

SETTING THE THERMOSTAT: THE DEGREE OF INFLUENCE OF LEADERSHIP  
ON SPECIAL EDUCATION EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

by

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(Under the Direction of Jamon Flowers)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine what educational leaders' actions influence the degree of employee engagement within a Special Education Department of a large urban elementary school. Specifically, the action research team measured the outcomes of actions from the lens of special education leaders and special education employees. Researchers sought to determine what actionable behaviors leaders employed to create engagement among the staff members. Using action research cycles, three thematic findings emerged from the study. Intentional and authentic connections surfaced as the first theme. These connections were meaningful both between colleagues as well as between colleagues and leaders. Educators interact more frequently with direct colleagues than further removed leaders. Understanding this data support the second theme of tiered hierarchal support of engagement. Data indicated that employees understand that engagement may look different depending on the leader's level in the hierarchy; however, they wanted the engagement not to represent something else the leader must check off a list of tasks. The final theme of reflective practices encompassed understanding an individual's role in supporting engagement within a school. These

findings support that school leaders must be purposeful in fostering employee engagement within their schools and align their efforts with documented employee needs.

**INDEX WORDS:** Authentic connections, Employee engagement, School leaders, Special education, Teacher burn-out, Tiered engagement, Reflective practices

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. Carving out the time to allow me this opportunity often required scheduling Olympics and forced you all to take on additional responsibilities. I will always value your support along this journey. I love you all so much.

Clint, Melanie, and Natalie, you have demonstrated extreme grace when my time is stretched thin and always provided encouraging words. Clint, you have never questioned my aspirations or abilities. You have removed barriers and allowed me to chase my dreams since we were in high school. I cannot thank you enough for your unwavering love and support. Melanie, you have been my research buddy, listened to endless stories along this dissertation path, and have been a great editor. Natalie, you never batted an eye when I brought my laptop to your events and completely stepped up to the plate to help around the house when I was busy. I am beyond thankful I get to be your mom.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Current research indicates an overall decline in education employment, specifically within the field of special education (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Work, by any definition, requires some effort to achieve a result. Research clarifies that a special education teacher's job expectations and workload outweigh that of a general education teacher (Bettini et al., 2017). This increased workload may lead to burnout, and the solution to burnout is engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2009). There is a fundamental need to improve the work engagement of special education teachers to positively influence work outcomes (Edward et al., 2018).

Gallup, a global analytic and advice firm, defined engaged employees as "those who are involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work and workplace" (Gallup, n.d.). This "engagement is characterized by energy, involvement and perceived efficacy" of an individual (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2014, p. 299). Work engagement is "a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli et al., 2006, p. 702). In contrast, burnout is the detached attitude evidenced by the physical, cognitive, and affective exhaustion experienced by employees dealing with high work demands (Demerouti et al., 2003).

The goal of education is to impart content knowledge to students, and there are multiple data sources to ensure the accountability of school systems to complete this task. Historically, this concentration on academic and student-specific data and success rates often overshadowed a

focus on teacher engagement. Employee engagement is crucial to any field; however, in the highly demanding field of teaching, the engagement of staff members is imperative to keep morale high and prevent burnout (Guglielmi et al., 2016; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2014). According to Bakker et al. (2003), teachers with higher engagement are less likely to leave the workforce. Teachers of high-needs students, including special education teachers, are at the highest risk of leaving the profession without adequate support (Ansley et al., 2019). With the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on education, teacher burnout, and teacher shortages are receiving more attention (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021). Putting a focus on efforts to address teacher engagement may help to change the trend of teacher burnout and therefore improve employee retention.

Alignment between the private workforce sector and education occurs when examining how engagement affects employees. Research has indicated that when employees are engaged, productivity increases along with positivity and high energy levels within the workplace (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2014; Van Allen, 2012). Increased productivity based on teacher engagement is evident in the educational field through lower teacher absenteeism, lower teacher turnover (Bakker et al., 2003; Cancio et al., 2018), and improved academic achievement (Bakker, 2005). Though these indicators, in isolation, can be tracked and lead to correlations of engagement, questions centered around the individual, contextual, and environmental factors that influence the degree of employee engagement in an educational environment remain.

Both leaders and employees must realize that engagement possesses internal and external driving forces. Internal forces are self-driven; Bakker and Demerouti (2008) believed individual resources could help to facilitate special education teachers' work engagement. External forces directly affect an organization's climate (Guglielmi et al., 2016). One specific external force directly related to the degree of an employee's engagement is leadership (Berens, 2013).

Leadership typically occurs through a management hierarchy, and within a school, this management is in the form of an administrative team. Though there are multiple contributors to staff members' engagement level in the school system, the principal, as the school leader, is the assumed most significant influencer (Balyer, 2012; Whitaker et al., 2013). Alazmi and Al-Mahdy (2020) noted in their study that "empirical findings have shown that authentic leadership has positive effects upon teacher engagement" (p. 397). Expressing the magnitude of this work, Horvathova et al. (2019) reiterated the importance of continuously monitoring engagement. Considering these points, local school leaders must allot time for daily minutiae and the complexities of summative tasks without neglecting time to strengthen employee engagement (Carasco-Saul et al., 2014).

This study seeks to determine the effect leadership actions have on employee engagement within the special education department of an elementary school. According to Bsoul (2022), "leadership is the ability of a person or group to influence people, to lead them to a common goal, and to motivate them to perform tasks" (p. 27). Parent and Lovelace (2015) expounded that "the root of change starts with creating a positive culture within the organization. Culture is primarily shaped by its management and its members" (p.13). Berens (2013) reiterates the role of a leader in grounding employees in the knowledge of their impact on an organization by stating, "If leaders want their people to think and act differently, they must first take a hard look at their behaviors and how that has affected culture and engagement" (p. 48).

Using an educational perspective, school leadership directly influences teacher engagement (Abonero, 2022). While research indicated evidence of previous studies surrounding the importance of a leader within an education environment, further research regarding specific leader actions on employee engagement is minimal (Carasco-Saul et al., 2014). When school

leaders use transformational leadership techniques, the teachers experience evidence of work engagement, including higher job satisfaction and less turnover (Bsoul, 2022).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Leader actions weigh heavily on the level of employee engagement. Determining the specific leader actions and how to leverage these leader actions is imperative to creating an environment that fosters and increases the degree of employee engagement. Currently, employee engagement in the Special Education Department of Bay Side County Public Schools (a pseudonym) has mixed results that encourage further examination. More specifically, Gallup Poll data from 2020 indicated that 70% of 174 employees considered themselves engaged in the work as a department. However, data from the previous three years is as follows: 2019- 191 respondents, 73%; 2018- 178 respondents, 55%; 2017- 153 respondents, 52%. There is interest in determining how this type of data demonstrates replication within Special Education Departments of individual schools within the Bay Side County Public Schools. As the field of education highly focuses on student achievement, there often needs to be a significant focus on the employees' engagement that directly influences this achievement.

### *Overview of the Research Site Context*

Reed Elementary School (RES, a pseudonym) is part of a large urban school system in the USA's southeast quadrant. There are 842 students within RES, and 21% receive services through the Special Education Department. The Special Education Department employs 56 individuals with a mix of teachers, paraprofessionals, and speech/language pathologists. Reed's Special Education Department supports students from preschool-5<sup>th</sup> grade with various special education eligibility categorizations. RES has two special education grade chairs, one special education assistant principal, and one principal supporting the department's work. With the



number of total employees within the Special Education Department of RES, one can assume the degree of engagement of each member will differ.

One way to measure employee engagement is through yearly Gallup Poll Ratings. Historically in BSCPS, each school garnered its employee engagement rating, and the subgroups within the district office also produced an employee engagement rating. Leaders of each school within the county then used individually chosen methodologies to address employee engagement. As the researcher attempted to look holistically at the engagement, analysis occurred of responses from questionnaires, interviews, researcher observations, focus groups, and a historical data review. As district-level support to special education leaders, the researcher sought to determine what leader actions influenced employee engagement for each school while supporting other schools in the potential replication of efforts. Finally, research can inform practices at the district level to support their special education department moving forward.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine what educational leaders' actions influence the degree of employee engagement within a Special Education Department of a large urban elementary school. Specifically, the action research team measured the outcomes of actions from the lens of special education leaders and special education employees. The researcher sought to determine what actionable behaviors leaders employed to create engagement among the staff members.

The researcher situated the guiding questions within historical documents, journals, questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. These questions sought to determine what employees articulated as the impact of specific leader actions in their engagement. They also explored how school leaders engaged in this purposeful work around employee engagement.

Finally, the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) used an inquiry-based, cyclical method to study leader actions around engagement and the employee responses and reactions to these actions.

### **Research Questions**

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do special education employees articulate leadership's impact on their overall engagement?
2. How do local school leaders articulate their role in the process of influencing employee engagement (i.e., the leader's perceptions of their engagement efforts toward employees)?
3. How does the action research team describe analyzing the processes and effects of leadership actions on employee engagement?

As this study will incorporate many terms specific to education, these terms were defined to situate the reader in the context of Bay Side County Public Schools.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following key terms are defined:

- "Work Engagement" refers to "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption" (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74) with "productiveness, motivation...and acceptance of new ideas displayed by administrative staff" (Hakanen et al., 2006)
- "Employee Engagement" refers to employees who see their work role and their own cognitive, emotional, and behavioral start as part of an organizational vision (Kahn, 1990; Wollard, 2010)

- "Administrator" refers to school and district-level leaders, including principals, assistant principals, coordinators, and directors
- "Coordinator" refers to special education leaders that provide instructional and compliance guidance to local school administrators and lead special education departments
- "Gallup Poll" refers to an online data collection system in which employees respond to a series of questions to determine their engagement within an organization
- "Special Education" refers to specially designed educational services offered to students who meet predetermined requirements set by the state
- "Paraprofessional (para pro)" refers to educational support for individuals within the special education setting under the guidance of a teacher
- "Department Chair" refers to lead teachers who guide other colleagues within their school building
- "Teacher self-efficacy" refers to an individual's belief in their ability to perform tasks successfully (Bandura, 1977) and is an antecedent to motivation and performance (Bandura & Locke, 2003)

### **Theoretical Framework**

This action research study focused on leader actions that influenced employee engagement. Employees' engagement is as much about the direct leader's actions in day-to-day operations as it is related to a leader's ability to influence employees to activate their self-efficacy related to their careers (Guglielmi et al., 2016). The self-efficacy of intrinsically motivated employees is positively correlated with higher engagement in their work (Luthans & Youseef, 2007). Burns (1996) defined leadership as an internal relationship between a leader and his

followers, where the leader motivates his followers and causes a change in their behavior. As business and education mirror one another in the complexities of daily tasks, educational leaders can use leadership principles from the private sector.

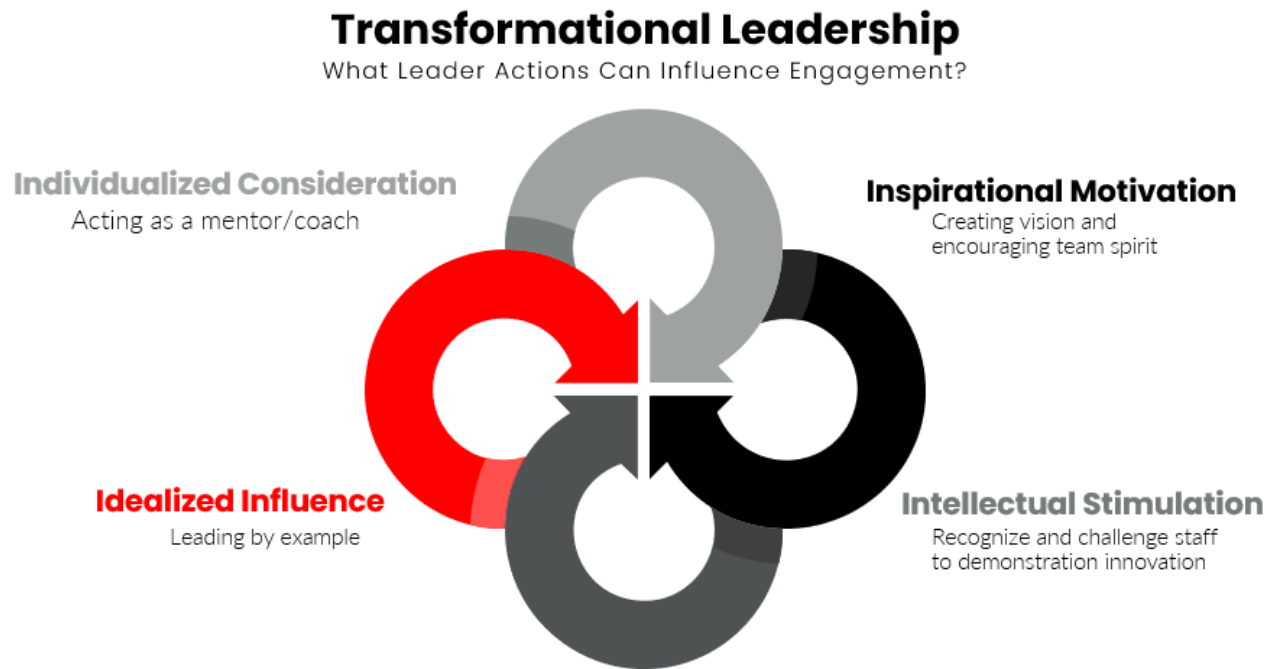
Using a Transformational Leadership Theory, Burns (1978) explored a leader guiding a subordinate to create change. The theoretical framework of Transformational Leadership creates a path with a vision and strategy to move an organization forward (Bsoul, 2022). The current study sought to determine the special education school leader's ability to create change in employee engagement. According to research, if teachers get support from their leadership and are responsible for their actions, they end with positive emotions toward the field of education (Bsoul, 2022), potentially decreasing special education employee turnover.

In his 1978 book *Leadership*, Burns characterized the encouragement and motivation of employees by the organization's leaders. According to Burns (1978), the ability of an organization to make change reflects the leader's actions, relationships, and personality. Bass (1985) continued exploring what created a transformational leader centered around a classroom. He studied the effects of a leader relating to both the leader's personality and the environment they led. This study explored the connection between employee engagement and the Transformational Leadership tenants of leader actions, including interpersonal relationships and the school environment (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985).

Andriani et al. (2018) determined that there was a significant effect on teachers' performance due to transformational leadership. In their study, Andriani et al. (2018) evaluated each of the tenants documented by Bass (1985): Individualized Consideration, Idealized, Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, and Intellectual Stimulation, which all emphasized

the actions of a leader. Using the ideas of Andriani et al. (2018), "...transformational leadership can be interpreted as a process to change and transform the individuals to change and improve themselves, which involves the motive and fulfillment of needs and respect for subordinates" (p. 24). The Action Research Design Team used the four tenants of Transformational Leadership specifically as follows, 1) Individualized Consideration—acting as a mentor/coach; 2) Idealized Influence—leading by example; 3) Inspirational Motivation—creating the vision and encouraging team spirit; 4) Intellectual Stimulation—recognizing and challenging staff to demonstrate innovation.

This study used an Action Research Design Team to influence employees and their actions through motivation and mentorship while allowing opportunities for innovation and planning. Transformational leaders effectively convince their employees to exert more significant effort (Bass & Avolio, 1993). Bsoul (2022) explained how employees under leaders using a Transformational Leadership Framework connect their desire for self-fulfillment to the organizational goals. The Transformational Leadership Framework, presented in Figure 1.1, created space for the Action Research Design Team to move toward a shared vision of change within the organizational culture, hereby influencing employee engagement.

**Figure 1.1***Theoretical Framework—Transformational Leadership*

*Note.* Adapted from Bass (1985).

The selection of this framework centralized on the idea that leaders can be transformative role models if their efforts focus on employee engagement within the four tenants mentioned above. The current study sought to examine how the collaboration of specific actions of leaders in one school's special education department could influence employee engagement. Using action research, a logic model follows, situating the theory into practice.

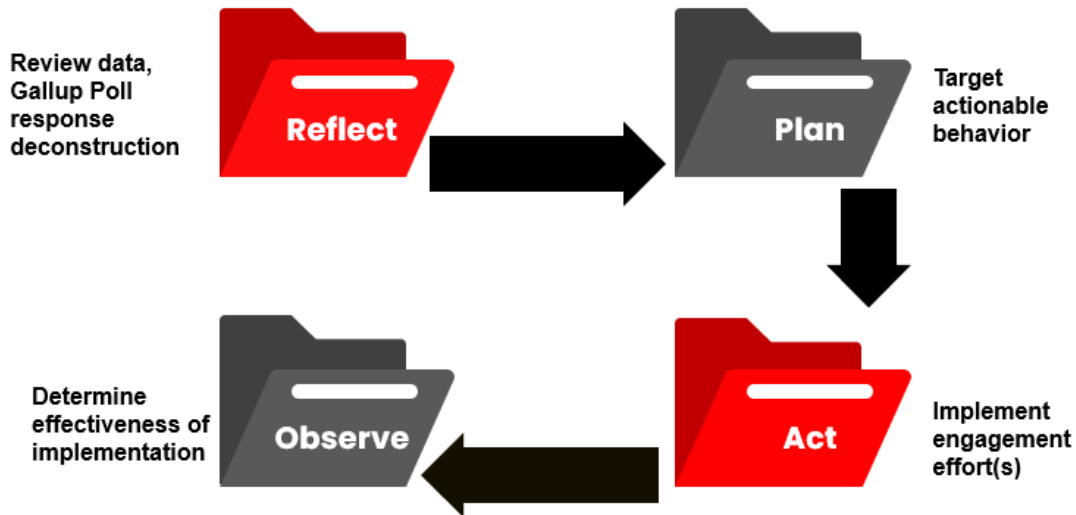
### **Logic Model**

Establishing the belief that leaders influence engagement, the researchers attempted to isolate what specific action or inaction shouldered this impact and to what degree. The action research team used a logic model to execute their plans. According to Alter and Murty (1997),

"A logic model clearly states short- and long-term impacts and what resources and methods are to be used" (p. 104). The logic model identified in this study provided an opportunity for growth and reflection for both employees and leaders and a framework for the opportunities for interventions (Alter & Murty, 1997).

Altrichter et al. (2002) supported four phases of this action research: plan, act, observe, and reflect. These four phases, initially stated by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), were adapted to a conceptual framework of the study. In phase one, the ARDT reviewed initial questionnaire data and deconstructed response items from the Gallup Poll. The ARDT then reflected on this data to look for patterns or if specific data points stood out for various reasons. Then, in phase two, the action research team targeted the leader's actionable behaviors identified in phase one as having a potential impact. The ARDT then planned to execute those behaviors in purposeful or predetermined frequencies.

In phase three of the logic model, the ARDT implemented specific, identified, actionable behaviors toward employee engagement. Finally, in phase four, the ARDT observed participants and analyzed questionnaire data to determine the effectiveness of the interventions. Replication of these efforts continued through two cycles of action research and culminated in examining the overall degree of influence of the leader's behaviors toward engagement.

**Figure 1.2***Logic Model*

*Note.* Adapted from Kemmis and McTaggart (1988).

### **Overview of the Methodology**

Through data analysis, the purpose of this study reflected on the leader's actions which influenced employee engagement. This study proposed that the long-term effects of the leader's actions will affect purposeful efforts toward high levels of engagement. The Action Research Design Team utilized district-level Gallup Poll Data from previous years, questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, reflexive journals, and meeting minutes from staff and leaders. The ARDT employed a qualitative method of data review. Using anecdotal results from the data collection methods provided opportunities for deliberate leader actions that could affect employee engagement.



### *Action Research*

Action research was the chosen methodology as it occurs in real-time (Coughlan & Coughlan, 2002) and solves a problem within the researcher's current line of work. As the ARDT analyzes their work and the outcomes, they can formulate ways to improve continuously. Additionally, through the lens of action research, understanding the context was an initial step. This contextualizing allowed an understanding of the reasoning behind the chosen research topic of engagement and subsequent interventions. According to Coughlan (2019), "Action research ...is based on a collaborative relationship between researcher and members of an organization or community....to address an issue of concern and to generate actionable knowledge" (pp. 53-54). The researcher and the ARDT worked in tandem with the Special Education Department at Reed Elementary School to address employee engagement through this lens.

Noting the positive effects of action research included the fact that there were opportunities for leaders to pivot in their actions based on employee feedback. This ongoing cycle of leaders providing interventions, employees rating their engagement based on the interventions, and leaders analyzing their effect allows for open dialogue and continuous change. According to Manfra (2019), action research "is premised on the notion that changing teaching practice is connected to understanding how teachers learn" (p. 164). The action research team used collected data from special education employees and local school special education leaders to provide direction for subsequent steps in the action research cycle.

### *Data Collection*

Data collection for this study incorporated numerous qualitative methods. Initially, the ARDT reviewed historical district Gallup Poll results to inform the study and to look for gaps or patterns in the data. Additionally, the ARDT uses pre-questionnaire data and initial focus group

responses from leaders and employees to target areas that may influence employee engagement. Finally, the researcher used the responses from focus groups, post-questionnaires, and interviews to track the influence of the leader's engagement efforts if any. After the study, the researcher reviewed her reflexive journal for any salient findings.

