A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF TEACHERS’ LIVED EXPERIENCES WORKING IN SCHOOLS INFLUENCED BY PRINCIPAL TURNOVER

by

Carrie Nicole Barbour Link

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand teachers’ experiences with principal turnover. Julian Rotter’s locus of control theory is the theoretical foundation for this study. He has proposed that people either believe that they have control over what happens to them or that external factors determine their fate. Currently, most research has highlighted the negative consequences of principal turnover; however, there are studies that highlight positives as well. This study sought to dig deeper into the phenomenon of principal turnover to gain an understanding of how teachers experience a change in leadership. The central research question for this study asked, “How do teachers describe their lived experiences working in schools that have had principal turnover?” Participants were teachers in various schools across the state of Virginia who had experienced principal turnover within the previous two years. The data collection processes included one-on-one interviews with teachers, focus groups, and letters written by participants. Data analysis for this study involved the use of Moustakas’ four-step process of *epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences*. Steps for increasing data trustworthiness included researcher bracketing, data triangulation, member checks, and the use of an audit trail. There were five themes that emerged during data analysis: adjusting to new leaders, adapting to or resisting new visions, turnover impact on students, teachers’ emotions surrounding turnover, and what teachers wanted from incoming leaders. These findings highlight both positives and negatives that teachers have experienced during times of principal turnover.

*Keywords*: principal, turnover, culture, climate, self-efficacy, emotions
Dedication

The years that I have spent on this journey towards my doctorate have been some of the slowest, fast years I’ve ever had. There were times when I felt that I would never overcome the obstacles in front of me, but somehow, He made it happen. Thank you, Lord, for your blessings on my life and on this journey. I dedicate these pages, and all that is to come afterwards, to you. Without your hand, wisdom, and intervention, I would not be who I am, or where I am today. Thank you for entrusting me with this mission and giving me the strength, I needed when I did not have it on my own. This is a dream that I never once dreamed on my own until you laid it on my heart. So, to be at this point feels extremely spiritual and is a testimony I will carry in my heart forever.

I also want to thank my loving husband who never wavered in his support of me. I will never forget the conversation we had when I told you I wanted to do this, and you never hesitated to say, “go for it.” I look forward to the years to come that we can enjoy being together, making memories, and growing a family. Thank you for your patience with me as I chased this dream. I know it hasn’t been easy even though you’ve never admitted it. I can’t wait to be able to attend as many softball games and hunting journeys as possible!

Lastly, I want to dedicate these pages to my amazing mother. Thank you for always encouraging me and reminding me that I can do anything I set my mind to. I know, without a doubt, that I would not have made it to this point without you, your calls, your texts, your hugs, and your love. Thank you for listening to me cry, laugh, complain, and cheer. I hope that in all that I do, I continue to make you proud. I want nothing more than for my life to be a testament of what an amazing mother you are, because you are. I thank God every day for giving me the blessing of being your daughter and I love you so much!
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List of Abbreviations

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Locus of Control Theory (LCT)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Standards of Learning (SOL)

State Committee on Higher Education of Virginia (SCHEV)

Virginia Department of Education (VDOE)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

When a principal leaves a school, teachers are left behind with the task of trying to let go of a past leader’s expectations while simultaneously attempting to learn the new ones held by a successor. When principal turnover happens, researchers have indicated that there may be negative consequences, such as increases in teacher turnover (Béteille, Kalogrides, & Leob, 2012), declines in student achievement (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010), and disrupted school climates (Burkhauser, Gates, Hamilton, & Ikemoto, 2012). On the other hand, other researchers have suggested that principal turnover has positive consequences as well, such as the infiltration of an atmosphere of change (Herman et al., 2008).

This study focused on the phenomenon of principal turnover and the lived experiences for teachers who have been a part of such a change in leadership at their respective schools. With an ever-increasing rate of principal turnover and the ongoing struggle to find highly-qualified teachers, observing the nature of this phenomenon from teachers’ perspectives is important. Allowing teachers to share their experiences allowed them to shed light on what they have seen and not seen as far as any changes that take place to the school environment, the rate of student achievement, and the nature of their own positions during times of transition. This study adds to the existing literature on principal turnover by giving a voice to teachers about their personal experiences. This chapter provides a statement of the problem and purpose, an overview of the significance of the study, and research questions and definitions of terms.

Background

Researchers have been discussing principal turnover for some time. However, the literature continues to be limited regarding its impact and implications (Rangel, 2018).
Discussions of the advantages and disadvantages of turnover can be found in several different published studies, but the methods and central research questions vary widely. More research is needed to be able to understand the context of principal turnover and its nature. The theoretical framework for this study is based on Julian Rotter’s (1966) locus of control theory and will build on what is known about the phenomenon of principal turnover. However, before presenting reasons why this new study is important, it is necessary to draw on the historical, social, and theoretical background surrounding the issue.

**Historical Context**

Research that highlights a school’s need to have a strong principal dates back to 1955 (Goodlad, 1955). However, it wasn’t until after the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that research on the phenomenon of principal turnover began to grow. The NCLB Act of 2001, which was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), was a true turning point for the job descriptions of principals in schools across the United States. Many scholars have noted the impact that this movement has had on teachers and students but have not mentioned how principals have been affected (Mitani, 2018). “Prior to the enactment of NCLB, there were no federally-mandated standards that governed accountability and testing in US public schools” (Li, 2015, p. 7). With increased accountability rates, NCLB placed stressors on principals to no longer simply focus on overseeing a school’s functioning but also to ensure the success of all students by meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals (NCLB, 2001). With this change in responsibility and its added pressures, research has highlighted that NCLB has been associated with increased principal turnover rates (Mitani, 2018). Mitani (2018) explained that the accountability measures increased job stress for both principals and schools as a whole,
which has led to both principal-initiated turnovers and turnovers that were a result of decisions made by upper-level administrators.

As researchers have begun to evaluate principal turnover, several implications have been noted. One positive conclusion from the research is that turnover has allowed for ineffective leaders to be replaced (Herman et al., 2008). However, researchers have also found a decrease in student achievement (Miller, 2013), negative effects on school cultures and climates (Masall & Leithwood, 2010), and decreases in teacher retention rates (Béteille et al., 2012; Miller, 2013).

Social Context

Annually about 20% of principals leave their schools from one year to the next (Battle, 2010; Cullen & Mazzeo, 2008; DeAngelis & White, 2011, Fuller & Young, 2009). Among the reasons for the turnovers include that baby boomer retirees have been leaving the profession (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010), working conditions were unpleasant (Partlow, 2007; Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012), student achievement was low (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010), dissatisfaction with the pay (Tran, 2017; Baker, Punswick, & Belt, 2010), and the poverty and demographic statuses of students (Young & Fuller, 2009; Beckett, 2018). A major cause for concern, is that when principals leave, it takes about five to seven years for a school to recover and to start making effective interventions under a new leaders’ expectations (Fullan, 2001; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). At a time where education is already struggling to hold tightly to the people it has and find stability, every effort should be made in order to gain a deeper understanding of the crisis.

Theoretical Context

The theoretical lens for this study is Julian Rotter’s (1966) locus of control theory. Rotter (1966) described someone who has an internal locus of control as a person who believes that life
events are “contingent upon his own behavior or his own relatively permanent characteristics” (p. 1). However, a person with an external locus of control believes that life occurrences are not “entirely contingent upon his action” and are “typically perceived as the result of luck, chance, fate, as under the control of powerful others, or as unpredictable because of the great complexity of the forces surrounding him” (Rotter, 1966, p. 1). This study seeks to expand this theory by applying it to teachers and their experiences with principal turnover. The purpose is to understand how teachers describe their lived experiences with principal turnover and to explore the ways they believe they do or do not control the influences on their schools’ environments.

This study adds to the research of past researchers on the topic of principal turnover. According to previous research, depending upon a school’s circumstances, a change in leadership is likely to have negative impacts (Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Rangel, 2018), but may be a best next-step for jump-starting a culture of change (Herman et al., 2008). By giving a voice to teachers, this research contributes to the literature in a new way. Information was gathered about the experiences of teachers and how they were impacted when leadership in their schools changed and whether the change was negative, positive, or both. Upper-level administrators can benefit from this research by having new understanding about how teachers experience a change in leadership and what may be positive or negative ramifications regarding such a change. When turnover takes place, upper-administrators may now have some understanding as to how teachers may be feeling during these crucial times and know what steps are needed to offer supports.

**Situation to Self**

One of the characteristics that makes a qualitative study unique is the voice of the researcher. The researcher’s bias, voice, and experiences are all equally imperative to the study because of the unique role that is played in the construction of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
To help frame this research, I have used a combination of personal experiences and philosophical assumptions that has shaped the overall process.

**Personal Position**

Two years in the same school while undergoing the leadership of four principals and three assistant principals is what caused my passion for understanding the impacts of principal turnover to heighten. As a counselor, and someone who works very closely with administration, I can recall what it felt like, on my part, to be subjected to so many opinions, philosophies of education, and expectations; it was overwhelming and discouraging. However, to this day, I still do not fully understand how these changes may have impacted the ones who are most responsible for heading the "front-line" of the educational process -- teachers.

This research study explored the personal experiences of teachers during times of principal turnover. From my own experience, I assumed that principal turnover was a negative phenomenon, and this was an assumption I brought to the table. However, I was interested in understanding the perceptions of teachers who were faced with this situation and wanted to know how it looked from their vantage points. I went into the study with an assumption that teachers would feel burdened by constant changes in the instructional delivery expectations, lesson plan templates/requirements, student discipline procedures, and morale building activities among staff. Through the use of Moustakas’ (1994) bracketing process and *epoche*, I set aside my own biases throughout each step of the journey in order to gather pure, rich data centered on teachers’ personal lived experiences.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

The philosophical assumptions that I brought to the study were associated with a constructivist worldview. As a solo researcher, I was responsible for constructing the meaning of
others’ lived experiences. In doing so, I kept in mind my own personal ontological, epistemological, axiological, and rhetorical assumptions and analyzed the way that each one of these assumptions might play a role in the process.

**Constructivism.** The worldview that I brought to this study followed a constructivist paradigm, which called for participants to provide data that I used to gather meanings and essences of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). As Mojtahed, Nunes, Martins, & Peng (2014) stated:

In order to access and achieve an understanding about human perceptions, one of the main requirements of the constructivist approach is the establishment of a reciprocal and communicational ground between the research project participants and researchers in the co-construction of meaning (p. 87).

