

## The Unique Needs of Generation Z in the Educational Work Environment

**Dr. Nila J. Burt**

**Dr. Joseph R. Jones**

***Abstract:** New teachers are leaving public education at alarming rates leaving states with financial burdens for communities and education losses for students (Owens, 2015; Trans & Smith, 2020). This study examined new teachers' perceptions in Generation Z or within a year of that classification on leadership style and decisions to remain in education. An interpretive qualitative research approach was applied to examine five new teachers' perspectives through narrative inquiry under the lens of the Relational Leadership Theory. This study highlighted the need for school leaders to provide feedback on professional growth, classroom management strategies, and instructional practices. Additionally, this study revealed the need for school administrators to be mindful of timely, personalized, frequent feedback and emotional support for Generation Z teachers.*

**Keywords:** *Generation Z, Relational Leadership Theory, Administrative Feedback*

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**Dr. Nila J. Burt, EdD.,** Assistant Principal, Muscogee County School District, Columbus, GA  
Email: [nilajean@wavetel.us](mailto:nilajean@wavetel.us)

**Dr. Joseph R. Jones, PhD.,** Professor of Education, Gordon State College, Barnesville, GA  
Email: [jjones1@gordonstate.edu](mailto:jjones1@gordonstate.edu)

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## **The Unique Needs of Generation Z in the Educational Work Environment**

### **Introduction**

Teacher attrition is problematic and is well-documented, with differences in leadership style, school climate, high-stakes testing, and school resources have been noted as the primary reasons for leaving the profession (Owens, 2015; Pelfrey, 2020). Moreover, the loss of new teachers comes at great expense for communities in student educational losses and recruitment and hiring costs. Using the Baccalaureate and Beyond survey, Ingersoll et al. (2018) estimated that 44 percent of teachers left education within five years. Sutchter et al. (2019) showed a shortage of 64,000 teachers in 2015-2016, which increased to 112,000 by 2018. Ingersoll (2001) emphasized the harmful effects of migration and attrition, resulting in the loss of continuity and affecting the school climate. He described the relationship between teachers' decisions to stay in education or leave as a U-shaped curve; the younger teachers have higher departure rates than those close to retirement (2001). Young teachers remain the most prominent group leaving the profession (Ingersoll, 2002). Ingersoll (2004) noted many teachers leave education for personal and family reasons such as parental duties and retirement. However, a growing number of teachers leave due to job dissatisfaction stemming from a lack of support from administration and student discipline issues. Similarly, Farmer (2020) detailed several critical factors for teachers leaving the profession: high-stakes testing, material differentiation for multi-level learners, paperwork, lack of parental involvement, and student discipline and violence.

To address the attrition challenge, the researchers utilized a narrative inquiry of new teachers' (in or on the cusp of Generation Z) perceptions of the influence of leadership style on school climate. For this discussion, the study focused on two research questions: 1). What impact does relational leadership practices have on teachers' beliefs concerning their profession 2). How does relational leadership practices influence teachers' beliefs about their pedagogy?

After briefly exploring teacher attrition, it is beneficial to discuss the attributes of Generation Z and Millennial individuals; so that, we can provide a sociological framework for this study. In doing so, we aim to provide a greater conceptualization of attrition and its impact on new teachers who identify within these categories.

### **Generations Z and the Teaching Profession**

Most teachers currently entering the teaching profession are considered Millennials, born between 1980 and 1994, or Generation Z, born after 1994 (Bako, 2018). Those entering the teaching profession who went to college directly following high school are in Generation Z. Characteristics of this group of young people and their specific needs are significant in understanding their perceptions of leadership and climate. Dimock (2019) characterized Generation Z as the most culturally and ethnically diverse generation in American history, with the entirety of their lives steeped in technology. Considering the average age of young people completing college in four years is 22, most new teachers are members of this diverse new generation. Stahl (2021) projected that by 2025, Generation Z would constitute 27% of the workforce and this generation would have a values-driven approach to careers, specifically

mentioning their ethical concerns. When compared to millennials, she described these young people as more interested in job security, financial stability, employer transparency, and willingness to work harder.