Chapter 3 includes further detail on the employed methods. The lead researcher led the action research team and linked the findings from the various data sources to inform patterns or correlations of leader actions and subsequent employee engagement.

### **Interventions**

The interventions employed in this action research cycle included deliberate leader actions targeting identified areas of need based on results from multiple data sources. After response analysis, the group focused on improving employee engagement in lower-performing areas, thereby positively influencing morale and culture. There was a team effort among one district-level special education coordinator, one local school special education assistant principal, two special education department chairs, and two teachers to use specific, actionable items when working with staff members. Pivoting of interventions occurred as the ARDT proposed as data indicated it was necessary.

Pre-survey and Post-survey data paired alongside focus groups and responses provided clear data. Additionally, reflexive journal content and interview response analysis allowed for specific and in-depth conclusions. These responses, provided by the employees and the leaders, influenced the subsequent steps. Alongside these data sources, the ARDT increased their knowledge of working with adults by briefly exposing themselves to research surrounding different forms of employee engagement. These best practices allowed the ARDT to demonstrate confidence in their decision-making surrounding changes to practice.

### **Significance**

While several studies have examined a leader's influence within a workplace, fewer studies have investigated this influence specifically within a special educational setting. This research study focused on the degree of leadership influence on employee engagement in a special education department interested in specific leader actions. The synthesis of the literature indicated that leader actions influence the level of employee engagement. However, as Shuck and Herd (2012) explained, "there remains a gap in understanding what leadership behaviors could affect engagement-encouraging cultures as well as the processes around which leader behavior bring about higher levels of engagement" (p. 159).

Determining which leader actions and how to leverage these leader actions is imperative to creating an environment that fosters special education employee engagement. This study centered around research regarding specific, definable leader actions related to employee engagement. Finally, the study sought to identify local school leaders' behaviors influencing authentic special education employee engagement. Therefore, a potential plan for replication at other schools and the district-level Special Education Department can occur by leveraging a leader's purposeful actions at the local school level.

This study examined specifically what leader actions influenced employee engagement within a local elementary school's special education department. This research aims to add to the research on employee engagement within the field of special education. Additionally, the study attempts to identify leader actions for replication that correlate to the most significant changes in employee engagement. Local school leaders may use the findings to understand better how to cultivate and support employee engagement. Finally, district-level leaders can use the results to

facilitate professional development opportunities with local school leaders to understand their roles in the work engagement of their employees.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

Chapter 1 provides oversight of the contents of the dissertation, including the problem, the frameworks, and the interventions. A review of the related literature occurs within Chapter 2. Chapter 3 identifies the methodology situated within the context of the problem. Chapter 4 includes an examination of findings from the action research. Chapter 5 presents thematic analysis embedded in the findings from the action research cycles. Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation and presents the implications and recommendations drawn from the findings.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE**

The literature surrounding the role of a leader in a school is plentiful. However, how these leaders' actions directly influence employee engagement is less proliferate and, as the literature demonstrates, is pocketed with many nuances (Bibi et al., 2021; Carasco-Saul et al., 2014; Bsoul, 2022). According to Osborne and Hammoud (2017), "Leaders have an influential role in improving employee engagement" (p. 58). The percentage of teachers leaving the profession has increased substantially over the past two decades (Ansley et al., 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Of those leaving the field, dissatisfaction ranks as the primary reason for leaving, which is highly due to dissatisfaction with the administration (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Impacts of employee engagement reverberate through schools with effects on student achievement and employee longevity. With the extreme pivoting asked of educators in recent years, it is timely and crucial that school leaders address the engagement of their staff to maintain their optimism and dedication to the field.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine which leader actions influence employee engagement and how to leverage these leader actions towards increased employee engagement in the special education department of a large urban school.

#### **Research Questions**

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do special education employees articulate leadership's impact on their overall engagement?
2. How do local school leaders articulate their role in the process of influencing employee engagement (i.e., the leader's perceptions of their engagement efforts toward employees)?
3. How does the action research team describe analyzing the processes and effects of leadership actions on employee engagement?

To answer the questions mentioned above, an action research team explored the influences of educational leaders on employee engagement in a special education department of an elementary school in a large urban school district. By analyzing the content of journals, participating in historical document reviews, and reviewing responses from questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups, data were gathered from multiple stakeholders, analyzed, and acted upon, and this process continued cyclically.

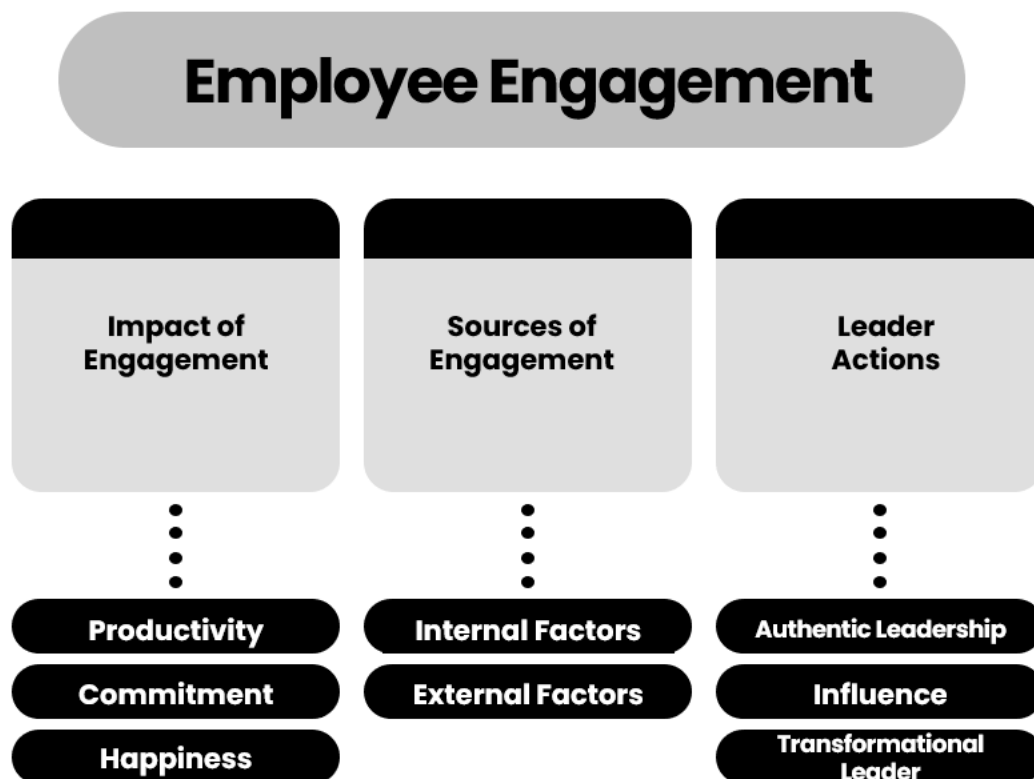
The literature used to inform this action research study was limited to empirical studies and research and conceptual papers that specifically focused on documenting the influence of leadership on employee engagement. The purpose of the limited research ensured a degree of adequacy in finding relevant literature that aligned with the research problem. The use of limited, relevant literature was consistent with a "methodologically adequate studies" approach, as supported by Jackson (1980, p. 455), Demerath and Roof (1976), and Jackson (2003).

Identifying specific studies occurred by searching the literature using keywords, phrases, and subject searching of library databases. Keyword searches included combinations such as Employee Engagement, Educational Leadership, Engagement, and Leadership. A search range of seven years provided current research for this examination.

The following literature review examined the salient findings related to employee engagement and separated these findings into three main sections. These findings serve as the framework for the literature review (see Figure 2.1). The beginning of the literature review explored the impacts of engagement, including correlations between private industries and education. Following this exploration, section two examined the origins of engagement, including internal sources such as self-efficacy and agency and external sources such as school resources and management. Finally, the literature review concluded with an outline of literature examining leadership behaviors that influenced engagement at an individual, school, or department level and correlated with transformational leadership.

**Figure 2.1**

*Organization of the Literature Review*



### **Impact of Engagement**

When staff members are engaged, this infuses multiple aspects of the company (Berens, 2013). For example, creating an environment where an employee feels supported and feels like a valued team member aligns with positive impacts on both the company and the individual (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2014). Engaged employees increase productivity and customer satisfaction (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017). Additionally, employee attendance improves, and turnover decreases (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). Within the field of education, these impacts include improved student achievement, more educators staying within the field, and educators demonstrating a willingness to alter their skill set with new research and knowledge (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

#### *Productivity and Customer Satisfaction*

Organizational productivity affects employees' efforts and engagement (Musgrove et al., 2014). Bersin (2015) determined that only 13% of the workforce is actively engaged. This disengagement in the workplace tends to breed other negative feelings and actions; therefore, leaders need to address engagement (Bersin, 2015).

Characterizing employee engagement, Parent and Lovelace (2015) echoed the sentiments of Van Allen (2012) as they explored the benefits of engaged employees. They noted the consistency of performance and the ability to propel the organization toward advancement. Ultimately, any organization's goal, whether for profit or not for profit, including education, is for the outcome of a product with a high level of success. Hughes and Rog (2008) theorized,

The more highly engaged the employee, the more likely he or she will be to say positive things about the organization, thereby contributing to the development of a positive employer brand, want to remain within the organization... minimizing turnover



...regularly exert a superior level of effort...(and) potentially influencing such variable as service quality, customer satisfaction, productivity, sales (and) profitability. (p. 749)

Schaufeli and Salanova (2014) agreed with these sentiments, as they believed engagement impacted employee satisfaction and employee performance. Osborne and Hammoud (2017) noted this same effect on employee productivity when implementing strategic actions to influence employee engagement. They later deduced positive outcomes of increased customer satisfaction, profits, and staff productivity when employees show a high level of engagement. Ultimately, Osborne and Hammoud (2017) agreed with the research that an organization's long-term success correlates to employee engagement.

Furthermore, in their 2015 study, Parent and Lovelace aligned their thoughts with Van Allen (2013) regarding employee engagement benefits. These employees were effective at relationship building and consistently displayed elevated productivity. Their positive influence on their organization accelerates overall outcomes. Within the educational field, teacher-level outcomes of engagement aligned with student-level outcomes, such as greater academic achievement (Caprara et al., 2006).

#### *Commitment and Attendance/Turnover*

According to Schaufeli and Salanova (2014), "burnout is a multidimensional construct that includes a stress reaction (exhaustion or fatigue), a mental distancing response (depersonalization or cynicism) and a negative belief (lack of accomplishment or efficacy)" (p. 296). Additionally, educators with low assurance often speak ill of the profession and dissuade other individuals from pursuing the field. Schaufeli and Salanova (2014) continued these thoughts when they reviewed that commitment, initiative, and presence (i.e., low turnover and sickness absence) are positive effects noted when work engagement is present.

Teaching conditions can influence a teacher's decision to stay in their current school (Podolsky et al., 2016). This correlation between the importance of employee engagement to the culture of the school is seen as teachers are at a higher risk of leaving the field when they are unsatisfied with the job demands" (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Job demands are "physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and or psychological effort" (Klusmann et al., 2008, p. 130). The positive outcomes of work engagement for employees include but are not limited to longevity within an organization (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Bakker et al., 2014; Lipscomb et al., 2021; Schaufeli et al., 2002).

### *Happiness and Openness to Change*

Elaborating on the idea of allegiance to an organization, Samkari, and David (2019) surmised that a high level of engagement towards the organization is required for committed employees as they routinely work to improve their skill set to execute their job in an optimum manner. Carswell (2021) explored the importance of how school culture was built in situations "where leaders build meaningful relationships with teachers, create positive and joyful school climates, foster and model collaboration, understand what motivates teachers to grow professionally, and teach and reflect upon real-world experiences" (p. 52). Additionally, Carswell (2021) indicated that

Principals who engender confidence in the school's faculty and staff by building a culture conducive to growth toward a shared vision or set of goals or objectives to be more successful in engaging teachers in advancing the school's mission. (p. 53).

As leaders, it is crucial to be intentional in the acts with teachers at the school. Specifically, the importance of building relationships aligned with the intrinsic motivation of teachers. It is essential for the leaders to set the tone of the school. There are implications for a teacher's high

level of intrinsic motivation (Carswell, 2021). Bird et al. (2009) explained, "The authenticity of the school principal was found to be significantly positively related to teacher trust and to teacher engagement levels" (p. 153).

### **Origin of Engagement**

Internal engagement influences include staff efficacy, drive, commitment, involvement, and agency (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2014). External stimuli of engagement include workload, time management, mental demands, responsibility, and relationships (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2014). The leader's purview of external influences includes alterations to school-based procedures. However, the internal sources require purposeful planning, shifts in interactions, and overall support and guidance. Engaged employees' characterization aligns with a strong work drive, personal initiative, and commitment (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2014). Schaufeli and Salanova (2014) also agreed that engagement results from the motivating nature of resources.

Lipscomb et al. (2021) used a qualitative study to explore the positive relationship between work engagement for teachers. Within that study, Lipscomb et al. (2021) stated, "Teachers' self-efficacy and professional support predicted greater work engagement, accounting for job demands (teachers' compassion fatigue/work distress and children's challenging behaviors) and teachers' education and professional development" (p. 1). Lipscomb et al. (2021) depicted how various internal and external sources contributed to work engagement and highlighted these factors in correlation with Bakker et al. (2008) and Schaufeli & Bakker (2004). Lipscomb et al. (2021) studied two main ideas of personal resources and workplace resources. Personal resources, specifically self-efficacy, are noted to correlate with work engagement. The engagement of employees centers around both internal and external influences. Internal influences of engagement include ideas of employee efficacy, drive, commitment, involvement,

and agency. External stimuli of engagement include workload, time management, mental demands, responsibility, and relationships.

### *Internal Factors Influencing Engagement*

Many of the internal sources of engagement noted character traits such as an employee who gets caught up or "carried away" in their work (Parent & Lovelace, 2015) or employees with a high level of energy, involvement, and perceived efficacy (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2014). According to the social cognitive career theory, self-efficacy in the education domain "refers to teachers' self-referent judgments about the capability to accomplish teaching-related tasks required to achieve educational goals" (Granziera & Perera, 2019, p.76). Horvathova et al. (2019) described employee commitment as having employees interested in their work and willing to go above and beyond to create their best quality work. Additionally, the internal driving forces of these employees align with their interest in their work, which motivates their performance (Horvathova et al., 2019).

According to Lipscomb et al. (2021), "Teachers' self-efficacy and professional support predicted greater work engagement, accounting for job demands (teachers' compassion fatigue/work distress and children's challenging behaviors) ..." (p.1). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2014) stated, "Research on teachers shows that self-efficacy is positively related to work engagement and job satisfaction, and negatively related to burnout" (p. 70). Personal resources are necessary for sustaining engagement (Granziera & Perera, 2019).

Engaged employees demonstrate commitment to their work (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2014). According to Calvert (2016), "teacher agency is the capacity of teachers to act

purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues" (p. 4). Zepeda (2019) stated,

Teachers are more willing to change practice and take risks if they exert agency by making decisions about the types of learning, the format of the learning opportunities and have opportunities to engage in conversations reflecting on what they learn. (p. 29)

When teachers understand their school's big picture, mission, and vision, they will start to understand how they can contribute to the overall narrative, leading to a feeling of belonging that directly aligns with engagement (Berens, 2013). When employees clearly understand their job role and what is expected of them, their experience is strengthened. (Gallup. 2019).

#### *External Factors Influencing Engagement*

Effective leadership can provide foresight and direction for employees outside the internal origins of engagement. Osborne and Hammoud (2017) explained the importance of providing for the needs of employees. Schaufeli and Salanova (2014) stated, "Essentially, work engagement results from the inherently motivating nature of resources. By their very nature, job resources invigorate employees, encourage their persistence, and make them focus on their efforts, which is exactly what work engagement is about" (p. 314). Schaufeli and Salanova (2014) explain that employees may be motivated by expectations such as workload, time urgency, mental demands, and responsibility. These challenges promote individual growth and potentially lead to advancement within a given organization. Sirisetti (2012) provided additional guidance to the foundations of external creation of engagement with the idea that increased engagement is due to positive working relationships, employee input in decision-making, and supporting growth and development with learning opportunities.

Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) and Podolsky et al. (2016) indicated that adverse working conditions could affect teacher engagement and retention. Teachers may leave high-needs schools because of their work context (Podolsky et al., 2016). Hoglund et al. (2015) defined high-needs schools as "...those that have a high proportion of low-income and ethnic minority children and that are located in neighborhoods with a high degree of social vulnerability but are not necessarily located within the inner core of the city" (p. 337). Teachers in high-needs schools are more likely to leave due to working conditions, "...including both material conditions and social and cultural elements of the work environment" (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018, p. 607).

High-needs schools possess specific concerns, such as inadequate resources and struggling staff (Lochmiller & Chesnut, 2017). Stressful working conditions positively correlate with teacher burnout (Hoglund et al., 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Hoglund et al. (2015) stated, "Burnout is characterized along three dimensions that reflect feelings of job-related emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and sense of personal accomplishment" (p. 338). It is imperative to address the external factors as "Having clear goals but lacking the tools and resources to achieve those goals is a recipe for discouragement and burnout" (Gallup, 2019, p. 9). Leadership, a crucial antecedent to many subsequent associations to engagement, must stay mindful and attuned to signs of staff burnout indicating low levels of engagement.

### **Leader Actions to Influence Engagement**

With controls for student and teacher characteristics, the workplace condition most predictive of teacher turnover was a perceived lack of administrative support, a construct that measures how teachers rate an administrator's ability to encourage and acknowledge staff, communicate a clear vision and generally run a school well (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The educational leader must focus on changes within their purvey and

implement these actions within the school building. Evelyn and Hazel (2015) noted the positive relationships of transformational leadership in the field of education as it relates to employee engagement and school performance.

Leadership is not only vital to engagement; it is also an antecedent to engagement (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017; Prochazka et al., 2017). Lochmiller and Chesnut (2017) explained that leaders in struggling or high-needs schools have staff working with a weak sense of self-efficacy. In terms of turnover, teachers who report a lack of administrative support have the strongest relationship with teacher turnover (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Geiger & Pivovarova (2018). Wronowski (2018) found in her study that teachers believe the administration could mitigate the pressure put on teachers and decrease the amount of turnover. Additionally, especially within high-needs schools, teacher turnover occurs when effective teachers take on a large portion of work while less effective teachers display lackadaisical efforts (Wronowski, 2018). It stands to reason that leaders should be mindful of employee engagement if they attempt to decrease turnover, specifically in high-needs schools.

Multiple stakeholders within a school building can influence staff morale; however, the principal holds the most significant role (Whitaker et al., 2013). Osborne and Hammond (2017) affirmed that leadership's ability influences essential workforce engagement strategies. Leaders motivate others to perform tasks (Bsoul, 2022), including motivating them to perform tasks they are not inclined to perform (Arar & Masri-Herzallah, 2016). If employees are an indispensable resource, as Motyka (2018) postulated, their engagement is crucial for leaders to consider. When alluding to this reference in the school building, Rowland (2008) proposed,

Principals have the power to influence many factors of a school. They have a myriad of roles included in their job. One of the most important and influential is the principal's

effect on the school's teachers. A good teacher will be successful in spite of a bad principal. This good teacher knows how to handle the pressures of the profession and ignores the incompetence of this principal. This teacher is interested primarily in what is good for the individual students in the classroom. For the others—the teachers who need some support, a little guidance, or just the occasional pat on the back—the principal plays a vital role in their morale. (p. 3)

Employee engagement directly correlates with individual performance in tandem with the organization's overall performance (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017). Osborne and Hammond (2017) reiterated the importance of leaders creating, improving, and reflecting on their roles and influences on employee engagement. Employees with a high level of engagement often struggle with change within their organization. There is a fear that the change may fundamentally change their organization's actions that align with their engagement's origin (Parent & Lovelace, 2015).

### *Authentic Leadership*

Nichols and Erakovich (2013) referred to the ability of authentic leadership to influence employees' engagement. Carasco-Saul et al. (2014) supported Samkari and David (2019) in asserting the existence of a positive relationship between authentic leadership, increased staff performance, and staff engagement. Zepeda (2019) stated, "Like students, teachers want supervisors who are supportive of the work they do and the challenges they face; however, teachers need and want leaders who are insistent about leading with a vision focused on learning and development" (p. 10). Principals carry a heavy load to create conditions for a school (DeMatthews et al., 2021). They can support or halt the ability of teachers to motivate not only themselves but other members of the school.



### *School/Departmental Influence*

Börü and Bellibaş (2021) supported Leithwood et al. (2008) in the sentiment "...that school principals exert substantial influences on school culture, structures, and processes, as well as on teachers" (p. 2). The idea of moving from "school administrator" to "school leadership" emerged from a theory of movement. This shift in terminology, created by Hallinger (2018), presented the concept "that ...leadership is closely related to influencing human capital, and thus organizational climate and culture" rather than the premise of concern around "effective use of resources (fiscal, facility, etc.) (as cited in Börü & Bellibaş, 2021, p. 3).