They go on to explain that researchers should remain as open-minded as possible during questioning and allow participants to steer the conversations in order to get a fuller picture of their lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews were used because they were helpful for a constructivist approach. My desire was to include questions that started conversations, but also encouraged teachers to speak freely on things that may come to mind during the dialogue.

**Ontological.** Ontological assumptions in research underline the fact that people have multiple realities regarding phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study presented the realities of teachers through documentation of interviews, focus groups, and written letters. These data collection processes provided an overview of individual perceptions about principal turnover. As the researcher, I brought these ideas together to develop patterns and to gather meanings and understanding of the essences of teachers’ lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994).
**Epistemological.** Creswell and Poth's (2018) explanation of epistemological assumptions stated that, "subjective evidence is assembled based on individual views" (p. 20). This expresses a need for researchers to get as close to subjects as possible in an effort to glean understanding from their individual lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interactions I had with teachers during interviews and focus groups allowed me the opportunity to get into their world in a personal fashion to see how they perceived this phenomenon of principal turnover. I was able to develop deeper relationships with participants and better understand their social realities by talking with them individually and by asking open-ended questions so that the participants could say what came to their minds.

**Axiological.** Axiological assumptions highlight the role that a researcher’s values play in data interpretation. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that, researchers should “acknowledge that research is value-laden and that biases are present in relation to their role in the study context” (p. 21). As a counselor who has worked in a school that has undergone multiple changes in principals, I believe that there is a need for teachers to be supported during these times of principal transition. I also value the importance of communication and believe that teachers are the heart of a school’s culture and climate.

**Rhetorical.** The nature of qualitative studies is to provide in-depth, descriptive explanations of participants’ perceptions, perspectives, and experiences. By conducting this study in that manner, the rhetorical structure was one that was narrative and personal. The language that I used for the study was one that gave a voice to the researcher and participants alike.
Problem Statement

Limited research exists on the nature and implications of principal turnover. However, the literature has been growing within the last decade. In 2009, Fuller and Young found that about 50% of newly hired principals leave their schools within their first three years and that the rates of principal turnover coincide with that of teacher turnover. Research also has shown that overall, about 20% of public-school principals leave their positions each year (Miller, 2013). The problem with principal turnover is that it has been shown to negatively impact the climate of a school (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015) and student achievement (Dhuey & Smith, 2018). Increases in principal turnover rates also have resulted in increased teacher turnover rates (Fuller & Young, 2009, Miller, 2013). Unfortunately, little is known about why this relationship exists and what teachers personally experience during times of leadership change. Notably, few researchers have mentioned any positive perceptions related to principal turnover, though at least two studies found that when poor leaders are substituted for stronger ones, schools have a better chance of success (DeAngelis & White, 2011; Herman, et. Al., 2008). However, more research is needed to fully understand the nature of what principal turnover truly means to teachers and their schools. This study has sought to discover how teachers experience principal turnover and the impacts that it has on them and their school. They are the ones who remain before, during, and after instances of turnover take place, so hearing their voices on this issue is necessary to understand what supports teachers and schools may need during times of principal transitions.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to understand teachers’ lived experiences working in schools that have undergone principal turnover. For this study, principal turnover was defined as the period of change that takes place when a principal leaves a school from one year to the next.
Julian Rotter’s (1966) locus of control theory, which argues that people either feel that they can control their life outcomes or that external factors in their environments determine their fate, was the theory that lined this study. When principals leave, the school environment changes (Boyce & Bowers, 2016; Wills, 2016; Miller, 2013; Rangel, 2018). Considering that teachers are the true "front-line" of the educational process, (Nelms, 2004), gaining an understanding of how they experience this phenomenon can provide educators with valuable information on how to best handle these disruptions. In an era of baby-boomer retirees and educator shortages, the more researchers understand about school climate and the needs of teachers, the better (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010).

**Significance of the Study**

This study expanded on previous research studies that have cited both negative and positive impacts of principal turnover on school environments (Boyce & Bowers, 2016; Wills, 2016; Miller, 2013; Rangel, 2018; DeAngelis & White, 2011). Research touches on the idea that there are correlations between principal turnover and teacher turnover (Béteille et al., 2012; Miller, 2013) but more is needed to understand the nature behind this correlation. This study gathered teachers’ perceptions of school climate and their self-efficacy during times of principal turnover because these two factors have been shown to have an impact on teacher retention rates (Béteille et al., 2012; Miller, 2013).

Considering that teacher shortages are an issue for U.S. public schools, and working conditions play a major role in teachers’ decisions to stay or leave (Burkhauser, 2017), it is necessary to understand the extent to which principal turnover may increase or decrease these conditions for teachers and why. Surprisingly, teachers’ voices have yet to be heard on this issue in the literature. Therefore, this study aimed to understand teachers’ in-depth perspectives of
their working environments and their experiences with what takes place during times of principal turnover.

The practical significance of this study is that, if schools understand teachers’ perspectives on principal turnover, then other decisions can be made that address both the potential positive and negative consequences of this type of change. Positive implications can be taken into consideration when determining when it may, or may not be, time for new leadership. Additionally, negative experiences or concerns held by teachers can assist upper-administrators in knowing if there is a need to implement support practices for teachers when new principals take over.

This research adds to current understanding of teachers’ beliefs about a school’s functioning. It provides insight as to how they perceive changes in leadership and what happens to different facets of a school under new leadership. With the steady rise in the rates of principal turnover, the impact on teachers may affect other areas of a school’s functioning that have yet to be considered.

Theoretically, this study expands on the ideas of Julian Rotter (1966) and his locus of control theory. By utilizing this theory for a qualitative study on teachers and their experiences, new knowledge about teachers’ perceptions about their locus of control was gathered. There was also an expansion to this theory in a way that provides understanding about how teachers view their working environments and the roles they play in their schools.

**Research Questions**

The review of the literature led to one central question and the four sub-questions listed below. The central research question and sub-questions for this study were derived from the existing literature on principal turnover, principal-teacher relationships, and Julian Rotter’s
(1966) locus of control theory. The literature on the topic of principal turnover has indicated that it can have a positive impact on schools if an ineffective leader is replaced by someone who is strong and effective (Herman, et al., 2008). However, it also showed that there can be negative impacts such as an increase in teacher turnover (Fuller & Young, 2009; Miller, 2013), decreases in student achievement (Wills, 2016), and disruptions in school culture and climate (Hanselman, 2016; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Rangel, 2018). The research questions for this study were formulated with ideas from the literature in mind. The questions sought to gather information regarding a teacher’s belief about what happens to teacher emotions, a school’s culture and climate, as well as students, when principal turnover takes place. One question took into account Julian Rotter’s (1966) locus of control theory and asked teachers to what extent they feel they are in control during these times. The central research question for the study was:

How do teachers describe their lived experiences working in schools that have had principal turnover?

This central research question was aimed at capturing the overall essence of teachers’ lived experiences with principal turnover. Themes from previous literature related to teachers and principal turnover mostly fall within the categories of teacher turnover, student achievement, and school culture and climate (Rangel, 2018). With these multiple facets of the school environment in mind, this research delved into how teachers have experienced the changes, if any in these areas of a schools’ functioning at the onset of principal turnover. Each of the sub-questions that stem from this study’s central question were rooted in Rotter’s (1966) locus of control theory. Teachers with an internal locus of control may have felt that it is their own initiatives and mindset that determine what happens during times of principal turnover. However, teachers with an external locus of control may have described feeling that principal turnover is
the immediate cause for possible changes for teachers, students, and the overall school culture and climate.

The sub-questions for this study were as follows:

1. How do teachers describe influences that principal turnover has on student achievement in the classroom?

Several studies have indicated a correlation between principal turnover and student achievement. Most studies have shown decreases in achievement during periods of principal turnover (Branch et al., 2009; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Miller, 2013; Kearney et al., 2012) while only a few have shown an increase in achievement or no impact at all (Béteille et al., 2012; Herman et al., 2008).

2. How do teachers describe the way that the school climate and culture are influenced by principal turnover?

A study by Mascall and Leithwood (2010) found that, overall, principal turnover had a negative influence on school culture. However, in schools with strong cultures that worked together to delegate leadership, the effects of the change were not as detrimental. Burkhauser et al. (2012) also found that, when it comes to school climate, principals play a major role in teachers’ perceptions of its status. Teachers had negative associations with principals when new principals sought to make too many changes at one time (Burkhauser et al., 2012).

Studies by Noonan and Goldman (1995) as well as Hanselman (2016) showed a negative relationship between a principal’s departure and teachers’ beliefs about a school’s climate. On the other hand, a study by Herman et al. (2008) showed that teachers often considered new principals to be a driving force for change who set the tone for success. This question is essential for understanding what it is that teachers experience as far as changes to the school culture and
climate during principal turnover and how they view this phenomenon specifically in light of the school environment.

3. How do teachers describe their emotional experiences with principal turnover?

Béteille et al. (2012) determined that there was a direct correlation between the phenomenon of principal turnover and an increase in teacher turnover. However, more research is needed to understand why this relationship exists and what emotions teachers felt that caused them to leave during this period. The increase in both teacher turnover and principal turnover happened more frequently in schools in high-poverty areas (Holme, Jabbar, Germain, & Dinning, 2017; Nelms, 2014). This may be associated with an increase in stressors and emotions that accompany teachers’ jobs in high poverty schools (Camacho, Vera, Scardamalia, & Phalen, 2018).

4. How do teachers describe their locus of control regarding principal turnover?

Julian Rotter (1966) argued that people either believe that their own characteristics and abilities control their circumstances or that fate and environmental factors are the main driving forces for change. Through this research, I sought to understand the extent to which teachers believed that they could or could not control what happened as a result of principal turnover.

Definitions

1. **Principal Turnover** – For this research, principal turnover is defined as when a principal moves to another school, district, or position as well as when a principal exits from the school system all together (Rangel, 2018).

2. **Transcendental Phenomenology** – Transcendental phenomenology is a qualitative research method used to capture participants’ lived experiences, glean the essence from their reports, and condense words and statements into patterns as a data
collection method, while carefully bracketing personal bias to ensure the purity of findings (Husserl, 1958; Moustakas, 1994).

3. **School Climate** – School climate is defined as the extent to which personnel share beliefs about, or perceptions of, behaviors in the school (Noonan & Goldman, 1995).

4. **School Culture** – School Culture is defined as the shared values, norms, and contexts among a staff (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010).