Schroth (2019) described Generation Z as highly educated, racially diverse, economically astute, and achievement-oriented. Bako (2018) called Generation Z digital natives and depicted them as far more pragmatic and career-focused than the previous generation. Although proficiency with technology as a digital native is beneficial, Schroth (2019) pointed out that the smartphone created a detrimental impact on communicating and interacting face-to-face. Whereas Generation Y (Millennials) prefer collaborative and team efforts, Generation Z is more comfortable with isolation (Bako, 2018). Generation Z has matured in an unsafe culture, resulting in emotional trauma, including increased anxiety and depression, (Schroth, 2019). Schroth also explained the impact of a lifetime of witnessing social justice movements influence on Generation Z's perceptions. Generation Z is the most diverse and accepting of differences, yet globally unaware, and due to their proclivity toward isolation, they seek leaders who are risk-takers and self-sacrificing (Bako, 2018). Despite racial and ethnic diversity and passion for social justice issues, Schroth (2018) suggested that Generation Z is more likely to support free speech restrictions. The subjectiveness of their feelings and what is "objectively offensive" will drive employers to clarify speech and behaviors within the workplace, according to Schroth (2018). Additionally, the parents of Generation Z similarly provided financial freedom during high school, thus reducing the need for jobs while preparing for higher education (Bako, 2018). Due to the increased economic support from their parents, as they enter the workforce, Schroth (2019) postulated that they would arrive with a lack of work experience. Schroth (2019) anticipated the growing need for leaders to compensate for Generation Z's lack of life skills due to overprotective parents who removed obstacles and only gave positive feedback, thus producing inabilities to cope in the workplace.

For comparative purposes, it is beneficial to briefly discuss Millennials. Bako (2018) characterized Millennials as technologically proficient, pragmatic, healthy, and clever, likely not to make the mistakes of previous generations. Dimock (2018) described this generation as growing up in the shadows of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, becoming politically active when Obama was elected, and entering the workforce during an economic recession as the "slow start" generation. Millennials have extensive educational, financial, and personal strengths (Bako, 2018). However, Bako commented that this preparation has often resulted in job dissatisfaction due to unrealistic expectations from leaders and employment responsibilities.

As such, it is important to conceptualize how leadership intersects with Generation Z and Millennials. Panwar and Mehta (2019) described leadership as "crafting a context for invention and inclusion in the face of ambiguity and the unforeseen" (p. 66). They explicitly recommended leaders develop those skills to equip Generation Z. Schroth (2019) echoed the need for leaders to manage expectations for Generation Z as they expect clear targets and positive attitudes from employers. Among the list of leader attributes important to Generation Z, Schroth (2018) listed: providing a checklist, facilitating communication, reinforcing culture, clarifying their specific purpose, explaining the significance of their position, and giving feedback. Both generations expect their ideas to be appreciated and considered (Bako, 2018; Schroth, 2019).

According to Robinson's (2021a) research on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in millennials becoming more engaged at work. Robinson (2021a) reported an increase from 35% to 75% in 2020 in work engagement, although he mentions working from home could be part of this causality. Robinson discussed how engagement is measured by delineating five variables: the flexibility of remote work, how employers communicate a plan of action, preparation for remote work, shared information, and well-being. Robinson pointed out millennials want to be in the loop, understand their role and expectations within the organization, and have a knowledgeable sense of its vision. Indeed, employment leadership plays an important role in the professional careers of Generation Z and Millennials.

After briefly examining teacher attrition, Generation Z and Millennials, we will next discuss the methodology utilized in the study, specifically focusing on the demographics of the school community, the participants involved in the study, data collection, analysis, and the theoretical framework that guided the analysis.

### **A Rationale for Narrative Inquiry**

In qualitative research, the researcher is often personally immersed, observing, and gathering data to understand and describe a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Jones (2010) suggested researchers use the qualitative research approach to comprehend participants' social settings from their perspectives rather than making predictions or testing hypotheses. Creswell (2014) also discussed choosing a methodology by considering the study's problem, personal experiences, and the audience critiquing the research. Likewise, Patton (2015) defined qualitative research as interpreting humans' meaning-making process with personal experiences. He encourages in-depth, open-ended interviews, direct observations, and written communication to interpret and understand experiences.