Leithwood et al. (2008) wrote a highly cited seminal study exploring the role of a leader in teacher development. "School leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions" (p. 27). Leithwood et al. continued by stressing the importance of developing people, stating, "The central task for leadership is to help improve employee performance..." which "...is a function of employees' beliefs, values, motivations, skills and knowledge and the conditions in which they work" (p. 29). Leadership is based not only on knowledge but also on the charisma which influences staff. Leaders "...had quite a strong and positive influence on staff members' motivations, commitments, and beliefs concerning the supportiveness of their working conditions" (Leithwood et al., 2008, p. 32).

### *Transformational Leaders*

Transformational leadership centers around motivating followers to achieve the organization's success (Marks & Printy, 2003). A transformational leadership style has a positive

and significant relationship with job satisfaction (Bibi et al., 2021; Bsoul, 2022). Polatcan et al. (2021) described,

A direct relationship was found between the transformational leadership practice of school principals and teachers' behaviors. In addition, transformational leadership practices of school principals had a direct as well as a moderate effect on teacher agency; teacher self-efficacy led to an indirect increase on this effect. (p. 1)

Polatcan et al. (2021) supported Leithwood (1994) as well as Sun and Leithwood (2015) in the idea that "transformational leadership is accepted as an optimal leadership model to strengthen the school and teacher agency and raise teacher engagement and commitment" (p. 2). Through teacher agency, individual optimism plays a role in employee engagement (Polatcan et al., 2021). Leaders, through their actions, can influence the staff's capacity, motivation, and loyalty using a transformational leadership approach (Bass, 1985). Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) and Marks and Printy (2003) postulated that the principal is the leading force within transformational leadership to provide change to a school and to motivate employees.

### **Chapter Summary**

If, as research supports, teachers are the most important school-level factor related to student outcomes (Hattie, 2003), school leaders must strive to maintain positive employee engagement. Employee engagement resonates with passion and devotion to the industry (Sarangi & Nayak, 2018). Employee engagement includes internal and external forces (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Leaders must work to continue to promote and foster employee engagement opportunities, especially within high-needs schools.

Overall, extensive research on employee engagement is not explicitly related to education (Bibi et al., 2021; Carasco-Saul et al., 2014 Bsoul, 2022). Alignment between various industries occurs when examining how engagement affects employees. According to Sarangi and Nayak (2018), "Employee engagement is the devotion, passion of employees and effective leadership skills with support from the top management to the employees" (p. 52). Research indicates that when employees are engaged, productivity increases (Van Allen, 2012). Engagement results aligned with productivity include lower teacher turnover (Bakker et al., 2003) and improved academic achievement (Bakker, 2005). However, stakeholders must realize that engagement possesses internal and external driving forces for this engagement to occur.

Though internal forces are self-driven, the external forces directly relate to an organization's climate or school (Guglielmi et al., 2016). One such driver, that of leadership, directly correlates with employee engagement. Though there are multiple contributors to staff members' engagement level in the school system, the principal, as the school leader, is assumed to be the most significant influencer yielding the most power to amplify change (Alazmi & Al-Mahdy, 2020; Whitaker et al., 2013).

The following chapter reviews the Action Research Methodology. Included within Chapter 3 are the action research design, data sources, data methods, analysis, and interventions moving forward.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Engaged employees help to promote organizational goals (Hansen et al., 2014; Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli et al., 2002). However, minimal researchers have aligned the specific leader actions to employees' engagement (Aryee et al., 2012; Hansen et al., 2014; Tuckey et al., 2012; Xu & Thomas, 2011). Determining which aspects of a leader and how to influence these leaders' actions is imperative to creating an environment that fosters and increases the degree of employee engagement (Popli & Rizvi, 2016).

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine which leader actions influence employee engagement and how to leverage these leader actions towards increased employee engagement in the special education department of a large urban school.

#### **Research Questions**

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry.

1. How do special education employees articulate leadership's impact on their overall engagement?
2. How do local school leaders articulate their role in the process of influencing employee engagement (i.e., the leader's perceptions of their engagement efforts toward employees)?

3. How does the action research team describe analyzing the processes and effects of leadership actions on employee engagement?

Chapter 3 examines the logic model situated within the action research study and explains the research design, data collection methods, data analysis, and a review of the study's reliability, validity, and trustworthiness.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research Design**

While research on leader actions concerning employee engagement exists (Bakker et al., 2007; Edward et al., 2018; Harter, 2021), there still needs to be more research on the direct leader actions that influence special education employee engagement in local schools. As "employee engagement has emerged as one of the greatest challenges in the workplace" (Osborne & Hammond, 2017, p. 60), it is understandable that organizations would want to research "...the root of what people care about, what creates the right behavior, and how they view the big picture" (Berens, 2013, p. 43). Qualitative data strives to understand specific reasoning within participant feedback, aligning directly with the needs of this study.

By interviewing key participants in the school, observing decision-making committees in action, describing in detail how participants relate to one another, and analyzing written documents and other sources about site-based management, the researcher may reach certain conclusions about the effectiveness of shared decision-making... (Glanz, 2014, p. 79)

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) stated, "qualitative research includes an understanding of context, circumstance, environment, and milieu" (p. 38). This study attempted to understand the context and environment around the leader's actions and the repercussions these actions created on the employees. Chapter 3 includes further detail on how the methods employed were used. The lead

researcher led the ARDT and linked the findings from the various data sources to inform patterns or correlations of leader actions and subsequent employee engagement.

### **Overview of Action Research Methods**

Action research was the chosen methodology as it occurs in real-time (Coughlan & Coughlan, 2002). It is especially valuable in the field of education as it works to find solutions to problems within the researcher's work environment (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). As the ARDT analyzes the work and outcomes, they can formulate ways to improve continuously.

Additionally, through the lens of action research, understanding the context was an initial step that benefited the design and implementation teams. This contextualizing allowed an understanding of the reasoning behind the chosen research topic of engagement and subsequent interventions. According to Coughlan (2019), "Action research ...is based on a collaborative relationship between researcher and members of an organization or community....to address an issue of concern and to generate actionable knowledge" (pp. 53-54). The researcher and the ARDT worked in tandem with the Special Education Department at RES to address employee engagement through this lens.

Noting the positive effects of action research included the fact that there were opportunities for leaders to pivot in their actions based on employee feedback. This ongoing action research cycle of leaders providing intervention, employees rating their engagement based on the intervention, and leaders analyzing their effect allowed for open dialogue and continuous change. The action research process used within this study has multiple opportunities for observation and reflection.

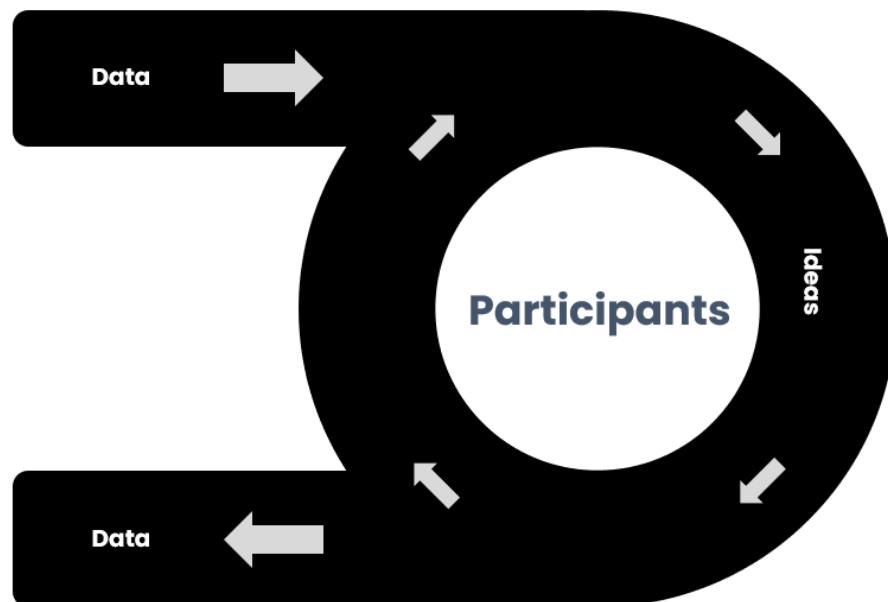
## Action Research Design

### *The Spiraling and Iterative Nature of Action Research*

The primary understanding of action research is focusing on teachers at the center of the research practice and placing importance on questioning and fact-finding (Manfra, 2019). Figure 3.1 depicts this iterative nature as the study situates participants at the center of the learning, illustrating that data and ideas continuously come in and out of the research process. Engaging in action research provides opportunities to create change within the school from both a practical and social lens (Vaughan & Burnaford, 2015). Using the constructivist theory, the researcher sought to determine how participants created their knowledge when considering social influences and thought processes (Boyland, 2019).

**Figure 3.1**

*Iterative Nature of the Study*

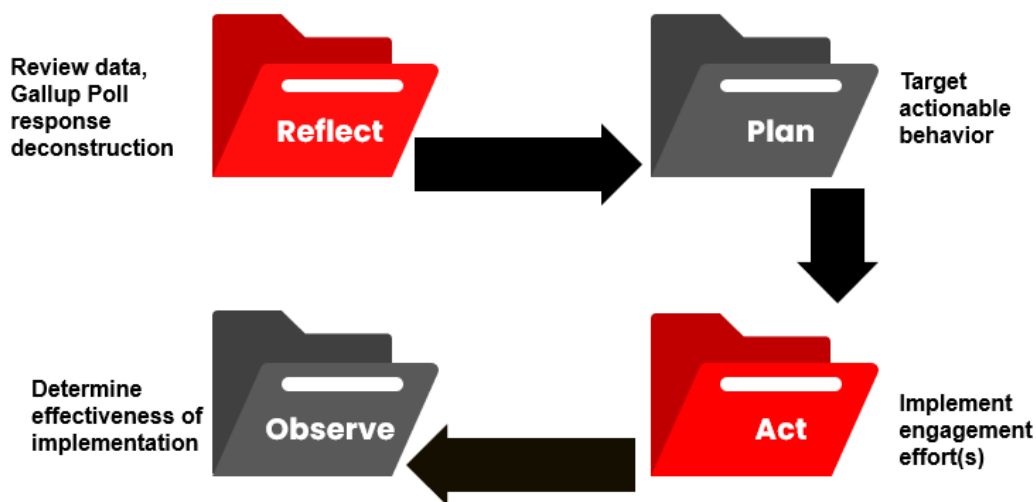


### *Logic Model*

In the study, the ARDT moved between the reflect, plan, act, and observe cycle, as noted in Figure 3.2, to further their understanding of the logic model. The logic model, adapted from Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), requires sequential steps, including time for reflection and observation. For example, planning and acting on behavior can only occur once the initial phase of reflection has taken place, allowing for the ARDT to have purposeful input throughout the process. As the ARDT will use this process multiple times within the study after gathering baseline data, the ongoing inquiry will coincide with continuous data collection.

**Figure 3.2**

### *Action Research Process*



*Note.* Adapted from Kemmis & McTaggart (1988).

### *Theory of Change*

Within the theory of change, the ARDT continuously revised their ideas as they determined if their actions were leading to effects, either positive or negative. The goal of the process aligned with the theory of change research by Pawson and Tilley (1997) as the team



sought to understand under what conditions something works and for whom. Using a theory of change, the researcher can "better understand what is being implemented and why, making clear connections between a given intervention and its outcomes" (Reinholz & Andrews, 2020, p. 2). Within this study, the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) analyzed participants' responses and proposed implementation interventions for leaders. The ARDT then observed the potential effects on different participants and continuously reflected on the data to plan for future actions.

### *The Case*

The context for this study was the Special Education Department at one elementary school. The participants comprised preschool-5<sup>th</sup> grade special education teachers, special education paraprofessionals, and speech-language pathologists. The overall aim of the research was to determine what leader actions influenced employee engagement. Questionnaires, focus-group responses, interviews, and observations provided insight into the participant's reflections on the leader's actions.

The research revolved around employee perceptions of leader actions and the potential effects on employee engagement levels. The selection of Reed Elementary School occurred based on the size of the special education department. With the sizeable number of employees, potential study outcome replication could occur at another elementary school and in larger environments such as a high school or the district level.

### *Action Research Design Team*

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) was comprised of the primary researcher, local school assistant principal, preschool-grade chair, K-5 grade chair, a veteran teacher, and a new teacher. Table 3.1 lists the team members and describes their roles in the research process.

**Table 3.1***Action Research Design Team*

<b>Team Member</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Action Research Role</b>
Primary Researcher	District-Level Special Education Coordinator	Leads and conducts all research with the action research design team.
Ms. Smith	Special Education Assistant Principal	Provides a wide-view lens to the actions of the special education department.
Ms. Jackson Ms. Rivera	Special Education Grade Chairs	Provides a subdepartment view of the actions within the special education department led on a smaller scale.
Ms. Underwood Ms. Garcia	Special Education Teachers	Provides the experience of working within a special education department.

*Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT)*

The Action Research Implementation Team was comprised of the special education assistant principal, district-level special education coordinators, special education grade chairs, and special education employees, including paraprofessionals, teachers, and speech/language pathologists. All participants were invited to join via a letter, and those who agreed were asked to sign a consent form. Table 3.2 lists the specifics of the participants who signed the consent form.

**Table 3.2***Action Research Implementation Team Members*

<b>Local School Role</b>	<b>Quantity of Participants</b>
Special Education Assistant Principal	1
District-Level Special Education Coordinator	2
Special Education Grade Chair	2
Special Education Employees	15

*Research Plan and Timeline*

Table 3.3 depicts the events that occurred during the 2022-2023 school year. The events included two cycles of action research. Data were collected throughout, including surveys, pre- and post-focus groups, and interviews.

**Table 3.3***Action Research Timeline*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Action Research Activity</b>
<b>September 2022</b>	Action Research Team Meetings Initial Consent for Participants Participant Pre-Questionnaire
<b>September-December 2022</b>	Periodic Action Research Team Meetings Action Research Focus Groups 1 and 2
<b>December 2022</b>	Action Research Focus Group Leader Interviews Participant Post-Questionnaire
<b>January 2023</b>	Data Analysis Follow-Up As Needed

### **Context of the Study**

Reed Elementary School (RES) is part of a large urban school system in Georgia. Within Reed, there are 842 students, and 21% receive services through the special education department. The special education department employs 56 individuals with a mix of teachers, paraprofessionals, and speech/language pathologists. The special education department at RES supports students from preschool to 5<sup>th</sup> grade with various special education eligibility categorizations. The Special Education Department at RES has two grade chairs, one assistant principal, and one principal supporting the department's work. With the number of total employees within the Special Education Department at RES, one can assume the degree of engagement of each member will differ.

A historical way to measure employee engagement is through the yearly Gallup Poll Ratings. In previous years, each school in the Bay Side County Public Schools (BSCPS) garners its employee engagement rating. The subgroups within the central office also produce an employee engagement rating. Leaders of each school use individually chosen methodologies to address employee engagement. Determining what leader actions influence the employee engagement for each school and to what degree will assist in replicating these measures in other special education departments and schools within BSCPS. As district-level support to special education leaders, the researcher hopes to determine which perceptions of local school leaders' actions effectively influence special education employees to provide quality support moving forward.

### **Data Sources**

The purpose of this action research study was two-fold: 1) to determine employee perception of the degree of influence school-level educational leaders have on employee

engagement within the special education department in a large urban school district, and 2) to determine what leadership behaviors promote employee engagement within the special education department in a large urban school district. The use of many data sources created an understanding through the lens of various leaders and employees and commonalities of actions with positive correlations.

### *Participants*

This study involved leader participants, including special education administrators, alongside special education grade chairs. Additional participants included special education employees, which included teachers, paraprofessionals, and speech-language pathologists. All selected participants completed a pre-and post-questionnaire during the 2022-2023 school year. All questionnaire data were de-identified as participants were assigned pseudonyms to pair pre-and post-questionnaire results with the given participants (see Appendix C and Appendix D).

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) members participated in a total of five hours of collaboration per team member. The five hours took place over four months, and participation was voluntary. Participants were recruited based on their interest in and commitment to the study. Participants completed and submitted pre- and post-questionnaires (approximately 20 minutes or less for approximately 40 minutes). Focus group time participation (two separate heterogeneous participant groups of 4-5 individuals) included an initial meeting of one hour and a concluding meeting of one hour for a total of two hours per participant. Focus groups also occurred with the Action Research Design Team at the study's conclusion. Participation in focus groups for participants was voluntary and recruited through interoffice email (see Appendix A) and in-person recruitment.

A consent form was disseminated (see Appendix B) with information including purpose, procedures, reporting, recording, and privacy. All participants received informed consent, including descriptions of expectations and the opportunity to ask questions before signing the consent form. Even though all participants received a pseudonym to protect their identities, they could stop or leave any focus group or the study at any point. The use of coding in analyzing data for focus groups aligned with the password protection of identifiable data. The eventual deletion of identifiable data will occur after five years. Focus group interviews and ARIT meetings were video/audio recorded and downloaded into a password-protected file on a laptop computer. The researcher assured that any information shared during action research team meetings by those members she supervised would not have any bearing upon their evaluations and would remain strictly confidential.

### *Selection Criteria*

By choosing purposeful sampling, the researcher sought “to describe a particular context in-depth” and to find “data that fit the purpose of the study, the resources available, the questions being asked, and constraints and challenges being faced” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 186). Participants in the study must have met preselected criteria. These criteria included current employment at Reed Elementary School and employment categorized within the Special Education Department, including and limited to teachers, paraprofessionals, speech-language pathologists, grade chairs, and administrators. Meeting these requirements was purposeful as this study defined parameters for local school leaders' potential influence on local school special education employees.

### **Data Collection Methods**

This study used a qualitative approach for data collection. As Glanz (2014) defined, "Qualitative research relies on detailed verbal descriptions of the phenomena observed" (p. 9). According to Hamilton and Finley (2019), qualitative research benefits from observing what is occurring in real time and determining why. Using a combination of participant feedback and researcher data, the outcomes informed the action research cycles. The data collection used within this study included questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, researcher journals, and documents depicting historical data.

The qualitative methods used included:

1. Background questionnaire for all participants as well as pre-and post-questionnaires.  
Background questionnaires will provide the researcher with additional information to better understand the participants' perceptions, interpretations, and descriptions. The pre-questionnaires and post-questionnaires of leaders within the special education department reflecting on their employees' engagement efforts and pre-questionnaires and post-questionnaires of current employees within the special education department reflecting on the impact of leader engagement efforts;
2. Focus groups of leaders and employees reflecting on employee engagement efforts as well as the action of the action research team reflecting on the processes of the study;
3. Interviews of leaders' perceptions following the action research interventions;
4. Document review from the school system's historic Gallup Poll data;
5. Researcher journal notes throughout the action research process.

Analysis of outcomes by the researcher includes various sources of data inputted into a coding scheme looking for patterns and similarities in responses.

### *Questionnaires*

Researchers often use surveys to assess attitudes or viewpoints (Glanz, 2014). A survey is a frequently used form of data collection to gain data to inform the study (Glanz, 2014). The practicality of surveys benefited both participants and researchers (Braun et al., 2021). The action research team employed questionnaires and focus groups as a type of survey. According to Glanz (2014), “A questionnaire is a type of survey that is distributed to a sample to ascertain attitudes about a particular issue or concern” (p. 56). The questionnaires consisted primarily of closed questions that participants accessed and answered independently. This type of data collection benefited the ease and timeliness of gathering information. One caveat of questionnaires is articulated clearly by Gray (2009):

Questionnaires reflect the designer's view of the world, no matter how objective a researcher tries to be. This is true not only for the design of individual questions but often about the very choice of research subject. Furthermore, what we choose not to ask about may just as easily reflect our worldview as what we include in the questionnaire. (p. 339)

The use of background questionnaires occurred to garner a clear understanding of participants. The Background Information Questionnaire can be found in Appendix D. These closed-ended questionnaires required the participants to select from predetermined choices. The pre-and post-questionnaire can be found in Appendix C. According to Glanz (2014), questionnaires allow both participants and researchers ease. A sampling of the questions is included in Table 3.4.



**Table 3.4***Sampling of Questionnaires*

<b>Background Questionnaire</b>	Professional experience in my current role: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less than 5 years</li> <li>• Less than 10 years</li> <li>• More than 10 years</li> </ul>
<b>Pre-Study Questionnaire</b>	In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
<b>Post-Study Questionnaire</b>	This last year, I have had opportunities to work, learn and grow.

*Focus Groups*

Lee (2010) explained focus groups' ease and cost-effectiveness in gathering qualitative data. He continued that these group interviews have a historical basis and can uncover participants' opinions on various topics. This study held multiple focus group sessions with leaders, employees, and the ARDT. The participants within each focus group varied in their roles and responsibilities. Finally, the ARDT was a focus group as their purpose was more reflective of a process rather than sharing departmental engagement. The grouping allowed the participants to react to and "feed off" the responses, creating open-ended dialogue aligned with the researcher's questions and topics.