**Summary**

Principals play a pivotal role in setting the standards, culture, and climate within a school. Their influence is undeniably influential and has an impact on rates of teacher turnover, student achievement, and a school’s overall success. When principals leave, teachers who are left behind are expected to pick up the pieces of past expectations and adopt to new policies and visions implanted by the new leader. Unfortunately, increased principal turnover rates are a dilemma faced by many schools across the U.S. (Miller, 2013) and is coupled with a dire need for schools to fill hard-to-staff teaching positions (Berry & Shields, 2017). Understanding how teachers experience principal turnover provides a depth of knowledge that has yet to be delved into by research. For this study, I used Moustakas’ (1994) approach to phenomenological studies and conducted interviews, organized focus groups, and had participants write personal letters. In accordance with a transcendental approach, I gathered teachers’ experiences and bracketed my own biases.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Effective leadership is a pivotal component of successful school functioning. When principals change from one year to the next, teachers are placed in a position of uncertainty and anticipation for what is to come. Research has highlighted the powerful influence that school leaders have on teachers (Burkhauser, 2017; Player, Youngs, Perrone & Grogan, 2017; Urick, 2016), student achievement (Champion & Deoras, 2016; Dhuey & Smith, 2018), and school performance (Lee, 2015), but the literature on how these impacts present themselves during times of principal turnover is limited.

Existing research has highlighted both positives and negatives of principal turnover. One notable advantage of changing leadership is that a stale, ineffective leader can be changed with someone new (Herman et al., 2008). Rangel (2018) did a comprehensive review of published studies on principal turnover and discussed its disadvantages, including decreases in student achievement (Miller, 2013), negative effects on a school’s culture and climate (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010), and decreases in teacher retention rates (Béteille et al., 2012; Miller, 2013). Even though these studies provide some insight into the consequences of principal turnover, more study is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. In particular, no studies have given a voice to teachers on their perspectives regarding the phenomenon of principal turnover or how they may interpret these changes.

Julian Rotter’s (1966) locus of control theory (LCT) is presented as the theoretical basis for this study and provided a lens that is helpful for studying teachers’ diverse ways of processing change within their work environments. LCT proposes that teachers either feel personal responsibility for what happens during times of principal turnover or they that any
potential impacts are out of their control. This literature review expands on LCT and presents, in themes, the related literature on the powerful influence that principals have within their respective school buildings and what is already known regarding positive and negative consequences of principal turnover. The sections of Chapter two are: overview, theoretical framework, related literature, and summary.

**Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework lays the foundation for the richness associated with the proposed research. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) explained that the theoretical framework relates laws and constructs together and provides connections that are relevant to observations in past and future thoughts and ideas. The theory framing this study is Julian Rotter’s (1966) locus of control theory (LCT) which explained that people have a tendency to believe that things happen either as a result of internal behaviors or because of external forces. In studying teacher experiences working in schools affected by principal turnover, LCT provides a foundation for determining what impacts, both positive and negative, teachers contribute to a change in leadership. It also provides a foundation for understanding how teachers view the phenomenon of principal turnover, and whether or not they believe changes to their roles, the school environment, or student achievement are within or out of their control.

In 1966, Julian Rotter developed the first conceptualization of control and explained that his locus of control theory referred to the degree to which a person feels his or her actions, behaviors, or attributes determine the outcome of events (Rotter, 1966). LCT is rooted in social learning theory (SLT), which stated that “a reinforcement acts to strengthen an expectancy that a particular behavior or event will be followed by that reinforcement in the future” (Rotter, 1966, p. 2). With this theory in mind, a general conclusion is that, typically, people develop behaviors
about events based on their expectations, and that outcomes will either be driven from skill-related actions or chance (Rotter, 1966).

Locus of control is a continuum where a person is categorized as fully controlled by internal or external factors or somewhere in the middle. Rotter (1966) noted that, where people fall on this spectrum also relates to their belief about how much control they have over their environment or them self. LCT undergirded this study by framing opportunities for determining how teachers viewed the phenomenon of principal turnover. More specifically, this research sought to understand if teachers believed that the consequences of principal turnover were held in the hands of external factors or if it was the teacher’s own determination, motivation and personality that resulted in a smooth or disoriented transition.

Past studies that have utilized LCT as a theoretical foundation have found interesting results that are relevant to this research. Senler (2016) conducted a study on pre-service science teachers’ self-efficacy and how it related to attitude, anxiety, and locus of control. The study’s results indicated that when teachers believed students’ academic outcomes were a direct result of their efforts and abilities, they were more likely to have a positive attitude towards teaching. Further, teachers who had a strong internal locus of control had less anxiety about teaching.

Another study by Conley and You (2014) found that when teachers felt overloaded in their roles, those with an external locus of control had decreased levels of job satisfaction. Those with an internal locus of control felt a decrease in their commitment. Subsequently, teachers with an internal locus of control were directly related to those who had an increased likeliness to leave (Conley & You, 2014).

Akkaya & Akyol (2016) concluded that most teachers had a very strong internal locus of control and this positively correlated with “their internal, external, and general satisfactions” (p.
In contrast to these findings, Naureen, Awan, and Noshaba (2015) found no relationship between a teacher’s locus of control and job satisfaction. Each of these studies pointed to a need to advance understanding regarding how locus of control plays a part in teachers’ instructional delivery, job satisfaction, and self-efficacy.

Prior to this current study, no research had been conducted on teachers’ perceptions of principal turnover. Furthermore, this study expands on the literature regarding principal turnover, but it simultaneously contributes to the expansion of Rotter’s (1966) LCT by providing a deeper understanding about the ways that teachers experience turnover and how their locus of control contributes to their perceptions of changes. It also may contribute to the way that teachers think, act, and instruct.

**Related Literature**

Recently, principal turnover has surfaced in the literature as a major issue facing American school districts (Beckett, 2018; Rangel, 2018). Part of the reason for this rise is related to pressures that were placed upon leaders at the onset of NCLB and the ESSA of 2015 (Rangel, 2018). Many principals started looking for a change in their job placements or for a way out of education all together (Wood et al., 2013). Principals with increased levels of anxiety can have an effect on teachers and cause them to also feel heightened emotions, low morale, and decreased self-efficacy (Lambersky, 2016). Some leaders do more harm than good in their roles, and that is why Herman et al. (2008) highlighted that a potential advantage of principal turnover is the replacement of ineffective leaders with stronger ones. However, few researchers have found evidence pointing to the idea that principal turnover is advantageous.

Most researchers have found that there are more disadvantages to principal turnover than advantages (Rangel, 2018). When principal turnover happens, teachers have to spend the next
five to seven years waiting on their new administrator to begin to successfully implement reform efforts (Fullan, 2001, Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Seashore-Louis, et al., 2010). Teachers have to spend time getting to know their new leader before they develop positive, trustworthy working relationships (Meyer, Macmillan & Northfield, 2009). Considering that principals directly and indirectly influence so many aspects of a schools’ functioning and teachers are the ones left working through the turnover, more is needed to understand their experiences with this phenomenon.

This review of literature will delve into understandings that have been gathered about the importance of a principal’s role in the field of education and how this position impacts the leaders’ subordinates as well as schools’ entire student bodies. The intrinsic motivational factors held by leaders, or the idea of such as determined by others, equips principals with critical abilities to lead employees towards or away from success (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). The following section will discuss themes found in the literature. Statistics on the rise in principal turnover and the factors that influence turnover decisions will be expanded on first. Next will be a review of the advantages and disadvantages of the phenomenon of principal turnover. Then there will be a review of the importance of principal-teacher relationships and why the element of trust is important. Lastly, literature that highlights how a principal influences a teacher’s emotions, including the senses of self-efficacy, motivation, and job satisfaction will be discussed. Each of these topics defines the nature of a principals’ impact on teachers and how their roles determine the way teachers view their working conditions (Burkhauser, 2017), student achievement (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012), and school climates (Alqahtani, 2015).
Factors Influencing Principal Turnover Decisions

There are several studies present in the principal turnover literature that examine trends in principal mobility behaviors across both national and state lines. According to a study by Fuller and Young (2009), about 50% of all newly-hired high school principals in Texas stayed for three years, and less than 30% stayed for five. School Leaders Network (2014) found that about half of new principals that are hired each year have left by year three. Other studies and surveys have found that about 20% of principals leave their schools from one year to the next (Battle, 2010; Cullen & Mazzeo, 2008; DeAngelis & White, 2011, Fuller & Young, 2009). According to a recent survey conducted by Goldring and Taie (2018), during the 2016-2017 school year, 6.2% of traditional public-school principals reported having moved schools since the year before and 9.4% left the public-school system all together. Darmody and Smyth (2016) noted that a major reason for principals’ dissatisfaction with their positions was because of an increase in job requirements, expectations, and work conditions. As a result of these pressures on principals, many have started leaving the field of education in search of new professions (Wood et al., 2013).

A turnover gap does exist between charter school principals and those in traditional public schools (Sun & Ni, 2015; Ni, Sun, & Rorrer, 2014). Sun and Ni (2015) found that principals working in charter schools typically worked with minority students and inexperienced teachers, so their levels of stress and expectations are higher. They stated that, “Since charter schools are often established to respond to the needs of traditionally underserved student populations, the higher turnover rate of their principals seems to be related to these schools’ defining type of students served” (Sun & Ni, 2015, p. 175).
Part of the reason that such a gap exists may also be related to the fact that the characteristics and behaviors of charter school principals and public-school principals are different. Ni, Sun, & Rorrer (2014) found that when turnover happens in charter schools, it is most likely that a principal leaves the principal position all together. However, when a traditional public-school principal exits, they often leave to take a principal position at another school (Ni, Sun & Rorrer, 2014). Further, they explained that this is likely due to the fact that most charter school principals view their positions as ending-points in their careers, and public-school principals use the position as a stepping-stone to something higher.

The training associated with charter school principals compared with those at traditional public schools also has an impact on turnover. Many charter school principals come from business backgrounds and do not have pre-service principal training or a master’s degree, whereas public school principals normally do (Ni, Sun & Rorrer, 2014). Thus, the training, behaviors, and characteristics of charter school principals impacts the reason for the turnover gap when compared to public school teachers (Sun & Ni, 2015; Ni, Sun, & Rorrer, 2014).

There are various explanations for turnover behaviors found in the research and researchers look at the phenomenon through multiple lenses. Regardless of the reason behind it, understanding principal turnover behaviors is important because research has shown that there are numerous negative consequences to principal turnover (Boyce & Bowers, 2016). Research also suggests that it can take up to seven years before a new principal really incorporates any kind of change in a school (Boyce & Bowers, 2016). When evaluating all the research, several themes stand out in the literature. These include job duties and working conditions (Darmody & Smith, 2016), increases in accountability measures (Li, 2015; Mitani, 2018), school performance levels (Tran & Buckman, 2017), and principal job pay (Boyce & Bowers, 2016; Tran, 2017).
Some of these factors explain why principals make the decision to move to another location or retire, while others are explain why upper-administrators may be encouraging the moves (Farley-Ripple, Solano, & Mcduffie, 2012).