In the study, the researchers utilized narrative inquiry, a qualitative approach, which "aims at understanding and making meaning of experience through conversations, dialogue, and participants in the ongoing lives of the research participants" (Smit, 2018, p. 79). Narrative inquiry examines human life through a lens that characterizes experiences to illuminate the culture (Patton, 2015). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggested that educational research, in particular, should focus on the participants' stories. They claimed that life narratives are the context for making meaning in school scenarios. Carter (1993) posited that stories from teachers capture the complexity of their lived experience and inform others about how to prepare for the profession

Moreover, narrative inquiry involves a relationship between the researcher and the participant. The researcher's involvement in narrative studies allows a co-construction of events by the researcher and the participants based on the dyadic interpersonal relationship experiences and knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation. The shared experiences during field operations and interviews provide needed constructs for the deep understanding required in qualitative research (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). In fact, researchers conducting a narrative inquiry must focus on the participants and their stories and be aware of their part of the process (Smit, 2018).

## Demographics

This study was conducted in a large public school district in the southern United States with a district population of 31,899 students. The population of the city is 189,296. The district student ethnicity is approximately 58% Black, 26% White, 5% Multi-Racial, 8% Hispanic, and 3% Hawaiian or American Indian. Males comprise 51% of the student population, and 79% receive free and reduced lunch. Special Education students make up 12.74% of the student population, with 67.98% of that population male. There are approximately 2,245 full-time teachers (Niche, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). There are similar graduation rates between races, and the district has traditionally higher graduation rates than the state averages.

The city has been declining in population in the last decade. It is adjacent to one of the world's largest military bases, contributing to its diversity. Poverty is a significant factor in the area, with a poverty rate of 21.15 %. According to the Niche (2020) website, there is a 16:1 teacher ratio, and teachers have an average salary of \$54,200, compared to an average household income of \$63,902. The median house value is \$141,700, and rent averages \$877 monthly. The district spends an average of \$11,716 per student, 59% on instruction, 35% on support services, and 6% on other expenses (Niche, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Although there are relatively equal numbers of high school graduates among different ethnicities and races, Caucasians are twice as likely to have a bachelor's degree (Niche, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The city was once rich in cotton mills, which supported a wide middle-class base. It is now home to several large companies and several well-respected private schools, which have impacted public schools in the county.

This high school has 92 teachers, 19 paraprofessionals, and four administrators and is the largest of the eight high schools in the district. Seventeen teachers are within their first five years of teaching. Of the 17 teachers, only two of those teachers are from historically underrepresented groups. Eight percent of the teachers at the identified school are African-American, 4% are Hispanic, and 2% are Pacific Islanders. Only 33% of the teachers are males, and the administrative staff is white, with two females and two males. According to the local district website, this school's overall performance is higher than 83% of schools in the state and is the highest in the district. The graduation rate is 96%, and 61.5% of graduates are considered college and career-ready. The state's Department of Education calculated climate star rating from the state's student health survey, the state's school personnel survey, the state's parent survey, student discipline data, and attendance records for students, teachers, staff, and administrators. The state assessment score of this school was 86.1 in 2019, with a five-star school climate rating.

## Participants

Maxwell (2013) described purposeful sampling as a procedure used to select informative research representatives as experts in an area one is studying. He listed five goals of purposeful selection: achieving representativeness, capturing the heterogeneity in the population, deliberately selecting participants critical to the research theory, establishing comparisons to show reasons for differences between settings or individuals, and selecting participants who will provide a productive relationship, or enable the researcher to answer the research question. Group characteristic sampling was implemented for this study to evaluate "a specific

information-rich group that can reveal and illuminate important group patterns” (Patton, 2015, p. 267).

Five teachers at the high school, anonymously named Martinville, who were in their first five years of teaching, participated in the study. The participants provided background information about their experiences during their initial interviews before beginning their teaching careers. Two participants resigned in March 2022 for the following school year, and three continued teaching.