As focus groups are socially oriented, unintended conversational directions may occur (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). As the subject of leader actions may be considered sensitive to some participants, an individual interview may not elicit the level of openness that a focus group may provide. While creating the "permissive atmosphere that fosters a range of opinions, a more complete and revealing understanding of the issues will be obtained" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 195). The complete focus group protocol can be found in Appendix E and Appendix F

(adapted from Patton, 2002, p.352). However, a sampling of focus group questions is included in Table 3.5.

### *Interviews*

The researcher interviewed leaders at the conclusion of the study to probe for additional information regarding specific leader perceptions, and a sampling of these questions is included in Table 3.5 (Appendix G). The interviews were structured with specific questions to ask; however, there were opportunities for participants to provide open-ended responses as well. Though interviews are often a primary method for data collection (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019), limitations to this data collection method do exist. In action research, the researcher is the interviewer; therefore, it is understood that the interviewer will provide the roadmap and guide the conversation. Consequently, the interviews must be transcribed verbatim (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

**Table 3.5**

### *Focus Group and Interview Question Sampling*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Focus Group or Interview Question</b>
Q1: How do special education employees articulate leadership's impact on their overall engagement?	How do you see your/your leader's role in terms of influence on employee engagement?
Q2: How do local school leaders articulate their role in the process of influencing employee engagement (i.e., the leader's perceptions of their engagement efforts toward employees)?	Do you ever email, call, or meet with individual teachers? If yes, what is the frequency and purpose of these interactions?
Q3: How does the action research team describe analyzing the processes and effects of leadership actions on employee engagement?	How do you see your role or the role of a leader in influencing engagement?

### *Document Review*

"Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents" (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). Researchers use written, archival, or artifacts to develop new knowledge or to gain meaning from the artifacts (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Examples of data extracted from the document review included quotes from participants, opinions of participants, and quantitative data from Gallup Polls. The historical documents from the Gallup Polls were beneficial because the researcher did not influence the data contained within the artifacts. Pairing the data from documents and the other data sources created contextualized findings. However, the researcher needed to remain mindful of narratives surrounding the situation of the data from the documents (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019) and that the researcher does not create a biased assessment of the data.

### *Researcher Journal*

The researcher kept an ongoing journal throughout the research process. This journal included decision-making processes, opinions, observations, and reflections on the generated data and the research process, including interactions among teams and participants. Jasper (2005) supports the practice of keeping a researcher journal as this journal helps build the research's trustworthiness. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) support the idea of journaling as a research tool following the researcher's thoughts and evolving beliefs and ensuring the researcher uses an open mind.

Journaling encourages critical thinking and the expression of feelings (Miller, 2017), which are imperative in action research where a researcher is studying work within their practice (Manfra, 2019). However, the validity of journaling alone is debatable. Jasper (2005) pointed out that much of the debate is in journaling reflections of practices versus journaling reflections of

the research process. Therefore, journaling, paired with other data collection methods, helped to alleviate questions of trustworthiness regarding the data gathered. Table 3.6 presents a sampling of journal entries.

**Table 3.6**

*Sampling of Journal Entries*

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Journal Entry Sample</b>
Planning for Action Research Design Team (ARDT)	September 15, 2022	Met with Assistant Principal and determined whom to invite to join the ARDT. Made sure to include people with varied experiences.
ARDT Meeting	October 19, 2022	While brainstorming interventions, team members wanted to consider ways to support one another that took items off teachers' plates rather than giving them another task to complete.
Connect With a Coordinator	December 9, 2022	When the coordinator and teacher talked, the teacher's face and body language indicated a serious conversation.

### **Interventions**

According to Glanz (2014), "An intervention is a specific instructional practice, program, or procedure that is implemented by a researcher to investigate its effect on the behavior or achievement of an individual or group" (p. 64). The plan for the study led the ARDT toward a path of intervention. The Action Research Design Team will select intervention methods based on the design implementation. The action research team moved forward based on the interventions chosen, as indicated in Table 3.7.

The ARDT reviewed historical documents, collected responses from pre-questionnaires and initial focus groups, and provided feedback which created opportunities to observe and reflect as part of the ARDT before moving toward the following steps of post-questionnaires and concluding with focus groups eliciting the final responses. These steps in the action research cycle demonstrate a response to interventions or change. As the action research team collected data, they observed the data for patterns of effect on employees, planned the subsequent intervention, acted on the intervention, and then reflected on the intervention's outcomes. This observe, plan, act, and observe cycle is based on Kurt Lewin's work, explicated by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988).

The alignment of the interventions the ARDT selected with research on employee engagement demonstrated that engaged employees make the best use of individual strengths (Kahn, 1990; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Table 3.7 depicts the intervention activities aligning with targeted groups and time frames. Considering these particular strengths or personal methods of fulfillment took place alongside the proposal of specific interventions.

**Table 3.7***Sources of Interventions for Study*

<b>Intervention Activity</b>	<b>Target Group</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Pre-Questionnaire Analysis and Document Review	Action Research Team	Beginning of the Fall Semester
Post-Questionnaire Analysis	Action Research Team	End of the Fall Semester
Focus Group Response Review	Action Research Team	Beginning and End of the Fall Semester
Interview Response Analysis	Researcher	End of Fall Semester
Collaborative Conversations with Special Education Department Leaders	Researcher + School Leaders	Ongoing throughout the Fall Semester

Continuously throughout the research process, data collection and analysis occurred. Patterns and understanding evolved based on the analysis outcomes, leading to research themes.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

The design of the data analysis methods occurred so that the information gathered was relevant to the purpose of the study and aligned with the interventions (Coghlan, 2019).

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), "Data analysis is typically an iterative and recursive process, and rather than an isolated moment, analysis is integrated with an occurs through the research process, involving much deliberation and critical thinking" (p. 235).

### *Coding*

As Saldana (2016) explained, a code "is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 4). This system of classification labels or organizes

data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The purpose of coding in this study was to take a large amount of data, much of which was narrative in nature, and to identify emerging patterns (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Saldana, 2016). A sampling of codes, the meanings, and the data examples aligned with these codes are included in Table 3.8.

**Table 3.8**

*Code Sampling for Data*

<b>Code</b>	<b>Meaning</b>	<b>Data Sample</b>
A/G	Authentic or Genuine	“But as we move forward, just making sure that it is done authentically and with fidelity...”. -Cycle One Concluding Focus Group
H/T	Hierarchy or Tier	“...having a solid leader on that smaller level is almost more important than the bigger piece is kind of like a pyramid.” -Cycle Two Focus Group One
IC	Interactions with Colleagues	“I do think I would say colleague to colleague first because we are struggling in that area.” -Post Intervention Leader Interview

*Thematic Analysis*

Thematic analysis is a system for organizing and finding patterns in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These patterns in the data lend to the creation of themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) introduced a 6-phase guide to completing the thematic analysis, as noted in Table 3.9.

**Table 3.9***Phases of Thematic Analysis*

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Description of the Process</b>
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data systematically across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, the final analysis of selected extracts, relating the analysis back to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

*Note.* Adapted from (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The researcher organized the codes using Delve's digital tool and searched for themes. The researcher continuously reviewed the data to ensure the emerging themes were correctly captured. Interwoven throughout multiple aspects of this study is the researcher. Using coding and later thematic analysis allowed the researcher to establish reliability and validity within the questionnaire. This trustworthiness was evident through the triangulation of data.

### **Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability**

To build the trustworthiness of the research, a qualitative researcher must engage in the practice of triangulation, a system to cross-check data sources, data collection methods, and data analysis methods (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Glanz, 2014). The triangulation helped ensure the



data's accuracy and believability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Eisner, 1991; Glanz, 2014; Noble & Heale, 2019). By combining credibility and validity, triangulation "can help ensure that the fundamental biases arising from the use of a single method or single observer are overcome" (Noble & Heale, 2019, p. 67). The practices used for triangulation included the length of engagement time, the use of a critical friend, member checking, a reflexive journal (researcher journal), a background questionnaire, and thick descriptions.

The engagement length of time for this study was four months with two cycles of interventions. Participants had the opportunity to participate in the practice of member checking, in which recordings were reviewed for accuracy in their transcription. This feedback ensured that participants' opinions were accurately captured, specifically in the focus groups and interviews. The research process used a critical friend to allow the researcher to clarify thoughts and ideas and to provide opportunities for impartial feedback. This critical friend took on the role of a "peer reviewer throughout the data collection, analysis, and interpretation" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 199).

The thick description painted the study context, which situated the data. This allowed readers to understand the context of the study thoroughly. The researcher's journal ensured that memories and thoughts were accurately captured. Table 3.10 notes the chosen methods for triangulation as related to this qualitative study. Though the time-consuming aspect of triangulation is a valid concern (Noble & Heale, 2019), as this was a single researcher study, the need to establish trustworthiness was worth the energy expended.

**Table 3.10***Connecting Data Collection to the Research Questions*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Method of Data Collection</b>	<b>Method of Analysis</b>	<b>Approximate Timeline</b>
Q1: How do special education employees articulate leadership's impact on their overall engagement?	Focus Group	Researcher Reflection	September 2022-December 2022
	Questionnaires (including Background Questionnaire)	Coding/ Analysis of Themes	
	Document Review (including observations)		
	Interview		
Q2: How do local school leaders articulate their role in the process of influencing employee engagement (i.e., the leader's perceptions of their engagement efforts toward employees)?	Focus Group	Researcher Reflection	September 2022-December 2022
	Questionnaires (including Background Questionnaire)	Coding/ Analysis of Themes	
	Interview		
Q3: How does the action research team describe analyzing the processes and effects of leadership actions on employee engagement?	Focus Group	Researcher Reflection	September 2022-December 2022
	Questionnaire	Coding/ Analysis of Themes	

### **Subjectivity Statement**

As the researcher and an active participant, uncovering the roles of a special education district leader in Bayside County Public Schools was imperative within the study. Even though

the researcher was not the participants' direct leader, she guided their actions from the district level. The researcher could have influenced the local school engagement of these employees through her district-level actions. The researcher has been a district special education department member for over thirteen years and has witnessed and endured the impacts of leader actions. Her role has shifted from a teacher to an instructional coach and coordinator. These roles and positionality have shifted her lens of understanding leader actions. As her roles have changed, she has always experienced the guidance of leaders within the special education department. Observing the effects of various leaders during times of high turnover may have affected her subjectivity to the influence of specific leaders' actions.

An advantage to being an insider during this research time included easy access to participants and using common educational language. However, a hindrance to this access included participants' potential reluctance to be honest and transparent in their responses. The researcher has built many relationships within the department during her employment. These relationships may equate to biased feedback. As the participant, the researcher will receive feedback on her leadership. As a researcher, she used a combination of focus groups and questionnaires to elicit feedback from participants. To counter these effects, she stressed that the individual results remained confidential; however, internal and external sharing of the totality of the results occurred. To stay mindful of past experiences and neutralize the effectiveness of being a researcher-participant, the researcher used a combination of journaling, peer debriefing, and member checking.

### **Limitations**

Embedded within the work of action research, by definition, is the action researcher. There were potential limitations as the researcher was a participant in the action research team

and an observer. The researcher was also an indirect leader to all study members on the action research design team and participants, which could influence outcomes. Purposeful efforts were put into place by the researcher to allow participation and to create an environment where all study members felt comfortable providing truthful authentic responses.

Manfra (2019) explained this nuance as inherently part of action research in that "teachers understand that teaching is complex and that it cannot be divided into practical and critical concerns" (p.167). Therefore, one cannot separate the practical requirements of a leader within a school into just engagement-specific concerns; however, the complex nature of examining this topic aligns with cyclical action research procedures.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter depicted the methods and research design of the study. This study uses a qualitative study to emphasize "inquiry and placing teachers at the center or research-into-practice" (Manfra, 2019, p. 163). The ARDT implemented the observe, plan, act, observe logic model adapted from Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) to ensure interventions experienced continuous change based on participant feedback. The data sources used were questionnaires, focus groups, historical document reviews, and the researcher's reflections.

The next chapter of this dissertation presents the study's findings regarding the leadership influence on employee engagement at Reed Elementary School.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE**

The roles and responsibilities of an educator, specifically within the field of special education, have dramatically shifted over time (Gilmour et al., 2022). These changes have added to work stressors (Christodoulidis et al., 2022) and lead to feelings of burnout (The Georgia Department of Education, 2022) or, as Hamann (1990) defined it, “stress that has gotten out of control” (p. 31). In direct opposition to employee burnout is employee engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2009). It is of utmost importance to understand the leader’s actions influencing this engagement (Popli & Rizvi, 2016). The literature indicated that leader actions affect the level of employee engagement; however, there remain unanswered questions regarding the specifics of these leadership behaviors (Shuck & Herd, 2012).

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine which leader actions influence employee engagement and how to leverage these leader actions towards increased employee engagement in the special education department of a large urban school.

**Research Questions** To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry.

1. How do special education employees articulate leadership’s impact on their overall engagement?

2. How do local school leaders articulate their role in the process of influencing employee engagement (i.e., the leader's perceptions of their engagement efforts toward employees)?
3. How does the action research team describe analyzing the processes and effects of leadership actions on employee engagement?

Chapter 3 outlined and described the data collection methodology and how data was analyzed. This chapter reveals the results from two action research cycles collected via questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, historical documents, and researcher journals. The data in this qualitative study were derived from participants, including educational leaders, teachers, paraprofessionals, and speech-language pathologists. Reoccurring topics and keywords resulted in thematic discoveries. Analysis of these discoveries occurs in chapter five.

### **Context of the Study**

As special education teachers are some of the highest-risk employees to leave the profession without adequate support (Ansley et al., 2019), one school with an extensive special education department was chosen as a microcosm representation of the larger view of education. Reed Elementary School, situated in a large urban school, has 842 students: 179 receive special education services. For these 179 students, Reed Elementary School employs 56 special education staff members. The special education department supports students through the Interrelated Resource (IRR) model and houses the following self-contained units: Severe Autism (ASD Level 1), Moderate Autism (ASD Level 2), Significant Developmental Delay Kindergarten (SDD-K), and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE).

Over the last three years, the special education department has grown in terms of the number of students served. The special education department has increased by 10.5 employees in

the past three years to support student growth. This historical growth included a change in leadership from the initial time some employees started their tenure at Reed Elementary School, in addition to the global pandemic, COVID-19, which altered how people interacted with one another.

*Action Research Implementation Team (Participants)*

The focus of participants at Reed Elementary School centered around the Special Education Department. In terms of staffing, Reed Elementary School employs 22 teachers, 29 paraprofessionals, and 5 Speech-Language Pathologists in the Special Education Department. This department has two grade chairs, one for Early Childhood Special Education (Preschool) and one for School Age Special Education (Kindergarten-5<sup>th</sup> grade). Of this expansive department, 19 participants consented to participate in the study.

An initial background information survey was sent to participants at the beginning of the Fall 2022 semester. Table 4.1 describes the background information for all participants. Based on the information gathered, 100% of the participants identify as female. Regarding job roles, 6 participants are paraprofessionals, 1 is a school administrator, 1 is a speech-language pathologist, and 11 are teachers. The experience ranges from 10 participants with less than 5 years of experience, 2 with less than 10 years of experience, and 7 with more than 10 years of experience. Two participants reported their degree level as high school, seven reported earning a Bachelor's Degree, six reported earning a Master's Degree, two reported earning a Specialist's Degree, and two reported other. On a 5-point Scale, 100% of participants said they either Agree or Strongly Agree that they are engaged within the Special Education Department. Finally, 12 out of 19 participants indicated that they interact with a leader (principal, assistant principal, or grade chair) at least weekly.

**Table 4.1***Participant Background Information*

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Degree</b>	<b>Base Engagement with Special Education Department</b>	<b>Interact with the Leader every week</b>
A	F	Para	<5	Other	Strongly Agree	Yes
B	F	Teacher	<5	Masters	Strongly Agree	Yes
C	F	Para	>10	HS	Strongly Agree	Yes
D	F	Teacher	>10	Masters	Agree	No
E	F	Teacher	<5	Bachelors	Agree	Yes
F	F	Teacher	<5	Bachelors	Agree	Yes
G	F	Teacher	>10	Masters	Strongly Agree	Yes
H	F	Teacher	<5	Bachelors	Agree	Yes
I	F	Speech	>10	Masters	Strongly Agree	Yes
J	F	Teacher	<10	Masters	Agree	Yes
K	F	Para	<5	HS	Strongly Agree	No
L	F	Para	>10	Bachelors	Strongly Agree	No
M	F	Para	<10	Bachelors	Agree	No
N	F	Para	<5	Other	Agree	No
O	F	Teacher	<5	Masters	Strongly Agree	Yes
P	F	Teacher	>10	Specialist	Strongly Agree	Yes
Q	F	Teacher	<5	Bachelors	Strongly Agree	Yes
R	F	Teacher	<5	Bachelors	Strongly Agree	Yes
S	F	Administrator	>10	Specialist	Strongly Agree	Yes

*Action Research Design Team*

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) met throughout the study. The initial planning of the ARDT started in mid-September. The ARDT then met four additional times culminating in the final session in December. Each meeting occurred before the school day as this seemed to be the most conducive to the participants' schedules. During these meetings, the ARDT reviewed documents of historical trends, reviewed data specific to Reed Elementary School, designed interventions, and discussed the outcomes of the interventions.



The Action Research Design Team was designed with specific awareness of participant demographics, as shown in Table 4.2. The researcher selected two teachers that were relatively new to the profession, as they both had less than five years of experience. One of these teachers is from the Early Childhood Department, and one is from the School Age Department. Alongside these teachers were two grade chairs. The Early Childhood Special Education Grade Chair is highly experienced, with over 10 years in the field and a Specialist in Education Degree. The School Age Grade Chair, however, has less than five years of experience and a bachelor's degree. The Assistant Principal of Special Education has more than 10 years of experience and has a Specialist in Education Degree. The duality of the researcher existed as she was an active participant in the ARDT. She also has over 10 years of experience and a Specialist in Education Degree. This combination of participants attempted to elicit ideas and opinions from differing perspectives.

**Table 4.2**

*Action Research Design Team Participants*

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>Degree</b>
Ms. Smith	AP	>10	Specialist
Primary Researcher	County Coordinator	>10	Specialist
Ms. Rivera	Teacher	<5	Masters
Ms. Underwood	Teacher	<5	Bachelors
Ms. Jackson	Grade Chair	>10	Specialist
Ms. Garcia	Grade Chair	<5	Bachelors

### **Findings from the Case**

This study involved an interplay between the action researcher and the Action Research Design Team and the participants, the Action Research Implementation Team. Data were collected from September 2022-December 2022. During this time, the ARDT mapped out the study to include two research cycles and two interventions during each cycle. The ARDT

planning included starting the first intervention, a Special Education Staff Newsletter, in October and continuing this intervention through both cycles and the study duration. The team designed that the other interventions would be split, with one occurring in cycle one and the other in cycle two. These interventions were isolated events intended to address employee connections. The first cycle allowed employees to fellowship with colleagues, while the second cycle introduced staff to the idea of connecting with leaders one-on-one. All intervention data collection concluded in December 2022.

### **Action Research Cycle One**

#### *Action Research Design Team*

The researcher began the study upon Internal Review Board (IRB) approval by meeting with the Assistant Principal, who leads the Special Education Department at Reed Elementary School. During this initial meeting, the researcher presented the purpose and impetus behind the research study and worked collaboratively to identify critical participants needed for the ARDT. Once the ARDT participants were solidified, the researcher scheduled the first ARDT meeting. Initially, the ARDT met in September 2022 to discuss the historical needs plaguing education, in general, related to employee engagement. As a result, reflection on the research problem began. To level set the understanding of the ARDT members, the researcher exposed the ARDT to the ideas of the internal factors, external factors, and leader actions that the literature indicated influenced employee engagement.

Then the ARDT discussed, from their perspectives, the employees' engagement at Reed Elementary School. A pre-survey (Table 4.3) analyzing the level of engagement was sent to all 19 consenting participants. Participants were asked to respond to 13 statements using a 5-point scale (1: Strongly Disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Neutral; 4: Agree; 5: Strongly Agree). Scores were

recorded and analyzed in Microsoft Excel. Of these 19 potential participants, 18 completed the pre-survey, and Table 4.3 shows the mean results from these participants. This data provided the researcher the framework to understand the perceptions of more participants regarding their engagement and therefore helps to provide context for suggestions within the ARDT.

**Table 4.3**

*Pre-Survey Results*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Pre-Survey Mean</b>
How satisfied are you with your school as a place to work?	3.77
I know what is expected of me at work.	4.27
I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.	4
At work, I have the opportunity to do my best every day.	3.72
In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise.	3.27
My supervisor or someone at work seems to care about me as a person.	4.05
There is someone at work who encourages my development.	4.11
At work, my opinions seem to count.	3.61
The mission or purpose of my school makes me feel my job is important.	3.94
My colleagues are committed to doing quality work.	4
I have a best friend at work.	3.83
In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.	3.77
This last year, I have had opportunities to work, learn and grow.	4.16

*Focus Group*

In action research Cycle one, participants were solicited to discuss engagement in a focus group. Four individuals consented to participate in the focus group. The four participants included a speech-language pathologist, two special education teachers, and one special education paraprofessional, as noted in Table 4.4. The focus group occurred via Zoom after work hours and lasted approximately 35 minutes. Throughout the focus group, the research participants were asked a series of questions (see Appendix E) centered around interactions between employees and leaders and forms of recognition.