**Job duties, workload, and working conditions.** The expectations placed upon principals are daunting. They are called on to maintain school safety, plan the budget, implement disciplinary consequences for students with behavior concerns, and oversee instructional practices (Wang, Pollock, & Hauseman, 2018). Additionally, they are expected to be change agents in their schools. As quoted in Russel & Sabina (2014) from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2008):

> A sharp increase in responsibilities in recent years has made the job more stressful and has discouraged some teachers from taking positions in administration. Principals are now being held more accountable for the performance of students and teachers, while at the same time, they are required to adhere to a growing number of government regulations (p. 602).

Though this quote was dates back to 2008, research since then has continued to suggest that principal shortages remain a pertinent issue and concern (Rangel, 2018; Tran, 2017).

Principals are becoming overwhelmed, stressed out, and burned out in their positions. Many feel that they are taking on too many roles and tasks, do not have enough time to complete their duties, and are being given insignificant resources (Oplatka, 2017). Unfortunately, “school leaders face significantly increased emotional demands compared to the general population, and this is associated with poorer psychosocial health” (Maxwell & Riley, 2017, p. 493). The burnout rate for principals was so high in a study by Maxwell and Riley (2017), that they beat out all managers in other fields and teachers too. What is even more discouraging is that, when
principals attempt to implement change and are committed to making a difference in their buildings, it causes their perceived workload to go up even higher (Oplatka, 2017).

With all of the emotional demands placed upon principals, eligible retirees who are overwhelmed with their job duties and chose to retire as early as possible, which also contributes to the rise in principal turnovers (Reames, Kochan, & Zhu 2014). They make this decision is so that they can have more time to spend with their families and have less stress. As Reames, Kochan, & Zhu (2014) stated: “principals are older, more diverse and are largely eligible for retirement within the next five years” suggesting that by 2018, a concerning number of principals would be ready to exit their positions. However, for principals working in schools that had strong systems of support with the administration, teachers, students, and families, the decision to stay increases (Reames, Kochan, & Zhu, 2014). For those working in schools that placed strong mandates upon the principal and had more stressful job requirements, the decision to leave was the most popular (Reames, Kochan, & Zhu, 2014).

One of the leading factors contributing to principal stress is work-life balance and a loss of personal time (Klocko & Wells, 2015; Markow, Friedman, & Friedman, 2008). Thus, it is no surprise that principal turnover is happening most frequently in schools that are in high-poverty areas and are low performing (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Schools that have higher-level needs require more input from the principal and are accompanied with more work. To make matters even worse, these schools also need in the greatest stability and effective leadership (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Increased accountability makes these job duties and workloads become overbearing. Unfortunately, these job-related stressors that causing principals to leave and teachers to turn away from advancing to the principal position, are not going to change any time soon.
Increased accountability measures and school performance. The policies established by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) of 2001 and ESSA of 2015 have increased expectations for optimal performance. State and local policies, as well, have contributed to reasons why the job has become identified as one that is stressful and undesirable, causing principals to leave (Wood et al., 2013). The NCLB era is best known for being a major reform effort in education that shifted the world of education altogether (Dee, Jacob, & Schwarts, 2013). Since its enactment in 2001, there has been a steady push to hold schools more accountable for all students. As a result, there is added pressure on principals in their day-to-day routines and causing many of them to seek employment in higher performing schools (Li, 2015) or to retire.

However, it is not just the accountability of NCLB that increased educators stress, but the concomitant movement to make schools’ performance levels available to the public (Mitani, 2018). When NCLB was established, it was the first time ever that schools who, “failed to make AYP faced public scrutiny and criticism, as AYP results were publicly announced at the end of each school year” (Mitani, 2018, p.823). These measures changed the way that local governing agencies and stakeholders viewed the public education experience, so that principals not only had to not only meet accountability measures, but to meet various stakeholders’ expectations as well (Firestone & Gonzalez, 2013). Knowing that principals are the second-most influential part of a student’s success, right behind teachers (Mitani, 2018), NCLB brought into focus the role that principals play in school improvement and changed the way these individuals prioritized their goals (Dee, Jacob, & Schwartz, 2013).

These NCLB accountability protocols and reform efforts became especially complex for principals in disadvantaged schools. Until present day, schools that have been struggling to reach their annual accountability standards are the same schools that have lost the many highly-
qualified principals that they desperately needed (Li, 2015). Further, the stresses that have come along with increased accountability efforts have rearranged principals’ daily routines. Due to this, many principals have been seeking employment in places where the effort to meet accountability measures are not so strenuous (Li, 2015).

Along with the pressure of increased accountabilities came a focus on overall school performance. Vang (2015) noted that when NCLB was enacted, principals’ jobs become more complex because of a need to spend time analyzing test scores and zeroing in on performance efforts.” The pressure associated undertaking the daily activities necessary for assessing performance levels helped reduce job satisfaction for principals. A report by Metlife revealed that regardless of demographic backgrounds, almost three-quarters of principals in the US indicated that their jobs had become too complicated” (Markow, Lara, & Helen, 2013 as cited in Liu & Bellibas, 2018, p. 1). It is because of the complexity of these positions that turnover rates have steadily increased over the years (Liu & Bellibas, 2018). This turnover is especially applicable to first-year principals in schools that have previously struggled to meet AYP targets. In their study, Burkhauser et al., (2012) found that “new principals were more likely to leave when test scores declined in their first year.”

Principals struggle to juggle all the roles that are required of them, especially when working with disadvantaged students (Liu & Bellibas, 2018). To offset these pressures, principals need to feel included in decision-making initiatives, feel supported, and have a sense of community among staff. “Principals who reported higher levels of collaboration and cohesiveness were significantly likely to remain in their schools…” (Burkhauser et al., 2012, p. 48).
Job pay. Several studies have found connections between a principals’ job pay and the likeliness of turnover. If principals realize that they are not paid as well as that of their colleagues, they are likely to want to leave their current positions for ones that are higher paid (Tran, 2017). Pendola and Fuller (2018) found that, as it relates specifically to rural principals, those with higher salaries “are likely to stay at a school for a meaningful amount of time” (p. 13). Furthermore, while there are only a few studies, Sun and Ni (2016) found that studies that have linked principal salary to turnover intentions have shown that principals with higher salaries stay at their schools longer than others.

It was once thought that because principals are educators, like teachers, that they are not impacted by job pay, but rather by intrinsic rewards like their student achievement (Tran, 2017). However, that idea has been shown to not be the truth. In fact, principals who are satisfied with their jobs have been also been shown to be the same principals who report being satisfied with their salaries (Boyce & Bowers, 2016). Though there are few studies that specifically discuss principal salary and turnover intentions, from what has been researched, it is obvious that job pay does, somewhat, play a part in divisions’ likelihood of retaining principals for certain amounts of time.

However, despite increased job stressors, pay satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and performance standings at their schools, many administrators continue to be resilient by making sure that their staff and students are properly taken care of. These leaders are dedicated to meeting staff needs regardless of an overload of duties (Darmody & Smyth, 2016). With this in mind, and considering the efficiency of the principal in power, turnover has the potential to be either a positive or negative phenomenon. In addition, there are many other factors to consider if schools are seeking answers as to whether turnover will be beneficial or detrimental.
Unfortunately, there are limited studies highlighting the direct impact of principal turnover and many of those published point towards the negative consequences surrounding the phenomenon. However, even still, studies have been done that show that, in some instances, principal turnover can be advantageous.

**Advantages of Principal Turnover**

One of the biggest advantages of principal turnover relates to instances when ineffective leaders are replaced with someone new (Herman et al., 2008). Researchers have noted that ineffective leaders have the potential to indirectly decrease students’ levels of achievement (Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Grissom, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2014). In fact, Dhuey and Smith (2014) found that replacing low value principals with higher value ones had the potential to increase students’ math scores by a 0.08 standard deviation and reading scores by 0.06. “Thus, even modest changes in the quality of the principal, [if] all else [is] equal, can produce appreciable gains in student quality” (Dhuey & Smith, 2014, p. 876).

DeAngelis and White (2011) stated that, even though principal turnover has been shown in the literature to be something that negatively impacts school environments, “presumably, so too can an ineffective principal who remains in a school for a long time” (p. 3). It is unfortunate that the literature on the positive implications of principal turnover is so limited. However, schools that keep their ineffective principals in their positions may present just as many challenges to school student achievement and school performance as schools that undergo change.

**Disadvantages of Principal Turnover**

There are many more researchers that have highlighted the disadvantages of principal turnover than those who have noted the advantages (Rangel, 2018). The major themes that can
be found in the literature regarding principal turnover relate to its impact on student achievement (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Kearney, et al., 2012; Burkhauser et al., 2012), school culture and climate (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Hanselman et al., 2016), and teacher turnover (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013; Miller, 2013). Each of these impacts, in some way, directly relate to the role of teachers and their levels of job satisfactions. Most of the studies are quantitative in nature and do not include the voice of the teacher.

**Student achievement.** Research highlights the relationship between school leadership and student achievement (Wallace Foundation, 2013). Dhuey and Smith (2018) used student achievement data to determine principal quality. Their research validated that a principal’s match to a school and his or her education level mattered when it came to student success and the value that is added to the school as a whole. When principal turnover takes place, it is hard to gauge whether the change will be effective for increased student achievement based simply on the portfolio of the new hire (Wills, 2016). To make the best-informed decisions about hiring those who will increase achievement, schools need longitudinal data that examines leader-to-school matches, which many schools do not have the leisure of gathering (Dhuey & Smith, 2018). Having this type of data would be beneficial, especially considering that Burkhauser et al. (2012) found that 50% of schools that had a principal transition had a decline in student achievement during the first year. Unfortunately, gathering data is time-consuming and difficult.

One researcher showed that right before a principal transition, student achievement is generally low and once a new principal is in place, that achievement increases (Miller, 2013). Another researcher noted that for each year a principal stayed at his or her respective school, student achievement went up (Kearney et al., 2012). However, interpreting these results can be difficult because there are lots of unknown factors that must be considered, such newly-hired
teachers (Fuller, Hollingworth, & Pendola, 2017) and that achievement data had nowhere to go but up in the first place (Miller, 2013). This change in student achievement can also be linked to factors in school culture as well (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010).

