study support efforts to provide leadership training to principals to promote transformational leadership characteristics within the school work environment toward supporting teacher retention.

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