**Table 4.4***Cycle One Focus Group Participants*

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Role</b>
Ms. Gildea	Teacher
Primary Researcher	County Coordinator
Ms. Scott	Speech-Language Pathologist
Ms. Bishop	Paraprofessional
Ms. Sierra	Teacher

When participants were asked to describe their ideal interactions with a leader, all four indicated that teacher and leader interactions, if they occurred, were initiated by the teacher. Ms. Gildea, an Early Childhood Special Education Teacher, stated,

I insist on having some sort of relationship with my principal or AP. I tend to, whenever I can, every opportunity I can, whether in the hallway or through an email; I do reach out pretty often. I would say on a weekly basis; I have some interaction with administrators.

Ms. Scott agreed with Ms. Gildea and added,

I rarely go to the principal. Because I was informed that I needed to go to the special education assistant principal first, I guess about two or three years ago, so I go through her first. I most often only go to her when there is a question I don't know the answer to or if there are any issues or concerns that have been brought up to me by the speech team concern that I have.

When asked what comes to her mind when discussing employee engagement, Ms. Gildea stated, "What comes to mind is being present." She continued talking about opportunities for connections by stating, "We're all different learners or visual learners, and it's great to get an email, but sometimes the email doesn't explain it all."

As the researcher probed on the topic of recognition, Ms. Gildea stated, “I don’t think anybody works for a reward, but it does motivate you...some kind of feedback always motivates us.” Three participants spoke about wanting to please past administrators who created a family-like atmosphere due to “connections.” However, Ms. Scott revealed that making connections between faculty and administrators may be more difficult now than in the past because “it seems that administrators’ plates are full.” Ms. Bishop spoke about the recognition of employees as she stated, “It seems like recognition for employees mostly comes from us recognizing each other.” Ms. Scott explained that up to two times per year, they may get notes of recognition from the administration, but “as a team, I think we recognize each other more.”

### *Intervention 1*

Following this focus group, the ARDT engaged in a follow-up meeting to review and discuss the collected data. Based on the generated data from focus groups and surveys, the ARDT identified two interventions to address the various facets of employee engagement, including internal factors, external factors, and leader behaviors. The first intervention was to create and distribute a Special Education Weekly Newsletter. This intervention targeted all three engagement aspects, including internal factors (i.e., self-efficacy), and external factors, including building level controls, such as the opportunity to get to know colleagues and leader influences. The ARDT suggested that content in the newsletter include highlights (i.e., visits by Santa), news (i.e., a new technology resource), successes (i.e., fellow employee graduating college), and a moment of “getting to know you.” This section of the newsletter included a short video clip introducing an employee. This newsletter was written and disseminated by the Early Childhood Special Education Department Chair, as she volunteered to take on this task and, as grade chair,

had robust knowledge of the updates for the Special Education Department. The plan was for the newsletter to be sent to staff members once a week to provide just-in-time information.

In the action research Cycle one, the team also decided to address external factors, specifically relationships with colleagues, by hosting a social gathering targeting special education staff members.

### *Intervention 2*

To target external factors related to engagement, the ARDT suggested that the school administration coordinate and host a Special Education Staff Breakfast, which faculty and staff members attend and fellowship with one another. According to researcher observations, 40 of the 56 Reed Elementary School Special Education Department staff attended this opportunity for fellowship. Leaders in attendance included the assistant principal, the principal, two grade chairs, and two county-level special education coordinators. The breakfast lasted approximately 30 minutes. During this time, the researcher observed a special education faculty and staff breakfast where there were opportunities for classroom teams to have their picture taken, which would be published in the Special Education Newsletter, and conversation starters, such as “what is your favorite food?” “Where would you like to vacation?” etc., on the tables. No observed participants were using the conversation starters. Many classroom teams participated in the group photographs. However, subsequent feedback indicated that not all teams participated in the photography activity.

### *Focus Group*

Action research Cycle one concluded with a final focus group meeting. This took place via Zoom during a teacher planning day when students were not in attendance. Zoom was used as the researcher was in a different town than the participants during the focus group. Three of

the four original participants attended the final focus group. One of the participants had an appointment scheduled and could not attend the last meeting. This focus group meeting lasted approximately one hour. Initially, the group discussed the implementation of the Special Education Newsletter. Ms. Gildea stated,

...making sure it's done in a way that there's equality, in terms of everybody being part of the newsletter. I would say we're starting to see things move in a direction where we can all engage a little bit more just with those efforts that have started.

The group then gave feedback on the staff breakfast. Ms. Scott stated, "...except they forgot to let [the] speech [department] know about the breakfast. So, we didn't know about it." However, Ms. Gildea, who did attend the breakfast, said, "It gave a human connection."

When the researcher probed the participants on their perceptions of overall leader efforts targeting engagement, Ms. Gildea stated she wanted to ensure her leaders' abilities to continue with engagement efforts and to "...make sure that is done authentically, and with fidelity and so that it is not, okay, I have to do this year, check off the boxes, throw some doughnuts at them, and check off the box."

Ms. Sierra added that, as a paraprofessional, she gets more communication and connection from the teacher she supports rather than the school leaders. Finally, the researcher encouraged participants to discuss future engagement efforts. Ms. Gildea indicated she would like to "connect more." She mentioned that when information is presented from the county level, she would like to "have a human connection" with the administration and to "sit down and talk, not receive an email" to discuss the updated guidance. Ms. Scott added, "this is a good start," and wants to continue to meet "in a safe environment to share." The meeting with the focus group concluded action research Cycle one.

## **Action Research Cycle 2**

### *Action Research Design Team*

To start action research Cycle two, the ARDT met to review focus group responses and pre-survey responses conducted during action research Cycle one. The ARDT agreed that a reoccurring theme of interaction was occurring. These interactions were divided between needing time to interact with colleagues and needing time to interact one-on-one with supervisors. Ms. Jackson, Ms. Smith, and the researcher brainstormed intervention ideas, such as putting specific days on the calendar for fellowship instead of only academic content-focused meetings or designating a room for special education faculty and staff to enjoy food and fellowship. Ms. Smith determined that professional learning centered on academic content could not be removed, and fellowship would have to be explored during non-working hours. Ms. Rivera, Ms. Underwood, and Ms. Jackson stated that the room of edible treats would be difficult to access as they do not have time away from their students during the school day. Ultimately, the team determined that the interventions for the action research Cycle two would include maintaining the special education newsletter and scheduling a one-on-one meeting with the administration.

### *Focus Group*

Following the ARDT meeting, the researcher invited five participants to participate in a two-part focus group (Table 4.5). Their opinions were gathered at the beginning of the second action research cycle and then again at the end of the second cycle. All five participants consented and attended the first focus group via Zoom. Zoom was selected as the researcher and participants were in different towns. This group was a mix of four teachers and one paraprofessional. Two of the teachers were in their first year at Reed Elementary School, and the



other three participants were veterans of the school, with one being an original faculty member of the school staff. This meeting occurred after school and lasted approximately 45 minutes.

**Table 4.5**

*Cycle Two Focus Group Participants*

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Role</b>
Ms. Collins	Teacher
Ms. Corbin	Paraprofessional
Primary Researcher	County Coordinator
Ms. Schaeffer	Teacher
Ms. Valdez	Teacher
Ms. Geyer	Teacher

The focus group began with the researcher inquiring about the frequency of interactions with the administration in terms of the number of times the interactions occur. There was a stark difference in the interactions with administrators between veteran and new teachers at Reed Elementary School. Veteran teacher Ms. Valdez commented, “It depends on my needs and if I seek them out,” and Ms. Collins, a new teacher, stated, “If I send an email, they will respond within 30 minutes, and they are easy to access.” When asked how these interactions with leaders typically occur, four out of five participants stated that the primary form of interaction is via email. The paraprofessional of the group indicated that the communication is filtered from the leader through her teacher to her. She then said she does not have much direct interaction with the administration. Ms. Schaeffer stated that after COVID-19, people had to relearn how to connect in person rather than via email and Zoom and that “...for two or three years, like, we haven’t had that in-person connection.”

The researcher then encouraged the participants to describe what ideal engagement from the administration looks like to them. Ms. Schaeffer, the veteran teacher, stated,

Ideally, I think that personal connection should be there at least weekly, that touch base to make sure everything's okay is super important because that's part of building that relationship and that trust to have to have engagement and for it to be authentic.

Another veteran teacher, Ms. Valdez, agreed with Ms. Schaeffer and stated, "...it's more than just the work. To connect and to talk about the work is one thing, but to be engaged is to talk beyond the work, and it can still be about the profession, your future goals." Ms. Schaeffer continued by stating, "leaders [need] to inquire about your family, your interests ... and actually sort of seeking out those more personable conversations and interactions."

Ms. Valdez elaborated that she wants this to be "...natural and not always planned...." She continued to discuss how she believes the lack of natural interactions is related to the turnover rate in her department to school engagement. Mrs. Valdez stated, "...I think what has kept me from leaving is having known the principal for so long, that sort of connection...." This prompted another participant, Ms. Schaeffer, to say, "I think about why I stay [and it is] because of that engagement, that positive engagement that's going on amongst the team." One of the new staff members at Reed Elementary School explained that her prior school did not have a connection and appreciation. She feels that Reed Elementary School is happy and welcoming and that the principal, assistant principal, and grade chair check in with little chats and to create a warm, family atmosphere.

Regarding recognition, four participants indicated that they would increasingly feel seen or recognized if the administration came into their classrooms more frequently. Ms. Schaeffer specifically stated that the recognition needs to be "authentic" because the administration "knows what is going on in my room." Though the perception of the teacher to administrator was the primary voice of the focus group based on the number of participants, it was important to

understand the perceptions of employees that are not teachers. The interactions between teachers and paraprofessionals also lend to a school's engagement. The paraprofessional of the group, Ms. Corbin, indicated that this starts at the classroom level, where the teacher recognizes the efforts of the paraprofessional, and she stated that her teacher often says the words "thank you, I appreciate you." Ms. Valdez followed up on these thoughts, exploring the idea that if colleagues start to recognize the positive impact of one another and bring that to one another's attention, it may happen more often.

Finally, Ms. Schaeffer stated that what keeps her at the school is the people. She noted that the culture of Reed Elementary School is the people. Ms. Collins agreed that the "boots on the ground" can encourage engagement. She stated,

It's kind of like a pyramid. Because the team that you work on, those are the people that you see every day, and they're right there on the ground with the same situation that you have. The tiers get higher, but they get smaller, and then noticing and giving feedback is helpful, but they're not in the classroom.

Ms. Schaeffer agreed that the leader on the small team (i.e., grade chair) may, at times, be more critical than the leader higher in the pyramid in terms of employee engagement as this grade chair has more frequent interaction with the employees.

Concluding this initial focus group, the researcher collaborated with the participants to determine that the final focus group would occur mid-December, after school, via Zoom.

### *Intervention 1 Continuation*

During action research Cycle two, Ms. Jackson, the department chair, continued to work on writing and disseminating the special education newsletter weekly. At the agreement of the ARDT, this intervention was carried over from action research Cycle one. Employees started to

mention looking forward to the newsletter, and the ARDT determined it would be detrimental to stop the practice. The newsletter continued to feature upcoming critical dates, just-in-time information, and opportunities to get to know the staff. The staff get to know you section was through video clips and pictures captured at the staff holiday breakfast. Data from the action research Cycle one indicated the need for more purposefulness in featuring specific staff members.

### *Intervention 3*

The ARDT synthesized, based on the generated data, the need for faculty and staff to connect with colleagues and the need for one-on-one time with leaders. Though the initial idea suggested by the ARDT was for one-on-one time with school administrators, time constraints of the local school administration prevented that idea from coming to fruition. Instead, county-level special education coordinators attended an event titled “Connect with a Coordinator.” A virtual invitation to this event was created and sent to all special education staff members. The event allowed any special education staff member of Reed Elementary School to come to a conference room anytime between 12:00-4:00 to meet individually with a county-level coordinator to ask questions and connect to highlight successes within the classroom.

This timing was selected to have some staff available if they get planning time potentially and to also include after-school hours in the event the teacher could not leave her classroom when students were present. The invitation was sent three times, twice within the week of the event and a third time the morning of the event. The coordinators at the event were the Early Childhood Special Education Coordinator and the School Age Cluster Coordinator.

*Observational Notes*

The researcher's observational notes in her journal captured the event's data. The researcher was in attendance during "Connect with a Coordinator" to capture the event's details. The first attendee is a first-year teacher at Reed Elementary School and happened to have a planning time during her day. Data notes indicated that this teacher wanted specific help on classroom tasks, including report cards, how to access substitute teachers to observe her mentor teacher, and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) support. She would like someone to come into her classroom and watch her using a particular curriculum and to provide feedback on her skills, as she feels she had to self-teach the use of the curriculum. She also expressed wishes for the administration to build group planning time, maybe once per month, to discuss ideas with veteran teachers. Finally, at the end of the session, this participant sat with the coordinator and talked about the career path that led her to Reed Elementary School and provided some authentic information about her family.

An Early Childhood Special Education Teacher was the second staff member to attend Connect with a Coordinator. She did not have an agenda of needs that she requested support with. Instead, she wanted time to talk and explain how things are going in her classroom, grade level, and the Special Education Department overall. She shared that her grade-level staff member recently passed away, and there has been a high emotion surrounding this change to the grade level. She continued by sharing that Reed Elementary School has suffered the passing away of several staff members in the past few years. A subsequent historical data review informs that these two individuals have a professional history of more than 10 years with one another.

The final staff member to attend Connect with a Coordinator was another veteran staff member. In observing her conversations with the coordinator, her intentions were a) presenting a

problem and brainstorming a solution with a county representative, b) brainstorming ways to gain more support as a classroom teacher, and c) venting on local school concerns. In follow-up conversations with the coordinator, after the staff member left, it was the coordinator's perception that this staff member wanted to be heard and to have someone else understand and recognize her work and needs.

### *Focus Group*

The final focus group of action research Cycle 2 took place in mid-December. During the original focus group, the five participants were asked to agree upon a day and time after work hours for the final session. When a calendar invite for the Zoom session was emailed, only four participants accepted the invitation. At the time of the focus group, only three participants attended the session: one veteran teacher, one new teacher, and one paraprofessional.

When asked about the leader's actions to foster engagement, Ms. Valdez stated that "engagement happens with some...it happens with a preferred group or, from my perception, what seems to be a preferred group." The paraprofessional, Ms. Corbin, added that most engagement is through the teacher and that she "...sets the tone and the engagement for sure in here and very well." Ms. Corbin followed up by saying that the lead teacher in her classroom "wouldn't ask me to do anything in this classroom if she wouldn't step up and do it first."

When reflecting on specific leader actions targeting employee engagement, Ms. Valdez explained that the staff breakfast "...really felt like it was a checkmark, you know, checking off a box." However, she enjoyed connecting with the cluster coordinator and being personally reflective with problem-solving opportunities. She stated, "I shared some thoughts, some concerns, but also just about myself and my interests and where I want to see my career path

going, and that's not an opportunity I've had with somebody at her level." She stated the conversation very "...felt very reciprocal. I enjoyed it. I thought it was really nice."

Ms. Corbin "...loved the newsletter, I love the idea." However, she felt that she and her lead teacher could not leave the room for the other activities when students were present. Ms. Valdez agreed that it would have been helpful for someone to come into her classroom to engage with her rather than her making an effort to arrange her paraprofessionals as she left the room. Ms. Garcia agreed that the pictures from the staff breakfast for the newsletter had good intentions, but purposeful steps to capture everyone were not taken.

The participants were asked to provide any final thoughts or plans for their school moving forward. Ms. Valdez stated,

I think that, before we start really focusing on the extras, I think we need to focus on the kinds of interactions that we have to have. I mean, the cake was great, the breakfast, that's all fine and good, but that was all sort of erased for me when I was observed on the last week before break. My only observation this semester. Those are the interactions at the end of the day, are on the record forever.

Ms. Corbin agreed that having the administration stay in the classroom for more extended periods to see what happens during the day and not just when they need help would be appreciated.

In conclusion, Ms. Valdez felt that this study may "...serve a school that was in need and program that was in need of maybe some guidance and some reflection and some outside input from non-school level stakeholders."

## Survey

A post-survey (Table 4.5) gathered data regarding the level of engagement was sent to all 18 initial consenting participants. Participants were asked to respond to 13 statements using a 5-point scale (1: Strongly Disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Neutral; 4: Agree; 5: Strongly Agree). Scores were recorded and analyzed in Microsoft Excel. Of these 18 potential participants, 17 completed the post-survey, and Table 4.6 shows the mean results from these participants and the change from the pre-survey data.

**Table 4.6**

### *Post-Survey Results*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Pre-Survey Mean</b>	<b>Post-Survey Mean</b>	<b>Change</b>
How satisfied are you with your school as a place to work?	3.77	4.06	.29
I know what is expected of me at work.	4.27	4.47	.20
I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.	4	4.12	.12
At work, I have the opportunity to do my best every day.	3.72	4.12	.40
In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise.	3.27	3.35	.08
My supervisor or someone at work seems to care about me as a person.	4.05	4.24	.19
There is someone at work who encourages my development.	4.11	4.0	-.11
At work, my opinions seem to count.	3.61	3.29	-.32
The mission or purpose of my school makes me feel my job is important.	3.94	4.12	.18
My colleagues are committed to doing quality work.	4	3.76	-.24
I have a best friend at work.	3.83	3.53	-.3
In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.	3.77	3.65	-.12
This last year, I have had opportunities to work, learn and grow.	4.16	4.0	-.16

Additional post-survey data were solicited regarding the impact of the specific interventions.



The survey was sent to all 18 initial consenting participants. Participants were asked to respond to 3 statements (“The implementation of (intervention) positively impacted my employee engagement”) using a 5-point scale (1: Strongly Disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Neutral; 4: Agree; 5: Strongly Agree). Scores were recorded and analyzed in Microsoft Excel. Of these 18 potential participants, 17 completed the post-survey, and Table 4.7 shows the mean results from these participants in the concluding survey. Of note, at the Connect with a Coordinator Event, only three participants attended. The post-survey results of the people that came had a mean of 4.0. Feedback regarding the timing of this meeting was provided during the action research Cycle two concluding focus group.

**Table 4.7**

*Concluding Post-Survey Results*

<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Impact Mean</b>
Newsletter	3.29
Special Education Breakfast	3.59
Connect With a Coordinator	3.0

Finally, within the post-survey, participants could provide open-ended feedback through a question asking about any final thoughts the employee had regarding employee engagement, a leader’s influence on engagement, and/or the process of the study.

Four employees mentioned having leaders that cared. One participant stated,

Through reflection and conversations in the focus group, I believe that before leaders in a school focus on the “extras” (newsletter, breakfast), they should focus on the everyday interactions that have to happen, such as observation, communicating RBES [Results Based Evaluations Standards] goals, daily communication, etcetera. Being able to

effectively interact and engage in those conversations seems to have a more lasting, professional impact.”

Another participant stated, “Employee engagement over the past few months has improved staff engagement. It was evident that our voices and opinions were heard. Our school definitely had more fun and joy!” One final participant reflected on overall leadership abilities by stating, “I have seen progress with the morale of the department. I feel direct leadership from my AP and mentors has increased and remains positive and supportive. I do feel that our principal needs a stronger presence for those uncomfortable situations that need to be addressed.”

### *Interviews*

Educational Leader interviews occurred in December 2022 to learn how leaders articulate influencing employee engagement. The leaders’ occupations ranged from a county-level special education coordinator, the local school special education assistant principal, and the local school grade chair. The county-level coordinator explained that her primary responsibility is to assist school leaders in various ways, including creating and sustaining a positive instructional culture, which provides her multiple opportunities to visit special education classrooms. She stated, “Absolutely!” when asked if employee engagement should be a focus at a local school. She continued by saying,

If you don’t have engagement in your schools by your staff, then it’s really hard to keep the retention and the teachers wanting to come back year after year. That should be the responsibility of not only the administration, they should be involved in teacher engagement, but teachers should also want to be part of creating and helping with teacher engagement, especially when they bring new teachers on board.

In the interview with the grade chair, Ms. Jackson explained that she mostly meets with teachers on her grade level informally on a weekly basis after the students have left for the day. Generally, these meetings range from social interactions to helping to solve identified classroom-level needs. She explained that the grade level does have an email text thread, and there are times after hours when they do follow up with one another, but it is mostly centered around reminders and procedural information. In terms of overall staff engagement, Ms. Jackson stated,

Staff engagement definitely should be a focus because everyone, whether they are a new teacher or a veteran teacher needs to feel supported. And I felt like staff engagement allows individuals to do that. I feel like it is imperative that, most importantly is done by administrators. At that first level tier like we'd really need to feel supported and seen by them. And then after that, it's going to be peers and not necessarily leaders, but just in terms of just being recognized on some capacity as being here and validated and engaged. But, definitely, first administrators because that is the tier where people put the most weight on. And then after that, it will just be the whole school, your grade level, and then hopefully other people, but definitely your grade level. Because if you don't have it from the people you see the most every day, I don't think you'll really be able to really function effectively.

