

The Relevance of Relational Leadership

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Research Topic and Questions

Thesis Statement

The role of a teacher has changed over the last several decades and is a complex and sometimes challenging career that can lead to burnout and professionals choosing alternate career paths. This paper explores how a relational approach to educational leadership can impact teacher retention through decreasing stress and burnout and increasing a sense of belonging and job satisfaction. This can be done through emotional intelligence skills like empathy, communication and collaboration as well as a leader's self awareness.

Guiding Questions

How does a relational approach to leadership impact the professional well-being of teachers in the Lower Mainland?
What emotional intelligence attributes are important to relational leadership?

Significance

In the last decade teaching has become more difficult and complex. Societal changes, and world views and events have led to an increase in stress and burnout for teachers. Principals and other educational leaders need to have the skills and tools to encourage teachers to stay. Education is a community based on strong relationships amongst students, teachers, families and educational leaders. The emotional wellbeing of a principal can impact the entire school climate.

Theoretical Framework

Postmodernism

In today's postmodern education system, diversity and change are valued and recognized. Uniqueness is celebrated and it is recognized that knowledge is shaped and changed by those around us. Dewey's (1916/2009) research on education as a social function highlighted these themes. Relationships and social dynamics continue to impact schools today. The quality of student-teacher relationships can impact a student's ability to learn, just as the quality of principal-teacher relationships can impact a teacher's ability to teach.

Constructivism and Humanism

Existentialists like Emerson and Sartre helped us understand that we do not simply exist in this world, but that we are an interconnected part of it (Cox, 2016). The world around us influences our behaviors and our interactions, and in turn we learn and grow in future interactions. Freire(2018) finds human relationships so important that he states, "leaders who do not act dialogically...do not organize people, they manipulate them" (p.127).

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is a term coined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) to describe a person's ability to understand the emotions of themselves and others. Goleman (2011) made this term popular in educational research. More recently, Leithwood (2021) has developed a leadership framework that includes relationship building and equitable leadership through understanding oneself and others.

Themes from the Literature

There are 5 themes that emerge from the literature on relational leadership.

Principal
Impact

Emotional
Intelligence

Empathy

Self
Awareness

Communi-
cation

Principal Impact

- Behaviors that principals have that help retain teachers, are the same ones that help increase student achievement (Ulrick, 2020).
- Principal guidance, support and encouragement is the most important predictor of teacher retention (Goodwin, 2025).
- A principals ability to reframe events into positive emotions can help mitigate teachers stress (Eyal & Berkovich, 2024).
- "It is indisputable that building strong relationships with teachers is essential for successful school leadership" (Manke, et al., 2025, p. 2).

Emotional Intelligence

- Emotional intelligence consists of five attributes self-awareness, managing emotions, motivation, empathy and social skills (Goleman, 2011).
- Leaders who have emotional intelligence are able to watch for signs of stress in themselves and others and take action to mediate the effects (Wu, 2023; Ledger et al., 2025).
- Generally individuals with strong abilities in these 5 areas are effective leaders that help increase teacher retention and satisfaction.

Empathy

- Whether learned or constructed, empathy is an important element in emotional intelligence (Jian, 2022; Manke et al., 2025).
- Empathy has been linked to building trust and embracing change (Gomez-Leal et al., 2022), as well as increased job satisfaction (Yilmaz, 2026).
- Jian (2022) and Manke (2025) support these links but believe that they are under-researched.
- Empathy is not a singular event but it built over numerous interactions (Jian, 2022).

Self Awareness

- Paulo Freire theorized that to create a space understand others, he must first understand himself (Freire Institute, 2026).
- Blaik et al.'s (2022) leadership study participants noted that self-reflection has a "pivotal role in enhancing better practice and school improvement."
- Self-awareness is a critical tool for educational leaders (Gomez-Leal et al., 2022).

Communication

- Teachers like to be communicated with clearly.
- Good communication can help teachers feel connected and valued (Peng et al., 2025).
- Communication can grow through positive relationship building and is a two-way process (Manke et al., 2025).

Recommendations

The literature suggests a few key items for educational leaders to build into their practice and improve staff well-being and retention:

Build Relationships

Current and future educational leaders should develop their skills in emotional intelligence in order to build strong relationships with staff members. Two-way communication is essential for health and well-being.

Practice Self-Reflection

Educational leaders should regularly reflect on their behaviors, actions and interactions within the school community. Being self-aware helps everyone strengthen their skills over time.

Communicate

Open and honest communication reduces stress and helps build relationships. Educational leaders should not be afraid to be honest with their staff and encourage their team to work together to solve problems.

Learn New Things

The research is still growing on this topic. More information could be gathered on the effects of cultural diversity, context variations and the efficacy of leaders with strong emotional intelligence skills.

Conclusion

Key Findings:

Educational leaders play an important role in teacher retention.

Teacher retention issues are not solely related to salary, as popular media sometimes suggests.

Relationship building is not only important between students and teachers.

Emotional Intelligence is an important part of relationship building for educational leaders.

References