### *James*

James is 26 years old, is in his fourth year teaching, and is from a mid-sized city in the state. He attended a liberal-arts high school and graduated from the local university. He began college majoring in Environmental Science, but he changed his major to secondary education. James enjoyed his science classes in college and appreciated his ability to “dabble” in so many classes during his program of study. He has broad-field certification in science, emphasizing earth and space science. After completing his science degree with an alternate math/science certification program, James added his secondary education.

### *Sam*

Sam is in his second year of teaching mathematics and is 24 years old. He grew up “in the dead middle of the state” and jokingly added that his town would be at the crease if one folded the map of the state both ways. Sam attended college at the local university in the same city as Martinville. Sam and James both attended this college and attained their education degrees through the alternate stem education preparation program, but they did not attend at the same time, nor did they have the same experience with the program.

### *Holly*

Holly grew up in the city where she now lives and work. She was the only participant who began college, intending to become an educator. Holly is 25 years old and graduated from Martinville. Many of her immediate and extended family are educators. Holly followed her sister to a state university for a couple of years because her sister had a softball scholarship. She returned home and finished her degree at the local university. She majored in middle grades education, and she gained secondary education certification by passing the state’s certification exam.

### *Sara*

Sara is 26 and twelve days shy of being a part of Generation Z. She is a science teacher in her second year, and like James and Sam, she obtained her education degree through an alternate degree program. Sara attended a large state university specializing in science and technology in the Midwest. She began her education as an undetermined engineering major, although she initially applied for physics and secondary education.

### *Joe*

Joe is a twenty-seven-year-old special education teacher in his third year of teaching. He attended a liberal arts magnet high school for one year, then transferred as a sophomore to Martinville, where he currently works. Joe went to a small liberal arts college in the state for a year and then transferred to a more prominent religious-based university to complete his undergraduate degree in Business Administration and play baseball. When Joe

graduated, he started applying to large local corporations. The head baseball coach at Martinville informed Joe of an open coaching position. Joe did not hesitate, and he immediately began his master's degree in special education at a local university.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Smit (2018) credited Ospina and Uhl-Bien (2012) as the pioneers of Relational Leadership Theory (RLT). According to Smit (2018), Ospina and Uhl-Bien identified leadership as a social process of influence through social constructs, or in other words, how communication transpires between leaders and followers based on an accepted list of social norms. Uhl-Bien (2006) defined Relational Leadership Theory (RLT) as “the study of both relationships (interpersonal relationships as outcomes of or as contexts for interactions) and relational dynamics (social interactions, social constructions) of leadership” (p. 667).

Uhl-Bien (2004) argued that RLT moves from hierarchical leadership, a top-down, pyramid-shaped organizational structure, to an influence process between leaders and followers to create dynamic institutional change. Uhl-Bien (2006) theorized relational leadership differs from personal relationships in that it starts with processes that centers relational realities rather than people. She also considered leadership in terms of social constructions made through rich connections among members of an organization.

Leaders who practice relational leadership build interpersonal relationships, which increases communication (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Leaders who communicate their vision and are transparent create positive school climates, contributing to a teacher's well-being (Lasater, 2019; Reitman & Karge, 2019; Wigford & Higgins, 2019). Ultimately, new teachers who are fostered emotionally are more likely to remain in the profession (Wigford & Higgins, 2019). These interconnected challenges within schools provide a unique and challenging task for school leaders. It is necessary to examine challenges through a relational theory lens.

Sutcher et al. (2016) revealed that 42 percent of teachers left the profession because of dissatisfaction with the administration due to a lack of support, input, and control over teacher decisions resulting in unhappiness with working conditions. These researchers reported that administrative support was the most consistent factor associated with teacher attrition. Kraft et al. (2016) surveyed teachers and illustrated how school leadership style predicted teacher retention decisions and leaders who supported teachers influenced retention. They analyzed reciprocal relationships between leadership styles, organizational capacity, teacher practices, and student achievement and found multiple correlations. The Learning Policy Institute (2017) concluded teachers' perceptions of administrators were a dominant factor in career decisions; leaders who set clear expectations, supported and encouraged, and recognized staff increased teacher retention.