The interview concluded after Ms. Jackson explained the employee engagement efforts currently in place within the school. She explained that interactions directly with school administration are more procedural in nature and would only occur if the employee specifically asked for them. She explained that newsletters are a good way to keep people informed and that tangible items do occur. She stated,

So, you can tell there's energy and effort put behind it from the administrative standpoint, even though we know they're drowning too. But they're still making time and effort to make sure that we're okay as much as they can be.

The final interview was with Ms. Smith, the Special Education Assistant Principal. She indicated she most frequently interacts with other leaders from her school (including the principal, other assistant principals, and grade chairs) and district-level support personnel. However, she does go into teachers' classrooms daily. These are typically short interactions (5-15 minutes) and are generally based on required observations or behavioral support situations. She said her primary way of interacting with the staff is via email. When asked whether employee engagement should be a focus at schools, Ms. Smith stated,

I definitely do. And I definitely think it should be more intentional from the leadership perspective to engage staff in different fun activities get to know you activities, like the breakfast we did. I do think that is more of a leadership role that should be on us, the leaders.

Then, Ms. Smith was asked to elaborate on some specific engagement activities taking place at her school. She stated that in terms of one-on-one connection with staff, "it would be more like conferences, what we're recommended to do;" however, she does have some drop-in opportunities like "the salty, sweet day just to come by the office and get a salty sweet and that ends up in a conversation that's just talking about, hey what happened today?"

Written feedback to staff generally revolves around specific feedback from classroom observations when the assistant principal highlights something positive she noticed. Finally, in terms of tangible acknowledgments, Mrs. Smith stated, "we have things all over the building so

teachers can go in anybody's office and get a snack or something. They can wear jeans every day."

### *Concluding Meeting*

Once data collection ended, the ARDT met one last time to review some of the more salient feedback from the focus groups, interviews, and surveys. This meeting occurred toward the end of December, before school, via Zoom due to geographical differences, and five of the six ARDT members were in attendance. When the researcher inquired how the ARDT members see their role as a leader moving forward, Ms. Smith indicated that she wanted to look at a "little more engagement, being more team-oriented, and doing things [such as] the breakfast, or the newsletter, and things like that." Ms. Jackson agreed that team building and fellowship would have to be a priority by leaders within the school. She then stated,

So, when we're all drowning in that boat, we will still roll together. But so that I see that's really still an important part of leadership and making it a priority as opposed to something that just kind of happens when it happens.

Ms. Underwood agreed but pointed out, "it's hard to make us priority because I just forget about it because it's usually all about the kids, which is why we're here." She implied that student needs take precedence over teacher needs.

The ARDT team discussed the methods used to gather participant feedback throughout the study. Ms. Smith felt that the survey was effective as it was less time-consuming. Ms. Jackson thought that the focus groups encouraged people to "really talk," and little things like taking their opinions into account made a big difference. As the conversation continued, the ARDT explored areas where there is room for growth with Reed Elementary School leaders. Ms. Rivera explained that allocating the time for these efforts is hard, and she spoke of "last minute

time constraints,” while Ms. Jackson focused on accountability and explained that it is “...hard to follow up when starting something with a list of to-do items.” She explained that a level of accountability was necessary for engagement.

When asked to provide final thoughts on the study, Ms. Smith said, “everyone’s needs are so different and have to meet the needs of individuals and have to find a happy medium.” Ms. Jackson agreed and stated, “people really do want to be heard and give input and want a voice.” Ms. Underwood felt that there should be various ways for people to provide their input on school engagement moving forward. Ms. Rivera culminated that discussion by explaining, “...you can try hard to please everybody...but at the end of the day, I don’t think it’s ever achievable to get 100% satisfaction.”

### **Chapter Summary**

This action research was conducted through a series of two action research cycles. The entire action research spanned four months through the lens of a special education department of one large elementary school. The study’s data sources included focus groups, interviews, surveys, and a researcher’s journal of observations. Themes were discovered using Braun and Clark’s (2006) investigative coding method and searching for reoccurring patterns. A summary of the discoveries is included in Table 4.8.

**Table 4.8***Action Research Cycle Findings*

<b>Findings</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The desire for fellowship and connections between colleagues</li> <li>• The desire for a personal and professional connection to the administration</li> <li>• The desire for genuine and authentic connections</li> <li>• The desire for recognition to take various forms</li> <li>• The understanding that leadership occurs in hierarchal tiers</li> <li>• Leaders have a multitude of duties, and engagement efforts should not take a checkbox mentality</li> <li>• Reflection of engagement for both leaders and employees generally uses an external versus internal lens</li> </ul>

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE**

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine which leader actions influence employee engagement and how to leverage these leader actions towards increased employee engagement in the special education department of a large urban school.

#### **Research Questions**

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry.

1. How do special education employees articulate leadership's impact on their overall engagement?
2. How do local school leaders articulate their role in the process of influencing employee engagement (i.e., the leader's perceptions of their engagement efforts toward employees)?
3. How does the action research team describe analyzing the processes and effects of leadership actions on employee engagement?

Chapter 4 presented the results from two action research cycles collected via questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, historical documents, and researcher field notes and journals. The data in this qualitative study were derived from participants, including educational



leaders, teachers, paraprofessionals, and speech-language pathologists. This chapter presents and analyzes the reoccurring topics and keywords that resulted in thematic discoveries.

This action research used a qualitative research design to explore special education employee engagement in a single elementary school as a microcosm of special education employee engagement in a large urban school district. Bass' Theoretical Framework of Transformational Leadership (1985) was embedded throughout the study as the Action Research Design Team continuously thought through how the leaders could coach employees, encourage team spirit, lead by example, and recognize staff innovation. As indicated earlier, focus groups were recorded via Zoom. All recordings were then transcribed using a third-party application, Otter.ai. The researcher listened to the audio recordings and made the necessary corrections to the transcriptions. Survey data was gathered via Google Forms and analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

When analyzing the data, themes were discovered using Braun and Clark's (2006, 2021) investigative coding method and searching for reoccurring patterns in conjunction with a third-party application, Delve, to analyze the qualitative data. The researcher began with a deductive, or top-down approach to the coding and added in inductive, or a ground-up system, as she looked for other codes derived from the data. These findings were introduced in Chapter 4. A summary of the findings extrapolated from Chapter 4 and aligned to the research questions along with themes are included in Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1**

*Summary of Research Questions Connected to Findings and Themes*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Findings</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Q1: How do special education employees articulate leadership's impact on their overall engagement?	The desire for a personal and professional connection with leaders	Theme 1: Engagement is intentional and authentic
	The desire for genuine and authentic connections	
	The desire for fellowship and connections between colleagues	
Q2: How do local school leaders articulate their role in the process of influencing employee engagement (i.e., the leader's perceptions of their engagement efforts toward employees)?	The understanding that leadership occurs in hierarchal tiers	Theme 2: Engagement is differentiated
	The desire for recognition to take various forms	
	Leaders have a multitude of duties, and engagement efforts should not take a checkbox mentality	
Q3: How does the action research team describe analyzing the processes and effects of leadership actions on employee engagement?	Reflection of engagement for both leaders and employees generally use an external versus internal lens	Theme 3: Reflection is internal versus external

Given that the study centered around the leader's actions influencing employee engagement, the emergence of the keyword "leader" throughout the findings is not surprising. Three significant themes resulted from the findings. These three themes are (1) engagement is intentional and authentic connections, (2) engagement is differentiated, and (3) reflection is internal versus external. Each theme is described in the next section, coupled with the findings

aligned to the research questions. The following data combines focus group and interview transcriptions, researcher field notes, and journals with survey data from the previous Table 4.4.

### **Research Question 1**

This action research study sought to determine how special education employees articulate leadership's impact on their overall engagement. As defined by Ms. Schaeffer, Ms. Collins, and Ms. Valdez, in action research Cycle Two, engagement is beyond work and a natural, personal connection built on trust and appreciation. Through this study, the theme of engagement being intentional and authentic emerged as the researcher learned about the needs and desires of the participants. This theme was situated in three findings (1) a desire for fellowship and connectedness with colleagues, (2) personal and professional connections with the leaders, and (3) the need for genuine and authentic connections.

#### **Fellowship and Connections with Colleagues**

Throughout the research study, multiple participants mentioned that engagement is not limited to leaders but also extends to colleagues. The need to belong and to make connections is fundamental to human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Ms. Scott stated it is essential to have "those opportunities to connect" with colleagues she does not regularly see, as that connection leads to engagement. These human connections allow individuals to interact socially so that participants feel heard, seen, known, and valued. Aligned with Ms. Scott's definition, Ms. Gildea added,

I think one of the most important things is also building rapport within the team, not just in your inner group but within your team. I think that it's very important to get to work together instead of working within your bubble.

Ms. Gildea elaborated, “But you also have to connect and have fun, and smile, and play games. And it must be fun because it makes the job a lot easier.”

Six participants referenced the Special Education Employee Breakfast event when discussing opportunities for fellowship between faculty and staff. For example, Ms. Jackson, a grade-level chair, stated, “many people are so happy to have the breakfast because we hadn’t had the chance to really fellowship.” Ms. Gildea’s feedback on the breakfast reiterated similar feelings regarding fellowship opportunities when she stated, “I think having the initiation of the breakfast has been great. It was just a really great moment to get together and get to know each other.” Ms. Gildea continued and provided further feedback on the connections within the breakfast, “It definitely gave us that human connection where we were able to physically sit and talk...Mostly, we talked about the human connection. I can’t emphasize enough about when we go back to that if we go back to that...but at the end, people lingered and sat and talked.”

Anecdotally, the participants indicated the need for opportunities to fellowship and connect with colleagues. Additionally, when asked about the specific interventions such as the colleague fellowship opportunity, focus groups, interviews, and observational data were all positive. However, when analyzing survey data, the results differed. Aligning to the idea of a connection with colleagues is the question from the survey, “I have a best friend at work.” Gallup has repeatedly shown that having a best friend at work is critical to employee engagement and job success (Gallup, n.d.). These “best friends” genuinely care about one another and help navigate change. This score had the third lowest overall post-mean in addition and the second most significant negative change (-.30) from pre-survey to post-survey.

As coworkers bond, share, and explore with one another about topics outside of work, their actions support the need to “...be seen as people (not just employees) even when they are at

work” (Gallup, Inc., 2022, p. 18). Additionally, the school culture improves when leaders create parameters for a school climate that fosters collaboration and fellowship (Carswell, 2021). The researcher postulated with the ARDT that the data indicates, though the reaction to the employee connection efforts was positive in isolation to the event, overall, employees have told qualitatively and quantitatively that they want opportunities to connect with colleagues, but it does not seem to be occurring.

### **Personal and Professional Connection to Leaders**

Interwoven throughout all data sources, participants expressed their desire to have personal and professional connections with their local school administrators. Lipscomb et al. (2021) found that professional support from leaders creates greater work engagement. The professional connections included in-person curriculum analysis as well as having administrators present in the classroom regularly. For example, Ms. Gildea, a teacher participant, shared that her administrator effectively regurgitates district-level information via email, “...but sometimes the email doesn’t explain it all.” She would rather meet in person with the administration to review this information. During both focus groups and ARDT meetings, teachers stated that it is often hard to leave the classroom while students are present. The teachers indicated it would be meaningful to have administrators come to see the work in action rather than just come to the classroom to complete required tasks.

Teachers understand that their primary role is a professional one in which they are tasked with student achievement. However, they sought to have leaders connect with them personally to help them feel engaged in the school. Research indicates that a school leader influences human capital (Börü & Bellibaş, 2021). If human capital is the influencer of student achievement, then it

stands to reason that these school leaders must make concerted efforts to build a strong faculty and staff. Ms. Valdez agreed with Ms. Schaeffer and said,

To me, it's more than just the work. To connect and to talk about the work is one thing, but to be engaged is to talk beyond the work, and that can still be about the profession and your future goals, but it can also be your family and your interests; not every week, but on some level.

Feedback regarding the opportunity to connect one-on-one with district leaders was overwhelmingly positive; however, the scheduling logistics presented a barrier to some.

During action research Cycle 2, Ms. Valdez spoke of the one-on-one time with a leader,

I really enjoyed that opportunity. I shared some thoughts and concerns, but just about myself and my interests, and where I want to see my career path going, and it's not an opportunity I've had with somebody at her level.

Aligning with these sentiments, Dr. Washington, special education coordinator, spoke of her reflection on the time she spent connecting with the teachers sharing, "I definitely want to do more of that one-on-one engagement with the teachers because it's always important to hear their perspective, especially when it comes to special education."

### **Genuine and Authentic Interactions**

Participants in the study articulated that not all engagement with leaders is the same. These participants indicated that they felt the engagement efforts of their leaders when the interactions occurred genuinely and authentically. Authentic interactions are interactions in which leaders are aware of their values, encourage open sharing, and create positive relationships (Kiersch & Peters, 2017). Ms. Schaeffer, during action research Cycle 1, said,

I'm wondering, as we're talking about engagement, if some of that is almost authentic recognition [understanding] what's going on in my room. So, [the administrator knows] what I'm really going through. When you recognize me, you're not recognizing me on a general [level], oh my gosh, you're an amazing teacher, you're so great. You're specific about what you're recognizing that I'm doing well...I think that comes across as genuine because they feel they know what this journey you have been going on.

Five participants used the term genuine when referring to feedback, and Ms. Collins stated, in response to another participant's focus group comment, "...genuine, you hit the nail on it with that. I think genuine is a big piece that's probably needed when you're thinking about what engagement looks like." While Ms. Valdez said, "And I think that engagement and genuine leadership is just really, really needed."

Two other teachers used the term "authentic" when referring to their desire for connections. Ms. Schaeffer described, "personal connections...at least weekly...touching base to make sure everything's okay, is super important because that's part of building that relationship and that trust to be able to have engagement and for it to be authentic." During action research Cycle 2, Ms. Collins elaborated on the need for authenticity,

The other part is authentic. I don't need any more county [ink] pens. But, if you actually do something to say, hey, we see this is your first year here, and you've been rocking, you've been going with the punches, learning all of the things, that's awesome. That goes further than just sending something that is probably going to collect dust on my desk.

The survey data indicate that the employees in the special education department of Reed Elementary School feel its leaders care about them as a person. This area was the second-highest overall mean (4.24) post-survey. This response indicates that there is emotional

engagement between leaders and employees. However, the survey data suggests that employees need frequent feedback from leaders. The second lowest overall mean (3.35) aligned with someone providing praise or recognition in the past seven days and negative change (-.12) to the staff receiving feedback about their progress in the past six months. So, employees understand that their leaders genuinely care about them as a person, but they are not getting authentic and genuine feedback consistently. Authentic leaders are driven to serve and support those around them (Kiersch & Peters, 2017).

The overall understanding gleaned from Research Question 1 was depicted in a statement from the assistant principal, Ms. Smith. She feels that engagement "...should be more intentional from the leadership perspective...." These intentional leader actions allow employees to feel personally and professionally connected to the school. Authentic fellowship between colleagues is imperative. All opportunities to connect cannot be grounded in data and students; some connectivity must also be personal. To bring purposefulness to employee-leader interactions, leaders must make concerted efforts for their interactions to be genuine, authentic, and regularly occurring.

### **Research Question 2**

One of the study's goals was to understand how school leaders articulate their role in influencing employee engagement. Findings aligned with this research indicate that school leaders face an overwhelming number of daily responsibilities. Because of this, some tasks, including engagement, may take on a check-box mentality. School engagement may occur on a tiered hierarchy to counteract the lack of time leaders may possess. Within these various tiers, the forms of recognition may vary. As leadership is an antecedent to engagement (Osborne &



Hammoud, 2017; Prochazka et al., 2017), local school leaders must focus on engagement efforts within their realm of control.

### **The Multitude of Duties/Checkbox Mentality**

During their interviews, teachers, staff members, and educational leaders spoke about the increasing workload of all school employees. There was a clear awareness that everyone, including the school leader, had a myriad of duties vying for attention. The scope of the workload at Reed Elementary School mirrors that of education as a whole (Rowland, 2008). At times, with the many tasks leaders balance, employees felt engagement efforts were more of a checkbox mentality than authentically true connectivity efforts. Ms. Gildea, when speaking about leaders, said,

It's just we don't see them as often. I think they're less available or visible to us this year.

That's changed. It seems like it's become less since last year.... And, again, I attribute it to just like we're saying, we're all super busy.

She later continued expounding on the level of work everyone faces, "We all know that every year our plates get fuller, and it could just be that our administrator's plates are full. I mean, they are great administrators, but they're not around as much." Ms. Scott agreed with Ms. Gildea and said, "I know their plates are full." Ms. Valdez, when discussing engagement, said, "If I'm just being honest, for the past few years, it seemed like it's been a check box like, all right, did this, we're engaged. Instead of more genuine, wanting to have an interest." This sentiment was summed up in action research Cycle 2 by a teacher,

What popped into my mind, like everybody else, I have to remember, as a teacher, when I'm given one more thing to do, like, oh my goodness, one more thing to do. And when you talk about our administrators, and our leaders' ability to do this, I did think on their

behalf that this is one more thing for my coordinator to do. So realizing that's one more thing to do, and then wondering, how do you balance all that you will have to do or that you do with pulling off some of these things, and doing it with fidelity.... But as we move forward, just make sure that it is done authentically and with fidelity and not; I have to check off the boxes.

Employees were not alone in their discussions of workload. Leaders spoke about their feelings about the overwhelming number of responsibilities. Ms. Smith, when meeting with the ARDT, stated, "Sometimes it feels like it's impossible with all of the workload that we have. And then we are split between so many different things." A grade chair, Ms. Jackson agreed, "Even though we're all quite busy and overwhelmed. It's still extremely important to build those teams. So, when we're all drowning in that boat, we'll still roll together."

### **Hierarchal Tiers**

One clear finding from leaders, faculty, and staff was the awareness that engagement was most effective when it occurred in hierarchal tiers. Börü and Bellibaş (2021) explained that school administrators influence school structures. If the structure for engagement and support at Reed Elementary School is to occur via tiers, the school administrators should be explicit in this expectation. These tiers at Reed Elementary School started with colleagues on a grade level, then to the department level, then a local school level, and then a district level. Ms. Scott spoke to the hierarchy of support, saying, "I was informed that I needed to go to the special education assistant principal before the principal ...it was very adamant." Ms. Gildea agreed to the support hierarchy and finding time to connect,

...it's different circles; there is your school, your classroom, your grade level teams, then special education as a team, and then the school. So, making sure that you're engaged on some level, within all of those different circles...

Ms. Gildea's comments discussing the hierarchy of support also aligned with Research Question One as she spoke about the type of connections within each of these tiers. Ms. Schaeffer agreed with the tiered vision of leaders and spoke to the culture of support within the school. She said,

Whereas I think with leadership, sometimes, especially once it gets higher up with the principal or AP, they don't necessarily know you or your room. I think with SDD because we're small, we have that opportunity. We are very specific and make sure everybody gets hey; I know that you had a hard day today, or oh my gosh, I know that you've been working really hard on this piece; it's amazing. We were very good about kind of giving that to each other.

Ms. Collins also talked about the levels of school support by stating,

I'm wondering if having a solid leader on that small level is almost more important than that bigger piece, kind of like a pyramid. Because the team that you work on, those are the people that you see every day, and they're right there on the ground with the same situation that you have. And, honestly, that's what keeps me motivated.

Ms. Jackson, special education grade chair, summarized all of the thoughts of her colleagues when she stated,

Staff engagement should definitely be a focus because everyone, whether they are new teachers or veteran teachers, needs to feel supported. And I feel like staff engagement allows individuals to do that. I feel like it is imperative that, most importantly, it is done by the administration. At that first level tier, we'd really need to feel supported and seen

by them. And then after that, it's going to be peers and not necessarily leaders, but just in terms of being recognized on some capacity as being heard and validated and engaged. But definitely, first administrators because that's the tier where people put the most weight. And after that, it will just be the whole school, your grade level, and then hopefully other people, but definitely your grade level. Because if you don't have it from the people you see the most every day, I don't think you'll be able to really function effectively.

### **Form of Recognition**

Faculty and staff articulated that, when considering the idea of tiered support, it was clear that the forms of recognition would differ among the different levels of support. However, a common theme aligned with sentiments from earlier findings is the need for the feedback to be genuine. Ms. Valdez described her perspective on the idea of feedback stating, "It's more of recognizing the needs and not so much recognizing the work." Ms. Gildea wanted her recognition to individualized "...because after a while, it just becomes generic. Like we're checking off a box." She then continued with the idea of motivation by stating,

I don't think anybody works for a reward. But it does motivate you. ...So, there's something about the human psyche that says that I need feedback not that we do it for that reason, but the feedback does motivate you....

Regarding the tiers of support, paraprofessionals mentioned that much of their engagement and feedback is led by the teacher in the classroom rather than the school's leaders. Ms. Sierra explained that the teacher in her classroom provides regular verbal recognition such as "you did great" or "I love the way you did this thing."