With all the factors that surround principal transitions, leadership styles, and their effects on student achievement, more research is needed to be able to determine what impact takes place that directly affects student achievement (Wills, 2016; Fuller, Hollingworth, & Pendola, 2017). However, principals can be motivators of successful school climates, which determines the basis for how schools will function and, as a result, impact students’ access to resources that instill achievement (Miller, 2013; Young, Winn, & Reedy, 2017, Wills, 2016). Moreover, “school leaders leverage different pathways for connecting students with learning opportunities appropriate for their growth and development” (Adams, Olsen, & Ware, 2017, p. 562). The decisions that principals make, their relationships and knowledge of teacher capabilities, and their ability to set clear goals for schools has an influence on students socially, psychologically, and academically (Adams, Olsen & Ware, 2017). Principals are responsible for increasing teacher effectiveness by knowing their strengths and weaknesses and enabling them with the right tools for meeting students’ needs. It is through principals’ intentional communications with teachers and students that they learn the needs of both parties and know what is needed to create a school environment that is most conducive to learning (Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

**School culture and climate.** Considering that teacher job satisfaction and turnover decisions can negatively impact school success (Burkhauser, 2017), “it would make sense for schools to pay attention to factors within the school climate that might influence the likelihood of retaining teachers” (Aldridge & Fraser, 2015). School climate is a broad concept that has been defined as the set of beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions held by teachers (Gulsen & Gulenay,
While some researchers have used the term climate and culture interchangeably, they do have notable differences. Climate refers more to the behaviors shared between staff members in a building, whereas culture refers to the values and norms that have been established (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009). Principals have a major role in setting the tone for a school’s climate and culture alike because of the influences that they have on instructional decisions and policies (Rangel, 2018).

Principals’ leadership styles are one of the most important factors that determine school climate (Bellibas, 2015). When principals provide effective instructional and distributed leadership, staff members become more empowered and are more likely to work cohesively with others (Bellibas & Liu, 2016). However, in the case of principal turnover, the leadership style of a new principal is not the only factor in creating positive school climates. Before attempting to implement any kind of change, principals must take time to understand a school’s culture (Leithwood et al., 2001). Understandably, when schools experience a change in leadership, there is a waiting period that takes place. During this time, teachers typically sit back while observing and learning the new principal’s behaviors (Northfield, 2014). Unfortunately, studies have shown connections between new principals entering a building and a decrease in school climate-related factors (Hanselman, 2016; Rangel, 2018).

One reason that a school’s climate worsens during times of principal turnover is a new leader’s desire to implement many changes all at once (Burkhauser et al., 2012). Researchers have shown that there is a need for principals to establish clear goals in order to promote a shared vision that sustains success and promotes positive interactions (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009). Unfortunately, in the time that it can take for a new principal to truly get to know staff members and the culture and climate of a school, the climate may have already gotten worse. Strickland-
Cohen, McIntosh, and Horner (2014) suggested that, during times of principal transitions, schools should create leadership teams that represent the whole school. These teams can work proactively to put practices in place that will promote sustainability and assist the new leader in making his or her adjustment to the school (Strickland-Cohen, McIntosh, & Horner, 2014). To minimize the impact of principal turnover on the school climate, teachers need a voice and need opportunities to be leaders in their roles as well (Bellibas & Liu, 2016; Strickland-Cohen, McIntosh, & Horner, 2014).

Teacher turnover. Urick (2016) noted that “teacher perception of leadership is a well-established predictor of attitudes associated with teacher decisions to stay or leave” (p. 435). In addition, principals’ decision-making and leadership styles have major impact on teacher job satisfaction (Jones & Watson, 2017). Educational environments are influenced by the nature of principal-teacher relationships (Price & Moolenaar, 2015). These relationships affect teacher self-efficacy, which contributes to teacher retention and attrition rates (Urick, 2016; Player et al., 2017; Pas, Bradshaw, & Hershfeldt, 2012).

Research has highlighted that, in schools with increased levels of principal turnover, teacher turnover increases as well (Miller, 2013). Interestingly, principal turnover has a specific impact on the retention rates of some of the most effective teachers (Béteille et al., 2012). In order to create healthy and stable, learning environments that teachers want to be a part of for long periods of time, schools’ administrators and teachers need to implement a shared vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2012) that is reliable and consistent (Richardson et al., 2016).

With the increased pressure for teachers to reach standardized objectives and to meet the needs of all students regardless of ability level, school environments have not all been reported to have the healthiest of standings (Burkhauser, 2017). During the 2011-2012 school year, for
example, the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2014) found that about 16% of public-school teachers had left their schools. Twenty percent of those teachers had 1-3 years of experience and they moved to another school or left teaching altogether (Goldring & Taie, 2014). A staggering 51% of teachers that left the teaching profession during the 2012-2013 year reported having better workload expectations in their new positions and 53% said their work conditions improved (Goldring & Taie, 2014). The working conditions that dissatisfied teachers were composed of an aspect of the school environment in which the administration has some aspect of control (Boyd et al., 2011; Hirsch, Emerick, Church, & Fuller, 2007).

With a new principal, decisions regarding how to keep teachers happy with the status of their school environments takes time and can make matters worse if not done correctly (Bellibas & Liu, 2018). Cieminski (2018) cited Boyd et al. (2011) said he “found that teachers’ perceptions regarding school administration had the greatest impact on teacher retention decisions among school contextual factors” (p. 23). Therefore, administrators have a significant role to play in determining the nature of school environments, which has the potential to influence teachers’ decisions to stay or leave.

Brown and Wynn (2009) determined that when principals established a clear vision for teachers, students, and other staff and work to keep that vision alive, retention rates typically increase. However, when principal turnover occurs, it can take five to seven years for that new leader to establish new visions. Therefore, it is easy to see how turnover has the potential to disrupt the school climate. If teachers need encouragement, support, and strong direction in order to want to continue teaching at their current placement (Brown & Wynn, 2009), principal turnover can be a strong factor in determining whether or not that teacher wants to continue in
his or her current position. More study is needed to be able to understand the ways that teachers are impacted by principal turnover and how this phenomenon brings to question teachers’ happiness, job satisfaction, and desire to continue teaching under certain conditions and leadership.

**Teacher-Principal Relationships**

Louis and Murphy (2017) undertook a study to determine whether principals could have a direct impact on organizational learning. They noted that:

Premised on the assumption that no matter how energetically leaders promote innovation, data-driven decision making, or the use of research-based knowledge among the faculty members, their impact will only be felt if they have cultivated positive relationships within the members of the school (Louis & Murphy, 2017, p. 104).

Thus, their research found that trusting relationships between leaders and teachers are essential for a school’s functioning. Trust is something that takes time to build and is established through multiple social exchanges and experiences (Northfield, 2014). When principals leave, teachers must start over with trust-building experiences and work closely with the new leader before a solid relationship is built. This leaves room for either positive or negative feelings to build and can lead to either detrimental or constructive changes to the overall school environment.

Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) are two leading researchers on educational concepts in working relationships. In one study, they noted that, “when principals demonstrate enough consistency in their behavior to inspire confidence that teachers can count on them in their time of need, teachers need not invest energy worrying whether the principal will come through in a difficult situation” (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015, p. 263). Moreover, consistency in relationships is something that happens over time through multiple experiences. Therefore, it is
easy to assume that teachers spend a good amount of time observing and getting to know leaders before considering them trustworthy. This exchange of trust that forms relationships between principals and teachers is pivotal in the learning environment because principals need teachers to provide instruction effectively, and teachers need principals to implement actions of support and give clear direction (Price & Moolenaar, 2015).

Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) discussed the importance of principals and their role in creating vibrant schools. They explained that they are, “ultimately held accountable to student learning in their buildings” but that most of their impact is instituted in an indirect way through teachers (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015, p. 256). Additional hats that principals wear specifically relate to curriculum implementation (Manley & Hawkins, 2013), monitoring instructional delivery (Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013), ensuring the safety of all students (Kelly, 2017), and providing interventions for diverse students’ needs (Stokes et al., 2017; Wang, 2015). For many of these duties, the principals’ reliance on, and relationship with teachers play some part in getting them done. This working relationship between leaders and teachers consequently means that various aspects of the school environment are indirectly impacted by the administrator and his or her personality, philosophy of education, dedication, and ability to connect and work cohesively with teachers. All of these qualities that leaders possess affects the depths of principal-teacher relationships (Kars & Inandi, 2018), how teachers view their ability to run a classroom (Burkhauser, 2017), whether or not teachers are satisfied at all with their careers or their schools (Liu & Hallinger, 2018), and eventually, the overall success of students based on the status of the latter (Dutta & Sahney, 2016).

“Contextually, ‘Leadership is human communication that modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others in order to meet shared group goals and needs’ (Hackman and Johnson,
Principals do not communicate effectively and build cohesive working relationships with staff members, school-level efforts are not implemented as effectively (Yoon, 2016). Principal-teacher relationships are vital for student success and strong relationships begin when effective communication is utilized and leaders have an understanding of not just teachers’ needs, but their emotions as well.

**Principal Impact on Teacher Emotions**

Principals’ decisions, behaviors, and beliefs influence almost every aspect of a school’s functioning. More specifically, a principal’s policies, leadership style, and investment in teachers’ professional development plays a major role in how teachers view their working conditions (Burkhauser, Gates, Hamilton, & Ikemoto, 2012) their beliefs about their teaching abilities (Liu & Hallinger, 2018), and retention rates (Urick, 2016). Due to the position of power that principals are in, it is important to understand the ways that these leaders have an influence on teachers’ emotions (Lambersky, 2016), beliefs (Kin, Kareem, Nordin, & Bing, 2018), and motivations (Lee & Kuo, 2019). Kouzes and Posner (2012) described this idea best with this statement:

> Leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow. It’s the quality of this relationship that matters most when engaged in getting extraordinary things done. A leader-constituent relationship that’s characterized by fear and distrust will never produce anything of lasting value. A relationship characterized by mutual respect and confidence will overcome the greatest adversities and leave a legacy of significance” (p. 30).

Lambersky (2016) spoke specifically to this and found that, in order to feel emotionally supported, teachers need the following: acknowledgement from principals, empathy, to be heard,
to feel supported, to see their principals in action, to simply have the principal’s presence throughout the building, and to know that principals are actively handling student discipline issues. Lambersky (2016) also stated that, “teachers consistently reported that feeling acknowledged by their principals was a critical contributor to their emotional satisfaction with their work, and in securing future commitment” (p. 396). Other studies have expanded on these ideas in different ways. Berkovich & Eval (2017a) found that transformational leadership plays a role in teachers’ emotional wellness while Lassila, Timonen, Uitto, & Estola (2017) found that the principal plays a central role in easing new-job stressors of beginning teachers. Each of these studies provides insight into the ways that principals impact the way that teachers feel on a day-to-day basis and their level of satisfaction with their job (Lambersky, 2016).