Tran and Smith (2020) also examined teachers' needs in different career stages, human resource strategies, and how principals should intentionally support teachers. They showed a need to approach teacher retention differently in the various stages of a teaching career. They summarized that beginning teachers' concerns include day-to-day functional skills and a need for encouragement and recognition.

In addition to meeting the needs of new teachers, providing a positive culture is necessary for the success of all teachers in the building (Jones & Watson, 2017). Branson and Marra (2019)

remarked it is essential in today's workplace for leaders "to know more about the people they are leading and not just about what people do at work each day" (p. 100). They further explained that employees need to feel included, valued for their skill diversity, and given opportunities to focus on mental and physical well-being. Teachers interviewed by CooperGibson Research (2018) felt resigned to excessive, unsustainable workloads, feelings of unwarranted scrutiny, and a lack of support from the administration. CooperGibson Research (2018) recommended increasing the level of support from school leaders to "reduce feelings of pressure in terms of scrutiny, accountability, and workload (p. 5)." They suggested principals focus on teacher well-being, including assistance in managing stress and help with performance and policy procedures (CooperGibson, 2018).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The researchers conducted two semi-structured interviews (approximately 60 minutes each) with open-ended questions allowing for flexibility for the interviewer and interviewee to follow important concepts during the interview process to ensure a more knowledge-producing experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The participants' stories were coauthored in the dyadic nature of narrative interviewing.

The first interview in this study aimed to clarify the educational background and experiences, concentrate on relationships between teachers and school-based administrators, and discuss professional futures. A variation of Seidman's (2019) three-interview technique was implemented, combining the first and second interviews to clarify educational background and experiences and concentrate on relationships between teachers and school-based administrators. The second interview included discussions about professional futures based on data collected in the previous interview. All interviews were conducted on Zoom; coding included three stages: organizing data and familiarization, reducing data and fracturing into open codes with axial coding for chunking resulting in themes, and finally connecting the main themes into categories which allow the participants' narratives to be represented holistically with appropriate rich, descriptive detail (Patton, 2015).

### **Themes and Findings**

The data analysis revealed several valuable findings, yet the purpose of this article will focus on results specific to Generation Z and leadership interactions. For these participants, supportive climates and administrative presence and feedback were paramount in creating the positive environment needed to continue in education.

#### **Supportive Climates**

Sam and Sara struggled more than the other participants with pedagogical issues and were also the two participants who did not return to the classroom the following year. Despite parent or community influences, Sara struggled with setting expectations and determining how to hold students responsible to academic and behavioral expectations. Sara felt she struggled with classroom management, felt defeated at times, and worried about the rampant cheating as Sam did. Sara shared, "it's demoralizing when students are not concerned with missing assignments." As a Summa Cum Laude graduate in high school and college, Sara expressed that it was hard to understand a lack of effort from students.

Sam, much like Sara, had difficulties with classroom management. Sam struggled with enforcing school rules such as allowing students to leave campus, the attendance policy, the dress code policies about hats and hoods, and the cell phone policy. He worried that some rules' enforcement ruin relationships that might keep students from learning. He viewed it as a weakness he needed to work on to be compliant but believes the older guard ("old and crotchety") should reconsider the rules. He lamented:

If I see a kid who is already bouncing in and out of ISS [in-school suspension], missing lots of class time, who I can see is taking notes or working on a problem, and he has his hat on, and I have to decide between telling him to take his hat off which would disrupt his work, he might retaliate, we might bicker a little, and he might give up for the day or let him work in peace, I am 100% of the time going to let him work. I had a lot of kids, who I know are routine troublemakers, tell me they appreciated me not being on their case for every little thing.

Sam had practica and student teaching experiences in other schools with more stringent rules and felt concerned about students' suspensions for extended periods for behavior offenses. Sam recognized the students' access to apps that solve math problems but felt he could usually outsmart them. He tried to work around it to avoid writing referrals for cheating.