With the understanding that engagement can happen throughout all members of a school or organization, it is imperative that all employees can capitalize on their strengths and then use this to help support one another. Suppose employees are to lean on one another and have fewer direct interactions with leadership at a higher level. In that case, it's essential to uncover hidden potential, for example, teacher leaders that can provide real-time feedback and engagement. The survey question "I have the opportunity to do my best every day" shows the highest change (+.40) from pre-survey to post-survey, indicating that employees can tap into their unique skills. Ideally, leaders could then capitalize on these skills and provide structures for frequent engagement between employees demonstrating leadership skills and their colleagues.

Throughout Research Question 2, it was evident that leader impact on engagement occurs within tiers of support. It begins at the classroom level and moves through grade levels, departments, schools, and the district. This tiered level of support is necessary as individuals, regardless of employment level, are inundated with duties and responsibilities (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Rowland, 2008). Based on this heavy workload, engagement can sometimes become one more thing to do or check off in the litany of tasks. Therefore, leaders must be purposeful in setting up a school culture where engagement is present (Börü & Bellibaş, 2021).

### **Research Question 3**

Reflective practices emerged as a theme when understanding how the action research team described analyzing the processes and effects of leadership actions on employee engagement. Field notes and transcripts from Action Research Design Team Meetings highlight participants engaging in external reflective practices more frequently than internal reflective practices.

## External Versus Internal Lens

During the study, participants were asked to reflect on engagement, but this reflection was not defined as internal or external reflection. Data indicate that much reflection centered externally on what could change or influence engagement. Fewer data demonstrated internal reflection of what each participant could do to influence engagement at their school. When speaking about employee engagement efforts, Ms. Underwood, a member of the ARDT, said, “it’s hard to make teachers a priority because I just forget about it....” She explained that her priority is her students, not the adults in her classroom. Her thoughts show that concerted efforts around an individual’s ownership of their engagement may not occur. Another participant, Ms. Schaeffer, spoke about recognition and how it’s hard to pinpoint what it looks like.

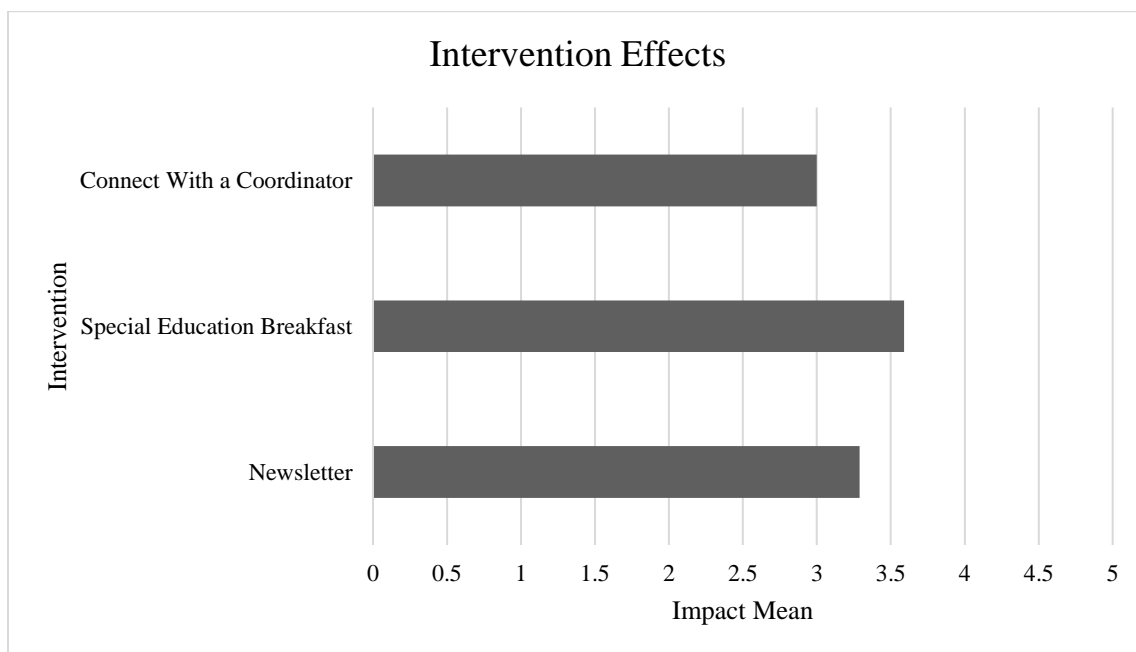
It’s hard because I think sometimes it comes off as being ungenune. But I’m not sure how to fix that...I don’t feel recognized; I don’t feel that it happens. But then what would that look like? Even in a perfect world? What would that look like to me? I’m not even sure how that would look; for it to be genuine.

Reflections such as these show that internally, staff are still determining what they expect in terms of engagement but can only articulate whether the actions of others make them feel engaged.

Other participants were able to provide feedback on the external pieces of engagement. Ms. Valdez believes that “before we start really focusing on the extras, I think we need to focus on the kinds of interactions that we have to have.” One of the school leaders agreed and stated that most leaders’ interactions with employees are procedural in nature. Another school leader said she would like to focus on “colleague to colleague first because I think we’re struggling in that area. And I can see it.” Leaders also spoke about the accountability of engagement efforts.

Ms. Jackson, in an ARDT meeting, explained, “I will say, a practice that I want to do more is the accountability piece. Like you said, sometimes it’s hard to follow up when you start something.”

The ARDT was provided data from a post-survey of the implemented interventions. Participants were asked to respond to three statements (“The implementation of (intervention) positively impacted my employee engagement”) using a 5-point scale (1: Strongly Disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Neutral; 4: Agree; 5: Strongly Agree). Scores were recorded and analyzed in Microsoft Excel. Of these 18 potential participants, 17 completed the post-survey, and Figure 5.1 shows the mean post-survey results from these participants. Of note, at the Connect with a Coordinator Event, only three participants attended. The post-survey results of the people that came had a mean of 4.0. Feedback regarding the timing of this meeting also came out of action research Cycle 2 Concluding Focus Group. One participant stated, “I can’t get out of the room when students are present,” and another said, “It would have been helpful to have someone come to our classroom.”

**Figure 5.1***Post-Survey Results*

Based on this feedback, the researcher explained that the staff that attended the Connect with a Coordinator rated the highest impact on engagement having that one-on-one time with a leader. However, it should be noted that when Connect with a Coordinator was brainstormed as an intervention, the leaders within the ARDT explained that time was prohibitive to have a local school leader work alongside the county coordinator at the event. Additionally, the Colleague Fellowship Opportunity scored relatively the next highest in terms of being impactful on employee engagement. However, when the ARDT explored other ways to provide special education employees opportunities for collegial fellowship, it was determined that the school's master calendar did not support these efforts.

The survey data supported the idea that reflective practices may not occur because the reflections do not amount to action. The survey question "At work, my opinions seem to count" helps to understand whether leaders consider employee thoughts as decisions are made. This



item had the most significant decrease from pre-survey to post-survey results (-.32). When combining the various data sources from the study, it appears that employees have determined and communicated the engagement methods that are most meaningful to them. However, the leader's actions do not align with these needs.

With the extensive role of the Action Research Design Team throughout the study, there were multiple opportunities for reflection. At the beginning of the study, team members could list events or engagement efforts within the school. However, these were made without an awareness of the needs or desires of the employees. When interventions were brainstormed, historical or perceived roadblocks presented by school leaders impeded using reflections on data in a meaningful way. However, once the study concluded, all members of the ARDT agreed that leaders must make engagement a priority at the school rather than just hoping it will occur organically.

The ARDT decided that with everyone's needs at the school being so different, it is imperative to allow employees to provide input and have a voice in the engagement efforts at their school. With teacher's self-efficacy levels in direct correlation with the professional support they are given (Lipscomb et al., 2021) and with teacher agency in direct alignment with teacher's ability to direct their professional growth (Calvert, 2016), school leaders should engage in internal reflection to ensure their efforts meet the needs of the faculty and staff they support.

### **Chapter Summary**

Data analysis from three research questions led to themes relating to a leader's actions. Findings throughout the research's two action research cycles corroborated these themes. Through the lens of Bass' Theoretical Framework of Transformational Leadership (1985), the ARDT sought to determine if there was a significant effect on teachers' performance due to

leaders' efforts (Adriani et al., 2018). This study used an action research design team to influence employees and their actions through motivation without micromanaging and allowed opportunities for innovation and planning. The Transformational Leadership Framework (Bass, 1985) provided the opportunity for the action research team to create a shared vision of change within the school, hereby influencing employee engagement.

Research Question 1 explored the leader's impact on employee engagement. Data indicated the importance of interactions between colleagues and personal and professional interactions between employees and leaders. However, grounding these types of interactions required that the interactions were genuine and authentic. These findings resulted in Theme 1: Intentional and Authentic Connections.

Research Question 2 investigated the specific leader's role as it relates to employee engagement. A clear theme emerged from the findings: this role is a tiered hierarchal support system at a school. All school employees face an overwhelming load of expectations regarding job duties. Therefore, employees may more frequently interact with direct colleagues rather than further removed leaders resulting in a need for feedback from all levels of the hierarchy.

Research Question 3 focused on the Action Research Design Team and their perceptions of the research process. To brainstorm interventions and to determine their effects, the ARDT was required to reflect on their actions. These reflections resulted in Theme 3: Reflective Practices. Team members were observed to engage in primarily external reflective practices indicating what others could change situated around the idea of engagement but less internally reflective about what they could change.

Chapter 6 presents the conclusions to the study, limitations of the study, implications from the study, and finally, provides connections to leadership practices.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONNECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP PRACTICES**

This qualitative study explored to what degree local school leader actions can influence employee engagement and what specific leader actions aligned with these changes. The study used an individual school's special education department as a microcosm of the actions of a district special education department in a large urban school system. The implications of this study provide a framework of understanding for local school leaders. Purposeful leader actions can support employee engagement, creating a positive ripple effect of repercussions for the school and students.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine which leader actions influence employee engagement and how to leverage these leader actions towards increased employee engagement in the special education department of a large urban school.

#### **Research Questions**

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry.

1. How do special education employees articulate leadership's impact on their overall engagement?

2. How do local school leaders articulate their role in the process of influencing employee engagement (i.e., the leader's perceptions of their engagement efforts toward employees)?
3. How does the action research team describe analyzing the processes and effects of leadership actions on employee engagement?

This chapter discusses suggestions for special education leaders, including local school and district-level leaders. These suggestions are grounded in the thematic discoveries from Chapter 5.

### **Summary of the Study**

This qualitative study occurred from September to December 2022 at Reed Elementary School. The Reed Elementary School is in the Bayside County Public Schools, a large urban school system. This action research was designed to explore a local school leader's impact on employee engagement with the desire to view the results as a small-scale version of the needs of the district special education department. Using Bass' Transformational Leadership Theory (1985), the researcher explored actions a leader could enact to result in school-wide employee engagement. The Action Research Design Team provided opportunities to reflect that resulted in the development of interventions and feedback from the findings from these efforts.

#### *Action Research*

Action research was chosen as it sought to solve an actual problem within the researcher's field of practice. The action research consisted of two cycles of study and included 19 participants. The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) routinely met to review historical and current data and to brainstorm interventions to address areas of need. The team was designed through the collaborative efforts of the researcher and the local school Special Education Assistant Principal. It was determined that in addition to their roles, two grade chairs and two

teachers would join the ARDT. The ARDT was purposefully assembled to encompass a variety of viewpoints in terms of age, years of experience in the field of education, years of employment at the school, and roles within the school.

The initial action research design team meeting reviewed the purpose of the study, the role of the ARDT, and a review of historical data from the district and local. From that point, the ARDT reviewed the data sources used throughout the study and set timelines for future meetings. In subsequent meetings, the researcher acted as the facilitator of the meetings and presented updated data. Additionally, the researcher challenged the ARDT to think through potential interventions and the logistics of implementing the interventions, including timing, roles, and responsibilities. After the study, the researcher conducted a focus group with the ARDT to gather their final thoughts and perceptions about the findings from the study.

#### *Theoretical Framework*

This action research study focused on leader actions that influenced employee engagement. Grounding this study was Bass' Transformational Leadership Theory (1985). School leaders must influence employees to activate their self-efficacy as this positively correlates with higher work engagement (Guglielmi et al., 2015; Luthans & Youssef, 2007). Leadership involves relationships and the skills to motivate others (Burns, 1996). The theoretical framework of Transformational Leadership created a path with a vision and strategy to move an organization forward (Bsoul, 2022).

The action research team used the four tenants of Transformational Leadership specifically as follows, 1) Individualized Consideration—acting as a mentor/coach; 2) Idealized Influence—leading by example; 3) Inspirational Motivation—creating the vision and encouraging team spirit; 4) Intellectual Stimulation—recognizing and challenging staff to

demonstrate innovation. The ARDT determined that local school leaders alone do not shoulder the responsibility of implementing the tenants of Transformational Leadership. A school leader, using individualized consideration, must establish structures of support. They must develop personal and professional relationships with employees through idealized influence and lead by example on how relationships should look within the school. Additionally, inspirational motivation comes not only from leaders but also through collegial fellowship as employees emulate and model the structures of relationships developed by their leaders. Finally, as determined by the ARDT, leaders must engage in reflective practices where the final tenant, intellectual stimulation, is not only encouraged but more importantly acted upon.

### *Logic Model*

The ARDT used a logic model to execute their plans. Following the framework of Alter and Murty (1997), the logic model identified three interventions and the resources needed to implement the interventions. The thematic finding of the ARDT about the need for reflective practices provided an opportunity for growth and reflection for both employees and leaders and a framework for the opportunities for intervention (Alter & Murty, 1997).

Four phases of action research were used: plan, act, observe, and reflect (Altrichter et al., 2002; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). In phase one, the ARDT reviewed historical and current data reported by special education personnel at Reed Elementary School. They then reflected on this data to look for patterns or if specific data points stood out for various reasons. Then, in cycle two, the action research team targeted interventions identified in phase one as having a potential impact. The team planned to execute those behaviors in purposeful or predetermined frequencies. The ARDT implemented interventions targeting employee engagement in phase three of the logic model. Finally, in phase four, the team analyzed data to determine the

effectiveness of the interventions. Replication of these efforts continued through two action research cycles and culminated in examining the overall degree of influence of the leader's behaviors toward engagement.

### Summary and Discussion of the Findings

Using an action research method, a qualitative study was employed to gauge the degree of impact leaders' actions can have on influencing special education employee engagement. Guiding this study were three research questions over two action research cycles. Support for the thematic findings is embedded in the data from focus group and interview transcriptions, researcher field notes, journals, and survey data. An overview of the research questions connected to the themes and implications is offered in Table 6.1 to provide an advanced organizer for the remainder of this chapter.

**Table 6.1**

*Overview of the Research Questions Connected to Themes and Implications*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Discovered Themes</b>	<b>Implications</b>
Q1: How do special education employees articulate leadership's impact on their overall engagement?	Theme 1: Engagement is intentional and authentic	Higher engagement may result in less employee turnover.
Q2: How do local school leaders articulate their role in the process of influencing employee engagement (i.e., the leader's perceptions of their engagement efforts toward employees)?	Theme 2: Engagement is differentiated	Intentionality in role responsibilities, allotments, and master scheduling
Q3: How does the action research team describe analyzing the processes and effects of leadership actions on employee engagement?	Theme 3: Reflection is internal versus external	Leaders, faculty, and staff all understand and take ownership in expressing their needs and acting on the needs of others.

### *Discussion of Findings from Research Question 1*

The idea that connections matter within the field of education is not new; however, it most frequently aligns with the impact teachers have on students (Darling-Hammond, 2000). The professional support of teachers predicts greater work engagement (Lipscomb, 2021). The initial research question determined what special education employees articulated was needed to support their engagement. This question produced data indicating that intentional connections are imperative. These connections must not only be intentional in their planning and implementation, but they must also be genuine and authentic. Findings from Gallup (2022) supported the need for the authenticity of these interactions “...as there is a big difference between perfunctory and genuine, and employees can tell the difference. They know whether you mean it—and they want to feel valued for their authentic selves” (p. 12). Authentic principals create feelings of trust and engagement in their teachers (Bird et al., 2009). For these connections, which are beyond surface-level “checking-in” to occur, people must have multiple opportunities to interact with others, which creates space to learn personal and professional information about one another.

In the first level of connection, employees generally seek a relationship with one another at the colleague level. A study by Gallup (2019) on understanding the teacher experience discovered that “teachers want to be part of a team of colleagues that they trust and respect” (p. 9). When faculty and staff have the drive to support themselves and those around them, it creates a positive school environment (Kiersch & Peters, 2017). Participants made it explicitly clear that they would like time to fellowship and converse with each other about their personal lives to gain a deeper understanding of the back story that grounds and guides the actions of individuals.

The next level of desired connection is that between an employee and a leader. Participants of the study wanted leaders to understand them as people and their professional



goals and aspirations. The culture of a school is built through leaders building meaningful relationships with employees and creating a shared vision (Carswell, 2021). Participants wished for leaders who demonstrate knowledge of their day-to-day work by coming into the classroom and connecting with job expectations and student needs. “A teacher’s relationship with their principal is their most important relationship at work. Warm, meaningful conversations (or the lack of them) set the tone at the beginning, middle, and end of a teacher’s tenure at a school” (Gallup, 2019).

### *Discussion of Findings from Research Question 2*

As participants unpacked the leader’s role in influencing engagement, they articulated the understanding that leaders are stretched thin in terms of their time. Educational leaders face an unyielding number of tasks on a given day (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015; Rowland, 2008). Leaders must understand that embedded within these daily tasks is the responsibility to create opportunities for employee engagement. Understanding the leaders’ perceptions regarding their role in employee engagement led to findings supporting a tiered hierarchy of support. When the school administrators implemented engagement initiatives, the initiatives, at times, were perceived as a requirement.

Participants clearly articulated that they do not want engagement that feels like their leaders are completing an “assigned task” or “checking off a box.” These participants understood that engagement may not always come directly from a school administrator. It may first occur within a classroom, then at a grade level, move up the hierarchy to the department, then at the school level. These individuals’ roles in influencing school engagement may change as employees leave the school and new employees are hired, so “...teachers must redefine their position in the group and figure out where they fit in” (Gallup, 2019, p. 9).

The type of engagement may differ as there will be different degrees of leadership within these tiers. At the innermost level, for example, between a teacher and paraprofessional within a single classroom, engagement may be more frequent and specific to the individual. As the tiers widen, employees understand that the engagement may be less frequent and potentially less specific. It is up to the highest level, typically the principal and assistant principal, to create the structure and model for this engagement to occur throughout all support layers (Osborne & Hammound, 2017; Whitaker et al., 2013). School leaders, namely the principal, must build a construct for school engagement that is strategic, appropriately allocated for, explicit and intentional, built on a hierarchy of school leaders, and based on the principal's engagement example (Gallup Inc., 2022).

#### *Discussion of Findings from Research Question 3*

Findings from the ARDT are not specific to the ARDT but are indicative of the needs of all local school leaders. Local school leaders face a plethora of day-to-day decisions, and these decisions impact the employees, students, and community in which they work. At times, these decisions may be grounded in student-centered data; however, when there is data reflective of employee needs, this must not be put to the side for what may be considered more important at the time, as engaged employees are less likely to feel burned out (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2014; Skaalivk & Skaalivk, 2014). This burnout equates to employees who "...don't bring their best to work- they are more likely to not show up at all and more than twice as likely to look elsewhere for a job" (Gallup, Inc., 2022, p. 13). Reflective school leaders demonstrate self-awareness and awareness of the skills of faculty and staff to capitalize on strengths to solve problems and transform environments (Ersozlu, 2016). Local school leaders must make concerted efforts to

engage in the reflective practice of intentional decision-making regarding employee needs and put forth resources, namely time, to address these needs.

Participants in the study could easily describe what external efforts would increase their engagement in work. However, they were less likely to engage in reflective practices surrounding internal efforts or what they may specifically do to address employee engagement. Local school leaders must create a school culture and climate where data and opinions are gathered regarding employee needs (Leithwood, 2008), as the leaders motivate others to perform tasks (Bsoul, 2022). This data should be used thoughtfully to address the school's needs when designing intentional use of the human capital of time (Börü & Bellibaş, 2021). As time seemed to be the biggest hindrance to the use of human capital, leaders must create and enforce master calendars and schedules while demonstrating awareness of employee needs. School leaders must recognize that they yield the most power to amplify change within their organization (Alazmi & Al-Mahdy, 2020; Whitaker et al., 2013).

### **Limitations of the Current Study**

The sampling at Reed Elementary School was purposeful as it employs a large number of special education faculty and staff. The findings were designed to be viewed as a microcosm of special education from a district lens. However, the findings are specific to only one elementary school in one district. This study only focused on the special education department at Reed Elementary School rather than the employee population as a whole across the district. Within the special education department, all 56 employees were invited to participate. However, only 19 consented to participation. Regarding timing, the action research spanned four months and two cycles. A sampling from an entire year or a cross-year sample may have more thoroughly captured the data from participants.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

This action research study explored the degree of employee engagement for special education teachers in a suburban elementary school. The findings from this study coincided with research that emphasizes the fundamental need to improve the engagement of special education teachers (Edward et al., 2018). However, the absence of scholarship around employee engagement specifically for special education teachers delays understanding the administrators' role at the school and district levels. Therefore, additional research studies are recommended. The researcher offers recommendations for practitioners and policymakers based on this study's findings, analysis, and conclusions.