A principal’s ability to be aware of how he or she impacts teachers’ emotional states is important to consider when trying to implement reform efforts, build relationships, or create a climate and culture centered on trust. This is especially relevant in relation to new principals because, from the beginning, a new principal needs at least five years to implement change (Seashore-Louis, et al., 2010). In conjunction with that, trust has to also be established in order for the new principal to build productive relationships with teachers (Lambersky, 2016).

How a principal emotionally manipulates teachers, whether it be in positive (e.g. praise) or negative ways, will make an impact (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017b). Berkovich & Eval (2017b) stated that principals who use their power to emotionally manipulate teachers in negative ways will likely feel resistance, but those who attempt to positively manipulate teachers’ emotions have a better chance of implementing change and creating more well-rounded relationships. There are themes that can be found throughout literature that specifically relate to the ways that principals play a role in the emotions that teachers feel. These themes specifically relate to
teachers’ self-efficacy, beliefs, feelings of burnout, job satisfaction, and the ways that transformational-style leaders make the greatest, positive impacts on each of these.

**Self-efficacy and beliefs.** Several studies show that principals have a direct and indirect impact on students by way of the practices they implement that affect teacher self-efficacy (Rangel, 2018). Self-efficacy stems from Bandura’s social cognitive theory which is explained as the way that people perceive their “capability to accomplish a given level of performance” (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). As it relates to teachers, their self-efficacy is centered on their belief about how they can help students succeed in the classroom (Fackler & Malmberg, 2016).

Principals are just one factor that play into teachers’ levels of self-efficacy. Fackler and Malmberg (2016) explained that, “an experienced principal might support teachers well by performing role model behavior and providing guidance” which may lead to positive teacher self-efficacy (p. 193).

“Strong staff relationships and collegial support may have a positive impact on teacher efficacy and burnout” (Pas, Bradshaw, & Hershfeldt, 2012, p. 144). Opportunities for professional development and teacher education also positively impact teachers’ self-efficacy because newfound knowledge leads to better classroom experiences for teachers (Lamberrsky, 2016; Morris, Usher, & Chen, 2016). Teachers’ confidence rises when they provide instruction on subjects about which they feel very knowledgeable (Morris, Usher, & Chen, 2016). Principals have power in determining what kinds of professional development opportunities teachers need and what subjects they teach.

In relation to this, Piyaman, Hallinger, and Viseshsiri (2017) found that administrators, who build trusting relationships with staff members and build leadership qualities through professional learning, help teachers become more empowered in their positions. The
opportunities for professional development allow teachers to expand their knowledge and feel growth, confidence, and importance. However, this opportunity for teacher growth starts with leaders who trust their abilities and believe that they can and will succeed (Piyaman, Hallinger, & Viseshsiri, 2017; Urick, 2016; Northfield, 2014). Principals must be open to teachers’ perspectives on these opportunities if they want to infiltrate such an atmosphere of cohesion, collaboration, and community.

“When teachers’ beliefs in their own competence increase, they make more effort to enhance student learning, which leads to improvements in student achievement and performance” (Cansoy & Parlar, 2018, p. 560). In order to start the domino effect that leads to strong teacher self-efficacy and, consequently, student achievement, administrators need to be willing to provide flexibility in teachers’ instructional practices, make efforts to reduce teacher stress, give teachers decision-making power, and reward teachers for a job well done (Cansoy & Parlar, 2018). Each of these practices infiltrates a sense of accomplishment and professionalism in teachers and encourages them to tackle tasks, even when they may be difficult. Each of these steps must be taken to encourage teacher self-efficacy, while at the same time, principals need to also be role models of the behaviors that they want to see in teachers (Mehdinezhad & Mansouri, 2016). This is essential because when principals show the same enthusiasm that they want to see in teachers, “the teachers will be able to see the educational goals as the major objective and have big ambitions for optimization and high performance” (Mehdinzhad & Mansouri, 2016, p. 56).

Another major way that principals play part in teachers’ levels of self-efficacy is through the act of distributed leadership. Principals who distribute responsibilities to teachers and make them a vital part of decision-making processes are likely to see increases in teachers’ sense of
self-efficacy (Sun & Xia, 2018). Not only does a teacher’s involvement in leadership roles increase individual self-efficacy, but it also increases teachers’ job satisfaction rates and levels of commitment (Sun & Xia, 2018). By encouraging individual teachers to become vital components of the school culture, principals are also creating increased cohesion and what is known as collective efficacy amongst teaching staffs (Versalnd & Erickson, 2017).

It is a principal’s responsibility to create opportunities for teacher growth and collaboration so that the culture in the school becomes one that is focused on student achievement and goal achievement. Principals are leaders for these types of actions and set the tone for success. In a study by Versland and Erickson (2017), “Teachers reported that the principal’s efficacy beliefs influenced the decisions about the type of actions the principal chose to take to positively affect teaching efficacy and student achievement” (p. 14). This explains the importance of schools having principals that lead by example and that are committed to promoting a shared vision. Promoting positive self-efficacy beliefs is just one way that principals can reach teachers through an emotional avenue. However, principals need to also consider teachers’ motivational levels and what drives their staff to wanting success in the first place.

**Burnout.** When teachers begin to struggle with their self-efficacy and beliefs and become unmotivated in the work place, it can lead to what is known as burnout. However, when there is support, growth, and encouragement, teachers are likely to experience the opposite, and that is job satisfaction and fulfillment (Griffith, 2004). Burnout is described as “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with people in some capacity” (Maslach et al., 2001 and cited in Shen, McCaughtry, Martin, Garn, Kulik, & Fahlman, 2015, p. 520).
Lambersky (2016) did a study to understand the role that principals play in teacher burnout. Some reported that they were fearful of being blamed for student test scores which caused increased anxiety while others felt supported by their principal which caused them to feel a sense of relief in hard situations (Lambersky, 2016). This insinuates that principals can have very different effects on teachers depending upon their leadership styles and personality traits. “Furthermore, a participative, flexible and facilitative structure of administrator support, open communication channels, mutual understanding and a school atmosphere where participation is encouraged are seen among important leadership behaviours for promoting job satisfaction” (Cansoy & Parlar, 2018, p. 44).

Teaching is an emotionally demanding job. While trying to provide instruction, these educators are expected to adhere to students’ behavioral concerns, learning gaps, and emotional needs as well. Teachers are constantly juggling different aspects of their positions and are held to certain accountability standards, all while trying to maintain a certain balance in their classrooms. Research shows that if the sources of teachers’ burnout continues for an extended period of time, these emotions can actually begin to impact teachers’ overall health and wellbeing (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). Hakanen, Bakker, and Schaufeli (2006) stated that:

Teachers who are able to draw upon job resources like job control, supervisory support, and innovativeness may become more vigorous and dedicated, i.e., engaged in their work, and may feel stronger commitment. On the other hand, our findings show that lack of important job resources to meet the job demands may be associated with burnout, which may further undermine work engagement and lead to lower organizational commitment (p. 508).
This is an important quote to consider because of the different aspects of these findings that are within the controls of most principals. Principals play a pertinent role in providing teachers with certain resources and supports that they need to do their jobs effectively. As Hakanen, Bakker, and Schaufeli (2006) stated, teachers need these things to feel motivated and equipped to perform. This is one way that principals play such a pertinent role in directly, and in some ways, indirectly, impacting the extent to which teachers feel burned out.

The literature on teacher burnout suggests that there is a strict need for teachers to feel supported, both emotionally and corporately (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018). There is such a strong emphasis on the need for support because, according to McCormick and Barnett (2011), burnout is a psychological phenomenon. When principals are empathetic listeners, they have the potential to show teachers that they are supportive, caring, and interested in their feelings (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018) and this gives teachers the comfort they need to be able to release their emotions and find the tools, through collaboration, that they need to persist in their efforts.

Whether it is through collaboration, active listening, distributing leadership opportunities, promoting a shared vision, or providing professional development opportunities, principals are a major factor in the overall emotional state of teachers in their buildings. Berkovich and Eyal (2018) stated that principals are individuals that teachers actually want to turn to for emotional support when needed. However, it is the way that these leaders choose to show their support that can be the difference between a school that has motivated teachers or ones who are ready to give up.

**Transformational Leadership**

Urick (2016) explained that principal leadership style has an influence on the extent to which teachers and leaders will connect. When it specifically comes to periods of transition,
teachers may be forced to adhere to one leader’s preferences and then be expected to change practices to conform to another leader’s style; assuming that the new principal’s expectations are different. In research, there are three commonly referred-to leadership styles. The three styles are transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire, with transformational leadership always seeming to be the most effective (Ali & Waqar, 2013). Different styles of leadership held by diverse principals impacts teachers and students differently (Marks & Printy, 2003).

A great number of researchers have found that when principals specifically utilize a transformational leadership style, they are more likely to earn the trust, respect, and motivation of teachers (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017a; Berokovich & Eyal, 2017b; Goswami, Beehr, Grossenbacher, & Nair, 2016; Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Tesfaw, 2014; Griffith, 2004; Zheng, Yin, & Wang, 2018). These leaders are impactful because they tend to be more nurturing, aware of teachers’ needs, empowering, goal-oriented, and empathetic (Eyal & Roth, 2011). In other words, these leaders have a high regard for teachers’ emotions.

“Transformational leadership is a personalized leadership style that involves providing a vision and mission, creating high expectation, embracing values, and showing care and concern for the subordinates (Bass, 1985; Podsakoff et al., 1990 as cited in Goswami, et al., 2016, p. 1087). It is said that when a principal implements this style of leadership, that teachers become more engaged in their work, more motivated, encouraged, and hopeful (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017c). Leaders that exhibit a transformational style of leadership have an impact on teachers’ self-efficacy, burnout levels, and motivation and these supportive principals have a critical influence on teachers’ overall wellbeing in the workplace (Cansoy & Parlar, 2018; Tesfaw, 2014). Not only that, but these leaders also impact the way that teachers perform. In a study by
Finnigan (2010), it was found that when principals have strong instructional leadership and support teachers during times of change, teachers’ self-efficacy regarding their ability to perform and impact students increases.