The participants with positive attitudes and experience returned with excitement about the prospect of a new year. Sara and Sam were the only participants who did not return. Sara struggled with the perception of teaching, frequently mentioning how she primarily had a science degree.

Moreover, participants devised strategies to create successful work/home boundaries. For example, James tries not to take work home, but he struggles with not responding to emails, especially when assignments are due or when he knows the student worked late. He extended his work schedule to Sunday afternoons, as did Sara, to get ready for the next week, modify/improve lesson plans or assessments, or complete necessary grading.

Similarly, Sara did not do well with time management. She adjusted when her husband complained about how stressed she seemed. She captured the tension in the following vignette: It wasn't working for me and my husband. So I just kind of had to draw the line and say, if I'm not at school, then I'm not going to do schoolwork. And I had to be okay with not grading everything. I kind of had to figure out when it's okay to just put something in the blue filing [not grade it]. I don't know. I still don't think I've got it figured out.

Sam and Holly, the youngest participants, reported the least amount of stress. Their ability to extend themselves is possibly because of their love for the profession. Sam attributed his ability to balance to a peer with whom he student taught:

I learned this from [the cooperating teacher], and he taught me this like my second week there. I don't even know if he remembers telling me this, but he told me, he said, "Look, you get here at 7:30, and you leave to go to practice at 3:45. Your work will be here at 7:00 a.m. You leave it at school. You leave it; you leave it at school. It'll be here. Those papers will get graded, whether today, tomorrow, or the next day. They'll get in before the deadline. But when you're at school, you work.

Sam embraced the words, remembering a manager he had at Starbucks saying, “If you have time to lean, you have time to clean.”

Holly struggled with balancing work and stress the previous year with teaching in-person and virtually. However, she admits it may have been because she was also pregnant while obtaining a certification in gifted education. Holly feels as if she is managing better this year. She tries to leave by 4:30 and grades only ten essays each day. Joe has late hours from coaching, but he does not generally bring work home. He values time with family and “makes his weekends his weekends.”

The data suggest that participants found meaningful and satisfying work and needed the energy to succeed. They discussed the sense of family, the consistency and application of high standards, opportunities for students to connect, and how they managed stress. Each agreed that Martinville had a supportive culture with a favorable climate and unanimously preferred their experiences at the school over other teaching or practica experiences. The participants accredited the school’s climate to the leadership, expectations, and attention to detail in school culture. The school climate provided a working environment that supported their social-emotional needs as well as the needs of their students.

### **Administrative Presence and Feedback**

Coleman (2017) postulated that teachers who received positive feedback from school leaders were less likely to leave the profession. Young teachers, especially those in Generation Z, listed meaningful feedback as one of the most desirable attributes of a leader (Bako, 2018; Schroth, 2019). The participants in this study desired more interactions with leaders and wanted feedback on performance. Thus, administrative presence and feedback frequency emerged from the participants’ focus on the disruption Covid-19 played on the infrequency of school leaders’ presence in the classroom, interactions with participants, and lack of performance feedback.

The school district in which the high school is located has required modified teacher evaluations for three consecutive school years. Evaluations from administrators have been informal and infrequent. Three of the participants never experienced a complete formal evaluation from the state teacher evaluation system.

James experienced at least one complete evaluation in his first year of teaching and has missed the detail and feedback from leaders in the past few years. He believes having frequent formative assessments from the administration was helpful, and having an administrator in the classroom kept students and teachers “on their toes.” Before the pandemic, an administrator’s presence in the classroom aided student accountability, leading to improved learning stakes. James enjoyed the moments when administrators would “pop their heads in the classroom” for several reasons. James believed the action made students aware that administrators are “not just this big figurehead to be feared” and that we are “there helping to hold them accountable.” Also, students see their teachers being evaluated and held accountable.

Sam enjoyed leaders “bouncing in and out of classes for a little bit” but was worried if he had missed something or if there was a problem. Sam’s evaluator praised him for his job performance, and Sam appreciated it “because kids aren’t going to tell me that!” Teachers, Sam noted, reassure students all day and would appreciate the same from leaders “even when we don’t need it.”