A replication of this action research study with a larger sample size should include participants from other locations (i.e., schools and school districts). Homogeneity was not ideal in that participants in this study were all females in one suburban elementary school education setting. Therefore, some recommendations may be birthed from the study's limitations.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Practitioners**

Currently, district leaders in Bay Side County Public School's Special Education Department engage in work that directly supports the needs of students. Professional learning or support for administration or teachers is often provided on a case-by-case basis and is centered around special education policy or law. Currently, the district special education office in BSCPS does not offer direct support addressing employee engagement needs even though this engagement is directly aligned with student academic outcomes and employee retention (Bakker et al., 2003; Bakkar, 2005; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

According to data presented to the board of education, from 2019 to 2022, 13.25% of BSCPS teachers had resigned or transferred to another school district, compared with the

statewide rate of 8.9% and the national rate of 10.9% (Yeomans, 2023). It is important to note that this data represents the teaching workforce, not specifically the special education department. Therefore, the reasons for resignations and transfers vary. Suppose the district continually demonstrates low employee retention overall, specifically in high-needs areas such as special education. In that case, it is imperative to address engagement, as engaged employees are less likely to leave their place of employment. This authentic engagement is non-negotiable at both local school and district levels.

Based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and other data sources aligned with the research questions, further data and research could support understanding “how” local school leaders could address employee engagement. The data were clear regarding what employees and leaders need for engagement. The data were also evident that leaders must engage in reflective practices surrounding their employees’ needs. However, once the leader engages in these practices and understands that purposeful efforts of creating a tiered hierarchy of leadership, coupled with intentionality surrounding relationships, researchers may focus on what precursors need to be enacted. These precursors align with not only the school’s master calendar and schedules but also the individual leader’s calendar and schedule. This resolute decision to make engagement a non-negotiable in the workday may, in turn, create engagement that is more common practice than concerted efforts that are episodic.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Researchers**

A finding from this study was that though research around employee engagement, in general, was easily attained, the research specific to educational employee engagement, specifically special education employee engagement was significantly less. Further research could look at the roles of special education leaders in terms of their interactions with faculty and

staff from not only a local school level but from a district level. Additionally, the researcher could identify if the degree of influence leaders' impact on engagement with special education employees mirror what is occurring in the general education setting. These additional data sets could provide guidance and a framework for college professors and district-level leaders as a construct for local school administrators to work with their faculty and staff.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Policy**

Typically, when school building administrators compose their improvement plans, much, if not all, of their goals are primarily centered around student achievement with limited support for a central stakeholder—teachers. While professional learning opportunities are afforded to teachers at various degrees, school administrators must remember that teachers are the levers to achieving this academic growth. Therefore, their professional learning must be relevant and customized. This can occur if district-level policies and expectations require school administrators to be purposeful and intentional in their efforts to discover the needs of their employees.

For example, school district levels could adopt policies that mandate administrators to collect data (i.e., questionnaires) periodically throughout the school year to inform current and future professional learning opportunities. In return, school district leaders could include specific days that allow these needed opportunities to occur without district interruptions. Said differently, school administration could conduct individualized professional learning at their schools versus requiring teachers to attend irrelevant professional development at the district level during teacher workdays.

Another implication is related to district-level administration. At the district level, it will be essential to ensure schools are staffed appropriately at the leader level to allocate time toward

employee engagement. For example, Reed Elementary School has a special education department of 56 employees and only 1 assistant principal who leads the special education department and other general education grade levels. The duties and responsibilities she is responsible for are geared primarily toward student needs and paperwork. A complete redefining of these responsibilities to prioritize employee engagement must start at the district level, understanding this may change leader allotments for local schools, specific schools with expansive special education populations, or high-needs populations. For example, suppose a local school reaches a specific threshold of students receiving special education instruction compared to the whole student population. In that case, an additional assistant principal point may be allocated to the school. Alternatively, if assistant principals are tasked with leading the special education department, maybe they should not be put in charge of other high-stakes tasks such as standardized testing.

Additionally, district-level special education offices face many similar needs to special education departments at local schools. At the district level, there are concerns with the workload and turnover of those who support special education employees at local schools. Budgetary decisions must support the goals of the office, and the goals must include awareness of employee needs. Highest-level district leaders must support the engagement of their interoffice employees, as this creates a trickle-down effect on local schools.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Research regarding employee engagement in private entities and public school settings demonstrates many commonalities. These alignments stem from the need to prevent employees from feeling burnout and therefore leaving the company or creating toxicity within the work environment. With the data from BSCPS indicating that teachers are leaving at a higher rate than

in previous years, namely teachers in high-needs areas, including special education (Yeomans, 2023), it is urgent that school leaders put concerted effort toward addressing the needs of their staff. The leaders' endeavors must be intentional and align with identified staff needs. Time is of the essence holistically as employees leave the district and field and in the daily details as master calendars and schedules are sated with other pressing requirements.

Understanding the complexities of a school leader's role is needed from all hierarchical tiers. With this transparency, honest conversations regarding the logistics of meeting the needs of employees can occur. Gallup (2022) showed that leaders can shape the culture of their organizations through their interactions with their people and more pointedly, "The truth is, workplaces shape wellbeing every day- for better or worse- by the way they treat their employees" (Gallup, Inc., 2022, p. 5).

Therefore, if educational leaders take the time to engage in reflective practices and to identify not only employee needs but areas of growth in leadership skill sets, the opportunity to provide genuine and intentional engagement can occur. While leaders play a vital role in creating an engagement-rich environment, everyone involved must do their part to allow a culture of engagement to take hold. Ultimately, leaders must be strategic as they plan and implement the steps needed to amplify the engagement of employees. The noticeable repercussions of a leader's impact on engagement in special education may change the trajectory for students and employees for years to come.



*Researcher's Thoughts*

Before starting this research process, I had an “outsider’s” understanding of the doctoral journey, including the courses, course loads, and writing a dissertation—the final product.

Initially, I fretted over identifying the problem within my professional context, determining what frameworks may situate the problem, and centering voices that are often neglected or discarded; in sum, this was no easy task. Throughout this process, I learned a great deal not only about my research but about myself. One of the most important personal lessons I learned was to trust my instincts.

Completing an action research dissertation in educational leadership is, by definition, writing a dissertation while working full-time, and in this instance, in a turbulent, ever-changing society and field post-COVID-19. Though I have considered myself a determined and driven person, these past three years have periodically challenged this and other personal beliefs. However, I can say with conviction that I can set a goal and organize my life to meet these goals. My writing skills are fundamentally improved by meeting these goals, and my leadership skills have been enhanced and refined. Ultimately, I can only say this process was a life-changing experience.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Email Introductory Letter**

Dear (Insert the name),

My name is Leslie Gilbreath, a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia in the Educational Leadership program. With the guidance of my major professor, Dr. Jamon H. Flowers, I am conducting dissertation research on the perceptions of local school-level leaders' influence on employee engagement within a special education department. The primary purpose of this email is to invite you to participate in this research study. The purpose of this action research study is two-fold: 1) to determine the degree of influence school-level educational leaders have on employee engagement within the special education department in a large urban school district, and 2) to determine what leadership behaviors promote employee engagement within the special education department in a large urban school district. The findings of this study contribute in two ways: to identify and understand the leadership behaviors that influence employee engagement within a special education department and to add to the scholarship of school-level leaders' role in influencing employee engagement, two topics of study that are underdeveloped and overlooked.

This study is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of doctor of education from the University of Georgia. The study will be confidential, and information shared from surveys and focus groups will be used for scholarship purposes. The completed document will use pseudonyms for all participants, schools, and school district. If you feel this is a noteworthy study, please contact me via email if you are interested in participating in this study or if you have any questions or concerns. Please know that once you agree to participate, a consent form, which outlines the research study, will be provided.

Sincerely,

Leslie Gilbreath

Doctoral Candidate, UGA

Dr. Jamon Flowers

Professor, UGA

**Appendix B**  
**UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA**  
**CONSENT FORM**

**Setting The Thermostat: The Degree of Influence of Leadership on Special Education**  
**Employee Engagement**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

**Principal Investigator:**

*Leslie Gilbreath*

*Education Administration and Policy*

**Co-Investigator:**

*Jamon Flowers*

*Education Administration and Policy*

**Study Purpose:** The purpose of this action research study is two-fold: 1) to determine your perception of the degree of influence school-level educational leaders have on employee engagement within the special education department in a large urban school district, and 2) to

determine what leadership behaviors promote employee engagement within the special education department in a large urban school district.

You are being invited to participate in this action research study because you meet the following criteria: a) be an employee within Reed Elementary School and b) work within the special education department.

If you agree to participate in this study:

- We will collect information about your perceptions, descriptions, and interpretations as a leader and/or as an employee centered around the concept of employee engagement.
- We will ask you to complete pre- and post-surveys and participate in multiple focus groups.
- Surveys will be distributed and collected electronically. You will be asked to complete surveys four times during this study. Each survey should be completed in approximately 20 minutes or less.
- Focus groups will be conducted during non-working hours and will be completed in approximately 60 minutes each. You will be asked to participate in two focus group interviews. Each focus group will have a maximum of 8 participants per meeting.
- Video/Audio recording may occur for the purpose of accurate transcription. The researcher is the only individual who will have access to these recordings. These recordings will be housed electronically on the researcher's computer and will be password protected to increase confidentiality.

Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. Your decision to participate will not impact your participation in other activities within the Special Education Department.

Some questions may make you uncomfortable. You can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them.

Your participation will contribute in two ways: to identify and understand the leadership behaviors that influence employee engagement within a special education department and add to the scholarship of district-level leaders' role in influencing employee engagement, two topics of study that are underdeveloped and overlooked.

We will take steps to protect your privacy, but there is a small risk that your information could be accidentally disclosed to people not connected to the research. To reduce this risk, we will use pseudonyms. We will only keep information that could identify you for five years and in a locked location.



This information will not be used or distributed for future research.

Please feel free to ask questions about this research at any time. You can contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Jamon Flowers, via email if you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

**Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.**

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Pre- and Post- Questionnaire Questions**

#### Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement Poll

1. I know what is expected of me at work.
2. I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.
3. At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
4. In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
5. My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
6. There is someone at work who encourages my development.
7. At work, my opinions seem to count.
8. The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.
9. My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.
10. I have a best friend at work.
11. In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
12. This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.

(<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/356063/gallup-q12-employee-engagement-survey.aspx>)

**APPENDIX D**  
**BACKGROUND INFORMATION QUESTIONNAIRE**

**TITLE: SETTING THE THERMOSTAT: THE DEGREE OF INFLUENCE OF LEADERSHIP  
ON SPECIAL EDUCATION EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**

**Question 1: Eligibility Criteria**

Here are the target subjects for my study: Please confirm that nothing has changed

- Currently employed at Reed Elementary School
- Currently working within the special education department

Please confirm that you meet the criteria by selecting the appropriate response.

- Yes
- No

**Personal Details**

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- I decline to answer.

**Professional Background and Experience**

Question 2: My current role within the Reed Elementary School Special Education Department is:

- Teacher
- Paraprofessional

- Speech-Language Pathologist
- Grade Chair
- Assistant Principal

Question 3: Professional experience in my current role:

- Less than 5 years
- Less than 10 years
- More than 10 years

Question 4: Highest Degree Earned (Please check all that apply.)

- Certification in School Administration and Supervision (or its equivalent)
- Master's of Education (M.Ed.)
- Master's of Arts (M.A.)
- Master's of Science (M.S.)
- Specialist degree (Ed.S.)
- Doctoral degree (Ed.D. or Ph.D.)
- Other (please specify)

Question 5: I consider myself to be an engaged employee within the special education department. (Please skip this question if you do not identify as an employee.)

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral (Neither agree or disagree)
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Question 6: As a district leader, I engage with my employees on a regular (e.g., weekly) basis.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral (Neither agree or disagree)
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Only on an as need basis

## APPENDIX E

### Initial Focus Group Interview Protocol

#### Participants: Local School Special Education Department

#### Leaders and Employees

Directions: The researcher will state the following at the beginning of each interview and recording. Additionally, the researcher will affirm that a signed consent form is in her possession or collect the signed consent from the participant.

*Good morning/Good afternoon. My name is Leslie Gilbreath, a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at the University of Georgia. Thank you for consenting to participate in this interview regarding leadership influence on the degree of engagement within a special education department of a local school. As a reminder, this interview will be audio/video recorded. If at any time you do not wish to answer a question, then please inform me, and I will move to the next question, if applicable. Also, your responses will be kept confidential, and I will replace names with pseudonyms. The time frame for this interview is approximately 60 minutes. I will provide a summary of the interview if requested. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?*

1. How often, if at all, do you interact with your employee/leader in an ideal week?
2. Describe your interactions with your employee/leader. Please provide 1-2 examples.
3. Describe what employee engagement looks like to you. Please provide 1-2 examples.
4. How do you see your/your leader's role in terms of influence on employee engagement?
5. Describe what recognition of employees looks like to you.

6. If you've received/given recognition, how did this influence your/your employee's engagement?

(adapted from Patton, 2002)

## APPENDIX F

### Concluding Focus Group Interview Protocol

#### Participants: Local School Special Education Department

#### Leaders and Employees

Directions: The researcher will state the following at the beginning of each interview and recording. Additionally, the researcher will affirm that a signed consent form is in her possession or collect the signed consent from the participant.

*Good morning/Good afternoon. My name is Leslie Gilbreath, a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at the University of Georgia. Thank you for consenting to participate in this interview regarding leadership influence on the degree of engagement within a special education department in a local school. As a reminder, this interview will be audio/video recorded. If at any time you do not wish to answer a question, then please inform me, and I will move to the next question, if applicable. Also, your responses will be kept confidential, and I will replace names with pseudonyms. The time frame for this interview is approximately 60 minutes. I will provide a summary of the interview if requested. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?*

1. In current interactions with your employee/leader, describe what you may see/hear centered around engagement. Please provide 1-2 examples.
  2. When you first became aware of the emphasis on engagement, what were your initial feelings concerning your employee/leader? Please provide 1-2 examples.
  3. How do you see your current roles and responsibilities in terms of engagement at this time? Please provide 1-2 examples.
  4. What are further ideas centered around engagement that you would like to learn moving forward? Please provide 1-2 examples.
  5. In the future, how do you envision aligning what you may be doing with work in terms of your current level of engagement?
- (adapted from Patton, 2002)

## APPENDIX G

### Concluding Interview Questions

#### Participants: Leaders

Directions: The researcher will state the following at the beginning of each interview and recording. Additionally, the researcher will affirm that a signed consent form is in her possession or collect the signed consent from the participant.

*Good morning/Good afternoon. My name is Leslie Gilbreath, a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at the University of Georgia. Thank you for consenting to participate in this interview regarding leadership influence on the degree of engagement within a special education department in a local school. As a reminder, this interview will be audio/video recorded. If at any time you do not wish to answer a question, then please inform me, and I will move to the next question, if applicable. Also, your responses will be kept confidential, and I will replace names with pseudonyms. The time frame for this interview is approximately 15 minutes. I will provide a summary of the interview if requested. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?*

1. As a leader, do you primarily interact with other leaders (i.e., Coordinator: AP, AP: Grade Chair) or a mix of interactions with other leaders and employees?
2. How often do you go to individual teacher classrooms (i.e., multiple times/day, daily, weekly, never, etc.)?
3. If you go to classrooms, how long do you stay?
4. If you go to classrooms, what is your primary purpose (i.e., teacher request, GTES, concern/parent request, etc.)?
5. Do you ever email, call, or meet with individual teachers? If yes, what is the frequency and purpose of these interactions?
6. Do you believe employee engagement should be a focus at local schools? If so, whose responsibility is it to facilitate this engagement?
7. Do you devote any time during the school year to the following local school employee engagement efforts? If yes, what is the typical time allotment for the activity?
  - a. One on One Connections



- b. Newsletter or Written Acknowledgements
- c. Planning or Facilitating Group Connections
- d. Planning or Preparing Tangible Acknowledgments

## APPENDIX H

### Empirical Findings Table

Citation	Topic	Key Finding
Andriani, S., Kesumawati, N., & Kristiawan, M. (2018, July). <i>The influence of the transformational leadership and work motivation on Teachers' performance.</i>	Theoretical Framework	The authors determined the effects of work motivation on teacher performance. They focused on the motivation and improvement of subordinates by leaders.
Altrichter, H., Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., & Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2002). The concept of action research. <i>The Learning Organization</i> , 9(3), 125–131. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1108/09696470210428840">https://doi.org/10.1108/09696470210428840</a>	Conceptual Framework	The authors sought to define action research. They determined that action research exists when researchers seek to improve their work. They believe there are four phases to action research: plan, act, observe, and reflect.
Coghlan, D. (2019). <i>Doing action research in your own organization</i> . SAGE Publishing.  Coughlan, P., & Coghlan, D. (2002). Action research for operations management. <i>International Journal of Operations &amp; Production Management</i> , 22(2), 220–240. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1108/01443570210417515">https://doi.org/10.1108/01443570210417515</a>	Conceptual Framework	Action research centers around using research in real-time with a participating team. Action research solves a problem in real-time using various data collection methods.
Schaufeli, W. B., & Bakker, A. B. (2004). Job demands, job resources, and their relationship with burnout and engagement: A multi-sample study. <i>Journal of Organizational Behavior: The International Journal of Industrial, Occupational and Organizational Psychology and Behavior</i> , 25(3), 293-315.	Impact of Engagement	The articles examine how employee workplaces impact the employee. The authors define engagement and identify the drivers behind engagement. Additionally, the concept of burnout is introduced, and the impacts burnout has on employees.

<p>Schaufeli, W. B., Bakker, A. B., &amp; Van Rhenen, W. (2009). How changes in job demands and resources predict burnout, work engagement, and sickness absenteeism. <i>Journal of Organizational Behavior: The International Journal of Industrial, Occupational and Organizational Psychology and Behavior</i>, 30(7), 893-917.</p> <p>Schaufeli, W. B., Bakker, A. B., &amp; Salanova, M. (2006). The measurement of work engagement with a short questionnaire: A cross-national study. <i>Educational and psychological measurement</i>, 66(4), 701-716.</p> <p>Schaufeli, W. B., &amp; Salanova, M. (2014). Burnout, boredom and engagement in the workplace. In M.C. Peeters, J. de Jonge, and T.W., Taris (Eds.) <i>An introduction to contemporary work psychology</i> (pp. 293–320). essay, John Wiley &amp; Sons. <a href="https://www.wilmarschaufeli.nl/publications/Schaufeli/416.pdf">https://www.wilmarschaufeli.nl/publications/Schaufeli/416.pdf</a>.</p> <p>Schaufeli, W. B., Salanova, M., González-Romá, V., &amp; Bakker, A. B. (2002). The measurement of engagement and burnout: A two sample confirmatory factor analytic approach. <i>Journal of Happiness studies</i>, 3, 71-92.</p>		

Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017, August). <i>Research report: Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can we do about it?</i> Learning Policy Institute. <a href="https://doi.org/10.54300/454.278">https://doi.org/10.54300/454.278</a> .	Impact of Engagement	Engaged employees have lasting impacts, including improved student achievement, more educators staying within the field, and more educators demonstrating a willingness to alter their skill set with new research and knowledge.
Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2014). Teacher self-efficacy and perceived autonomy: Relations with teacher engagement, job satisfaction, and emotional exhaustion. <i>Psychological Reports</i> , 114(1), 68–77. <a href="https://doi.org/10.2466/14.02.pr0.114k14w0">https://doi.org/10.2466/14.02.pr0.114k14w0</a>	Internal Factors of Engagement	Teacher judgment of their skills, also known as self-efficacy, is positively related to engagement.
Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2017). Motivated for teaching? Associations with school goal structure, teacher self-efficacy, job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion. <i>Teaching and Teacher Education</i> , 67, 152–160. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.06.006">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.06.006</a>		
Geiger, T., & Pivovarova, M. (2018). The effects of working conditions on teacher retention. <i>Teachers and Teaching</i> , 24(6), 604–625. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2018.1457524">https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2018.1457524</a>	External Factors of Engagement	Adverse working conditions lead to burnout and teachers leaving the field.
Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (1990). Transformational leadership: How principals can help reform school cultures. <i>School effectiveness and school improvement</i> , 1(4), 249–280.	Leader Actions to Influence Engagement	The motivation, and commitment of staff members, along with the working conditions within a school, are influenced by school leaders. The impact of a leader and their work includes building a vision. Leadership ability is not only situated within content knowledge. Charisma and personal characteristics of leaders also influence staff.

Marks, H. M., & Printy, S. M. (2003). Principal leadership and school performance: An integration of transformational and instructional leadership. <i>Educational administration quarterly</i> , 39(3), 370-397.	Leader Actions to Influence Engagement	Leaders using a Transformational Leadership Framework alongside Instructional Leadership Framework can influence a school's engagement if they capitalize on using staff as an interactive role in the leadership decisions.
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