Teachers also feel more empowered and effective when they are given opportunities to take part in a shared vision for the school (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). The more opportunities that they have to help in decision-making practices, the more likely they are to feel motivated and less burned out (Shepherd-Jones & Salisbury-Glennon, 2018). Lee and Nie (2017) found that teachers are psychologically empowered by leaders at different levels in the school building. Their study showed that teachers tend to look towards principals to promote a shared vision and build cohesive relationships because of their particular position and power (Lee & Nie, 2017); both of which are actions typically exhibited by a leader with a transformational style. Along with these characteristics is a need for principals to also be motivating in their oral communications with teachers as a means to create a climate that is productive and inspiring (Alqahtani, 2015). With these expectations placed upon principals, by teachers, it shows that divisions need to carefully consider the leadership style of principals and the impacts that they can have on teachers and students.

Summary

Julian Rotters (1966) Locus of Control Theory is the theoretical framework for this study which will be used to further understand teachers’ experiences with principal turnover. By utilizing this theory, more can be understood about the way that teachers experience principal turnover. Previous studies that utilized this theory explained the ways that teachers viewed phenomena and provided details about how they believed environmental factors played a key role or whether their own abilities and motivations took precedence. This study will use a similar
approach as LCT will be used to determine what factors related to principal turnover teachers believe are held within their own control or are mostly determined by their environment.

Current research studies express the importance of principals and the roles they play in determining the success of schools (Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Miller, 2013; Wills, 2016; Fuller, Hollingworth, & Pendola, 2017). Research also emphasizes a need for teachers to be able to establish healthy, trusting relationships with leaders in order to reach their full potential and successfully deliver instruction (Fackler & Malmberg, 2016; Rangel, 2018). Many of these studies explain the need for schools to have principals who utilize a transformational leadership style in order to preserve teachers’ passion, motivation, and self-efficacy for education (Cansoy & Parlar, 2018; Tesfaw, 2014). Unfortunately, to date, most studies have taken a quantitative, empirical stance in determining the impact that these relationships have on different facets of education (Rangel, 2018).

Most studies on the topic of principal turnover also highlight mostly negative impacts surrounding the phenomenon. However, none of these studies have considered teachers’ personal voices on the topic and do not take into account their personal experiences. Therefore, more research on this topic is needed to be able to understand the ways that turnover impacts a school’s culture and climate, a schools’ teachers, students, staff, and principals.

To delve deeper into teacher-leader relationships that are vital for school success, gathering as many perceptions of teachers’ experiences as possible is crucial. Teachers and leaders need to come together to ensure the success of students. Understanding how teachers view the impacts of principal turnover will provide a new in-depth of understanding of teacher beliefs about school environments and will help educators to prepare for tough transitions that
may take place amidst the various other battles that teachers are already facing on a day-to-day basis.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to gather understanding of teachers’ lived experiences working in schools that have had principal turnover. Julian Rotter’s (1966) locus of control theory was the theoretical foundation for this study and it suggested that teachers would either see the effects of principal turnover as something held within their own control or as mostly determined by environmental factors. Currently, research highlights many negative consequences related to principal turnover (Boyce & Bowers, 2016; Miller, 2013; Rangel, 2018; Wills, 2016), but there are studies that also found positives (DeAngelis & White, 2011; Herman et al., 2008). Teachers are the frontline of education, so their opinions surrounding school phenomena are pivotal. Surprisingly, their perceptions on the impacts of principal turnover have yet to be heard in the literature. Examining their experiences provided new understanding related to the overall phenomenon of principal turnover and its implications. It expanded knowledge held by upper administrators regarding ways to prepare for proper systems of support during times of leadership change.

This study gathered qualitative data through the use of interviews, focus groups, and written letters. Participants were teachers working in schools across the state of Virginia who have experienced principal turnover within the last two years. I analyzed the data using Moustakas’ (1994) four-step method, which includes: epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences. Chapter three highlights each of the following: research design, research questions, the participant selection process, settings, procedures for the study, the role of the researcher, data collection techniques, data analysis processes, trustworthiness, and a review of ethical considerations.
Design

For this qualitative study, I used a transcendental phenomenological design as defined by Moustakas (1994). A qualitative research method was most appropriate for this study because the goal was to get into the environment where teachers work and delve into their experiences in a personal fashion (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). The nature of this type of process provided deeper understanding of the perspectives held by teachers and the ways that they have experienced principal turnover. Currently, most research studies on the phenomenon of principal turnover have been designed with quantitative ideologies in mind. By taking a qualitative approach, this study added to the existing body of literature in a new way by using interviews, focus groups, and letters that provided in-depth information that had yet to be gathered about teachers’ lived experiences and offered new methods for analysis related to the phenomenon of principal turnover.

Creswell and Poth (2018) described qualitative research as the kind that seeks depth by communicating directly with research participants and studying their perceptions, opinions, actions, and beliefs. Moustakas (1994), a psychologist who has been known for his contribution to phenomenological qualitative research, explained that phenomenological qualitative research, in particular, is best for researchers who wish to capture the essences of participants’ lived experiences. Moustakas (1994) provided enriched perspectives on the process of conducting a phenomenology and specifically explained the step-by-step process for ethically conducting a transcendental phenomenology.

A transcendental phenomenological design involves analyzing the words of participants and deducing statements into patterns or themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Moustakas, 1994). Creswell and Poth (2018) further explained that in transcendental phenomenological studies,
after the formation of such patterns and themes, researchers can begin to develop textural and structural descriptions in order to provide information about what participants may have experienced and how they experienced it. The transcendental phenomenological design was best suited for this study because of it gathers rich, thick descriptions and their nature to not just get to know participants, but to gather the overall essences and meanings of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Other research designs were not chosen because they would not have focused specifically on how teachers have experienced principal turnover and would not have produced data that had the potential to enlighten educators on the in-depth meanings and essences behind teachers’ experiences with the phenomenon of principal turnover.

**Research Questions**

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

Central Research Question: How do teachers describe their lived experiences working in schools that have had principal turnover?

Sub-Question 1: How do teachers describe the influences that principal turnover has on student achievement in the classroom?

Sub-Question 2: How do teachers describe ways that the school climate and culture are affected by principal turnover?

Sub-Question 3: How do teachers describe their emotional experience with principal turnover?

Sub-Question 4: When there has been a principal turnover, how do teachers describe their locus of control?
Setting

Since the focus of this study was on teachers who have experienced principal turnover within the last two years, it was necessary to locate schools that had had such a change. After doing so, I identified teachers who were employed at these schools before the turnover happened and after their new principal arrived. The sites for data collection included multiple schools across the Commonwealth of Virginia who had experienced this phenomenon. Since I live in the state of Virginia, I chose to select participants from this geographical location for convenience and ease of travel. Also, Virginia has many diverse school divisions in various urban, suburban, and rural districts that participants could be drawn from.

According to the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) (2017), Virginia is faced with a diversity shortage, which is “compounded by the declining teacher pipeline and increasingly diverse student population. Although this is a national trend, Virginia has a greater disparity than [their] regional counterparts…” (VDOE, 2017, p. 8). During the 2014-2015 school year, Virginia’s teacher demographics by race were: 78.6% White, 11.3% Black, and 2.0% Hispanic (VDOE, 2017). According to a survey by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (n.d.) for the 2011-2012 school year, teachers’ ages in Virginia were: less than 30 years old – 13.8%, 30 to 49 year’s old – 50.4%, 50 to 54 years old – 15%, and 55 and up – 20.8%. In the same survey, NCES (n.d.) reported that 21% of Virginia’s teachers were male and 79% were female.

The average turnover rate for Virginia’s public-school teachers during the 2016-2017 school year was 10.2%, which was “more than two percentage points higher than the national average (8%)” (VDOE, 2017, p. 10). VDOE (2017) also noted that:
In 19 divisions, teacher turnover was particularly acute, exceeding 30%. In addition to exacerbating teacher shortages, high turnover rates also undermined stability for students, lead to more inexperienced teachers being hired to replace those leaving and resulted in additional training and productivity costs for schools. (p. 10)

The State Committee on Higher Education of Virginia (SCHEV) conducted an online survey with its workgroup members to study areas of concern related to the teacher shortage crisis in Virginia (VDOE, 2017). Based on this survey, the areas of concern were related to pathways, transition/induction, compensation, school climate, and retention (VDOE, 2017). I expanded and addressed the school climate and retention-related concerns and addressed them through the approaches I took with this study.

**Participants**

Participants for this study were teachers who had experienced principal turnover within the past two years. I chose to use a criterion sampling technique to select participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) described criterion sampling as a technique that assists researchers in carefully choosing participants who meet the criteria of having experienced a certain phenomenon. I used a screening survey to find participants who had been at their schools for at least two years and were at their schools before, during, and after a change in principal. This type of selection process was beneficial for me, as a researcher who wanted to gather information-rich data from a certain population of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A simple Google search with these words, “new principals schools Virginia” provided results with multiple schools in Virginia that posted on their web pages the names of newly hired principals for the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 school years. Utilizing this “Google search” process, I collected the names of as many schools in Virginia as possible so that I could have a
good base to begin selecting a variety of school divisions to reach out to. I then found out who were the division superintendents in these districts and began reaching out for approvals. In total, I was been able to secure permission letters from four division superintendents. As I moved forward, I was able to find principals’ names on school websites, and I then reached out to those individuals one by one or with the help of personnel in the school divisions. As I began reaching out via email to ask for permission to meet with teachers in their buildings, I explained that I was looking for teachers who were employed before and during the occurrence of a principal turnover. From there, I was able to find a diverse participant group of 11 teachers that had experienced the phenomenon of principal turnover. Also, to assist in the recruitment of participants, I used snowball sampling (Patton, 2015) and got in touch with additional teachers who met my criteria.

**Procedures**

Before I began my study, I was able to take all the necessary steps to have experts review all of the data collection tools I planned to use for my study. I was able to get two experts in the field to do a review. Both individuals held doctoral degrees and had completed their own qualitative studies in the field of education. Both also had continued to work as professionals in public school systems with their degrees. Their feedback was taken into consideration and adjustments were made as deemed appropriate by me and my chair.

After I acquired approval to conduct research through IRB, I conducted a pilot study of interview and focus-group questions, as well as the procedures for the written letters, to ensure the appropriateness of questions and methods. A convenience group of professionals in the field who were not associated with the actual research project were used. All recommendations and suggestions were taken into consideration, and adjustments were made accordingly.
I then began the process of participant data collection. First, I e-mailed principals at each school to explain my study’s importance and purpose. I also inquired about possible teacher-participants who were at their schools before and during their succession as principal. Then, principals assisted me by sending out my recruitment letter (Appendix B), which included a link to a Google Form screening survey to all of their teachers. For the teachers who completed the screening survey, met the criteria, and checked that they were willing to participate, I emailed them a welcome letter (Appendix D) along with a consent form (Appendix E). The welcome letter gave them an opportunity to let me know their preferred date for and method of interviewing (face-to-face or electronic). I followed this process until I reached a confirmed sample of 11 participants.