James suggested leaders meet with teachers “frequently and cordially” for a type of check-in.” He felt that formal evaluations were “impersonal” since the evaluator acted as if they were “a fly on the wall.” Usually, evaluators try not to disturb the learning environment. James reiterated the importance of affirmation and reinforcement to do the best possible in the following anecdote:

In conjunction with that [the formal evaluation], a personal interview...having a conversation... What’s going well? What can we do to, you know, keep supporting you? I would find conversations like that very helpful, just because feedback, whether positive, negative, or neutral, will give you information to work with, but in that context, okay, so how was your year? How did that go? Almost like coaching to get a debrief for how they feel, are they overwhelmed?

James saw informal conversations as a way for teachers to “feel a little more in touch with the administration” and improve interpersonal relationships with the school leaders. Sam agreed with James and suggested that leaders should have one-to-one conversations with teachers, especially new teachers. The gesture would “be cool” if administrators brought a coffee to his classroom during planning, inquired how school and classes were going, and asked how they could offer support without formal observation. Sam shared that he was not aware of what he could ask for as a new teacher and wished the administration would ask him what he needed. Holly agreed with Sam and James that a personal conversation about each observation would be more beneficial to her, rather than receiving only written feedback of her pedagogy.

The participants felt a disconnect with administrators and professional feedback on classroom performance. School leaders spent very little time in the classroom during evaluations. The teachers in this study did not feel they were given significant feedback or assistance in connection with the evaluations. Several participants desired more informal, personal communication from school leaders when discussing administrative feedback. James described the interactions he desired with leaders in addition to evaluations:

I feel like in conjunction with an evaluation, a personal interview where you know you just kind of having a conversation almost like what we’re having like. What’s going well? Can we do to you know keep supporting you? What do you feel could be added, or what do you feel like? Maybe it doesn’t work, and I would find conversations like that very helpful, just because feedback of inequality, whether positive negative neutral, will give you information to work with.

Sam also recommended more communication with administrators. He said administrators often enter his room for just a few minutes but do not interact with anyone, including him. When an administrator enters his room, he would appreciate a comment such as, “Hey, you’re doing a good job, thanks.” He mentioned the expectation for teachers to reassure students regularly and how the same reassurance would also benefit teachers. Similarly, Holly also desires more reassurance.

James believes evaluations assist teachers in avoiding complacency. The anticipation of evaluations causes teachers to be consistently aware of classroom practices due to fear of inadequate assessments in their evaluation. As such, James believes that teacher evaluations are the catalyst that prevents apathetic instruction. Sara wanted more feedback this past year because

she was “so new to teaching” and did not feel that she received constructive feedback in her teaching program and that her master’s program lacked that same component. Oddly, Sara received more feedback during the “Covid” year than this year. She said, “this year, it seems a little not there.” She wondered if feedback might not be necessary because “the things in her classroom are good.” Sara, having not experienced a traditional evaluation, did not know how truncated the evaluation times requirements were from pre-Covid years. She yearned for feedback from school leaders and wanted to hear the positive reinforcement that things were going well, which she said would be “nice to hear, I’m a bit of a perfectionist, and I want to be better.” Sam added, “the biggest thing about being young is that I don’t have enough experience to be sure of myself quite yet. So having a little reassurance helps a lot.”

Sam valued the feedback from peers more than school leaders. His peers are dealing with similar issues and better understand his struggles. He believes that talking to younger teachers might be preferable to his department head because, although she is “awesome,” he feels as if she has routines in place and has forgotten what “it is like to be dumb.” Sam has not had a positive experience concerning discipline practices with the administrator in charge of discipline, whom he feels does not like him, and his department head, whom he described as antiquated. They both have insisted he be “harder” on his kids. Sam believes they might be hard on him because they want him to improve as a teacher. However, Sam “did not have the emotional energy” to deal with those issues.

Holly has only been evaluated twice in the past year. She longs for more care from her leaders. She captured this longing in the following anecdote: “How do you think that went? Do you think that could have been better?” As a teacher, she wants “to evolve and change and get better.” Joe received “good and sufficient” feedback. He thought six evaluations were enough, and teachers should strive to meet standards, even overachieve if possible. Ultimately, Joe reflected, it “goes back to making sure we meet the kids’ needs,” and he argues we have enough feedback to ensure that process.

James had the most experience with the evaluation process and was comfortable with expectations. He feels comfortable with his evaluator, who was previously a science teacher, and stated they had a good rapport. However, Sara had the same evaluator and did not share the same experience as James. Sara does not see the value in the evaluation she received. She said:

But I don’t want to call him out...especially this year. Last year it was better. He seemed really distracted. When he was in my room for my evaluation, I was like, “Am I being evaluated or not?” He came in, he did not pick up my lesson plans, and I’m like, I put those together. Can you at least pretend to look at them? And then he sat in the back, and he just did not seem like he was paying attention. But, yeah, it’s one of those things where I wish I could get a little bit more constructive feedback. I appreciate the positive reviews, but I do want to know what I can do better or how I can do things, or even if it’s just like, hey, I saw this happen.

Sam’s evaluator is a new assistant principal who previously taught science and mathematics at Martinville. She was helpful to Sara but “scares the begizzes” out of Sam. He does not know why his anxiety level increases when she enters his classroom. The evaluator tells Sam to

“continue doing what you’re doing.” Sam wishes the administration would be more specific, give suggestions, evaluate more frequently and interact with him during evaluations. Holly mirrored Sam’s thoughts and was disappointed that the evaluator did not return after she found out the class was only reading silently. She wanted feedback from a more critical rather than surface-level instruction. Holly and Sam think administrators do not have much time to work with them. Joe was not sure who evaluated him.

### **Implications and Discussion**

The findings in this study offer implications that we posit are important to consider when preparing future school administrators and providing professional development for current school administrators.

First, a transformative shift in administrative training requires professional development or college preparation in relational leadership. The participants described relationships with peers, students, and school leaders as critical to the culture and climate of a positive working environment. Leaders who provide opportunities for growth in this area and maintain high expectations for students and staff are effective. Second, Generation Z teachers lack internal reflective tools and construct meaning from external reassurance and feedback about their pedagogy. Participants desired frequent feedback on classroom performance, discussions about professional goals, and individual attention from school leaders. Indeed, the relational aspects of schools is incredibly important (Jones, 2020).

Furthermore, Holly, Sara, and Sam mentioned wanting immediate reassurance from administrators during evaluations. James and Sam suggested informal conversations with administrators to check-in and support throughout the school year. These requests mirrored the leadership needs Schroth (2019) and Panwar and Mehta (2019) recommended for Generation Z. These researchers noted how leaders would need to manage expectations and craft “a context for invention and inclusion in the face of ambiguity and the unforeseen” (p. 66) to facilitate this generations’ employment journey.

### **Conclusion**

Based on findings from this study, administrators should consider providing thoughtful, genuine commentary on pedagogical performance. New teachers need to know they are valued and their job is essential. It is also necessary to consider the specific needs of Generation Z. They are dedicated to their profession and classroom practices, but they need informal feedback, formal evaluations, and frequent reassurance from school leaders. Administrators should consider visiting classrooms regularly and rotate, so each leader visits classrooms other than the teachers they evaluate; in doing so, teachers receive feedback from multiple sources, which is important to this generation of new teachers. Listening to the ideas of young teachers in this generation can benefit school leaders while giving them a voice in school decision-making to which they feel entitled. The participants desired a more personal relationship with the school leaders and valued their input. Where research showed teacher evaluation as a fearful experience throughout the state, these teachers wanted more interaction and constructive feedback from evaluations.

After analyzing the data, the most poignant discovery in this study was the desire of young teachers to be known personally by their administrators, which is antithetical to the belief

of an older school leader. Generation Z explicitly expects this level of personal affiliation with supervisors. Every participant shared that they desired a school leader who was invested in learning about teachers' personal and professional background. For these participants, relationships are the cornerstone of their professional journeys.

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