As I gathered consent forms, I began calling or visiting teachers to conduct one-on-one interviews. Interviews were held one at a time until all were complete or until data saturation had been reached (Patton, 2015); however, I was sure to conduct no fewer than 10. All interviewees were given an opportunity to join a focus group that was at a time most convenient for them. During the focus groups, I facilitated, and the participants discussed, a series of questions. The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed by me. A laptop was used as the primary recording device and a cellphone and iPad were used as secondary devices. Participants had an opportunity to review their transcripts and check them for accuracy as per member-checking protocol (Patton, 2015). Recordings and researcher notes taken during the focus groups were kept secure on password-protected electronic devices. After participants had completed their interview and focus group sessions, they were asked, as a final task, that they write a letter to an imaginary teacher who was about to experience principal turnover. Participant letters were sent to my e-mail address, which is password protected. No hard copies were made. Throughout each
phase of the data collection I kept a reflexive journal of my thoughts (Appendix I). Only a small sample of the journal has been attached in Appendix I due to its length and the confidential information within.

**The Researcher’s Role**

In the past five years, the school where I am currently employed has had to transition through five different principals. As a school counselor in the building, I am a sort of “dumping ground” for emotional students as well as teachers. My experiences have shown me that different teachers adapt to changes in leadership very differently. Informally witnessing the various perspectives of teachers regarding principal turnover gave me the insight necessary for concluding that teachers have a variety of opinions about what happens to the school environment when new principals take charge.

The use of a transcendental phenomenology approach was especially crucial for this study as it assisted me in carefully setting aside my perspectives and experiences in order to recognize pure patterns that resulted from data collection. As the human instrument for this study, I attempted to set myself apart from all the participants before data collection took place so that I did not bring in preconceived judgments or thoughts. To do so, I followed the guidelines set by Moustakas (1994) for the process of *epoche*.

Creswell and Poth's (2018) definition of epistemological assumption was "subjective evidence is assembled on individual views" (p. 20). This description emphasizes the need for getting as close to subjects as possible in order to glean understanding from their lived experiences. It also noted the importance of a researcher’s need to set aside personal objectives so that fresh perspectives can be gained through the participants (Patton, 2015). However, Moustakas (1994) observed that, regardless of how hard a researcher attempts to completely set
aside all bias when gathering data, it is impossible to do so. In fact, researcher bias is just as
important to the study participants’ accounts of their own experiences (Moustakas, 1994). As the
human instrument for this study (Patton, 2015), I followed Moustakas (1994) closely and took
steps to ensure that I had a clear understanding of my own bias before attempting to understand
the perspectives of others. I took into consideration the role that my own bias played in the
construction of research but also recalled the epistemological need to get as close to participants
as possible (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

My epistemological assumption for this study was consistent with a constructivist
approach. As Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) stated:

Educational researchers who subscribe to this constructivist position believe that
scientific inquiry must focus on the study of multiple social realities, that is, the different
realities created by different individuals as they interact in a social environment. (p. 22)

The philosophical assumptions that I held throughout this study aligned with Julian Rotter’s
(1966) locus of control theory and the constructivist position. I went into the process believing
that teachers would recollect their experiences differently based on how they constructed and felt
they had control over their environments.

Mojtahed et al. (2014) wrote, "in order to access and achieve an understanding about
human perceptions, one of the main requirements of the constructivist approach is the
establishment of a reciprocal and communicational ground between the research project
participants and researchers in the co-construction of meaning" (p. 87). They further explain that
researchers should remain as open-ended as possible during questioning and allow participants to
steer conversations to get a full glimpse of their lived experiences (Mojtahed et al., 2014). I
utilized a constructivist approach for this study through the use of semi-structured interviews,
which included questions that not only started conversations but encouraged teachers to speak freely on things that may have come to mind during our dialogue. I acted as a facilitator of sorts and kept the conversation on topic, while also trying to set myself aside enough to allow participants to expand on topics they felt were especially important.

**Data Collection**

A significant component of transcendental phenomenology is the process of *epoche* and bracketing, which are necessary for the researcher to be able to set aside biases for the sake of gathering accurate, pure data (Moustakas, 1994). Patton (2015) explained that *epoche* assists the researcher in setting aside preconceived ideas and judgments to see participants’ experiences with a clear conscience. Bracketing refers to a researcher’s attempt to take the data out of the experimental world and to scrutinize the data while taking notice of underlying themes and patterns (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process of *epoche* is what I did first and continued to do throughout the entire data collection process. I kept a reflexive journal of my thoughts and emotions to refer back to from the beginning to the end.

As noted, continuing with the framework of a transcendental phenomenological study, I collected data through interviews, focus groups, and participant letters in order to delve into teachers’ thoughts and lived experiences. I used teachers in the state of Virginia who have experienced principal turnover within the last two years as participants. The goal of this research was to understand teachers’ experiences with principal turnover and how they believe that such a change in leadership has an influence on students, school culture and climate, and their own self-efficacy, emotions, and working conditions. I used criterion sampling as the process for finding participants who had experienced the phenomenon and worked to build a diverse representative sample.
After I was granted IRB approval through Liberty University, I completed a pilot study of all data collection tools. Then, once that was completed, I began the process of conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups. As interviews and focus groups were completed, I asked participants to compose their written letters. I kept an audit trail (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of each step of the data collection process. I used memoing to collect thoughts while writing and reading the interview and focus group transcriptions along with the participants’ letters and my own journal. The purpose of using these multiple methods of data collection was to provide is data triangulation to increase the validity of the data (Patton, 2015).

**Interviews**

Moustakas (1994) explained the importance of utilizing interviews in qualitative research for the purpose of gathering participants’ lived experiences in their own words. My interviews with the 11 teacher volunteers were semi-structured one-on-one interviews in a semi-structured format. The use of open-ended questions allowed for optimum feedback from the research participants. As I noted above, prior to the submission of my IRB application, I completed an expert review of all questions to ensure face and content validity. As a first step after receiving IRB approval, I utilized trusted teacher colleagues to pilot all of my data collection methods and check for appropriateness (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). From the pilot study, I received feedback as to whether certain words or statements should be added or changed. I used research questions as a formal guide while simultaneously using probing techniques if the need arose to gain pertinent, useful information (Seidman, 2012).

I audio recorded and transcribed the formal interviews and took notes during each (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). I documented information that I thought may have been necessary to remember when interpreting the data. Interviews lasted anywhere from 30-60 minutes each, and
I recorded the audio on a password-protected laptop computer. I used memoing to track thoughts during the reading of interview transcriptions and Moustakas’ (1994) four-step process as a guide for analyzing interview and focus group data.

For the one-on-one interviews, I asked questions that attempted to capture teachers’ lived experiences with principal turnover. The open-ended questions I asked were as follows:

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions (Appendix F)

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself, and what it’s like working at your school.
2. Describe your experience working in a school that has had principal turnover.
3. Describe the ways that your students’ learning environments have been impacted due to a change in leadership.
4. Describe how this relates to impacts on student achievement.
5. Describe the nature of your working conditions during principal turnover.
6. Describe the ways that you believe principal turnover has impacted your school’s culture and climate.
7. To what degree do you feel that you are in control of what happens to students during principal turnover?
8. To what degree do you feel that you are in control of what happens to your school’s culture and climate during principal turnover?
9. To what degree do you feel that you are in control of what happens to you during principal turnover?
10. Describe the emotions you had when you found out that your school would be getting a new principal.
11. Describe any other emotional experiences you’ve had related to principal turnover.
12. Describe what you believe would be an ideal relationship between you and your new principal.

13. What factors do you believe help lead to the establishment of trust between yourself and a principal?

14. To what extent do you feel that a change in leadership impacts your self-efficacy as a teacher?

15. What other ways do you feel that principal turnover has impacted you as a teacher?

16. How has principal turnover influenced your thoughts about wanting to stay or leave your school?

17. What else should I know regarding your experience living through principal turnover?

Questions one and two were very broad, open-ended questions that I used to get the participant thinking in a way that would create positive, constructive rapport (Seidman, 2013). Beginning with very general questions assisted the participant in sharing and created an opportunity to begin brainstorming the nature of the phenomenon that was going to be discussed in more depth with subsequent questions. These first two questions related to this study’s central question, “How do teachers describe their lived experiences working in schools that have had principal turnover?”

Research presents different ideas about why there are decreases in student achievement during times of principal turnover (Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Wills, 2016). Some studies found that a principal’s fit within the school and his or her experience impacted student achievement (Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Wills, 2016). Others explain that student achievement rates during principal turnover could have something to do with underlying factors impacting a school’s culture and climate (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). Questions 3 and 4 asked teachers to report
their perceptions of how principal turnover impacts student learning and achievement from their vantage points and addressed research sub-question 1: “How do teachers describe influences that principal turnover has on student achievement?”

Questions five and six were focused on teachers’ descriptions of their work environments and factors related to the school’s culture and climate. Principals play a major role in establishing a school’s culture and climate (Bellibas, 2015). There are trends in research that show a decrease in school climate during times of principal turnover (Hanselman, 2016; Rangel, 2018). These two questions sought to gather teachers’ perceptions of their work environments during times of principal turnover. These questions also addressed this study’s second research sub-question, which stated, “How do teachers describe ways that school climate and culture are influenced by principal turnover?”

Questions seven through nine were directly related to the study’s theoretical framework and Julian Rotter’s (1996) locus of control theory. Rubin and Rubin (2012) advised that researchers not speak specifically about a theory to interviewees. Instead, researchers should ask questions about “the behaviors or actions implied by the theory” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 134). These three questions attempted to gauge teachers’ beliefs about their locus of control as it related to their own positions, students, and their schools’ cultures and climates during principal transitions. The study’s sub-question, which asked, “How do teachers describe their locus of control regarding principal turnover,” was addressed through asking these questions.

Lastly, questions 10-17 were aimed at gathering teachers’ emotional experiences with principal turnover. Specifically, questions 10 and 11 focused on teachers’ descriptions of emotions they had related to the transition and how they felt before and after the leadership change. Questions 12 and 13 inquired specifically about whether or not teachers felt that they
had a trusting relationship with their new principals. Research indicates that it takes time and multiple social exchanges before trust is built (Northfield, 2014). Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) also pointed out that consistent leadership behaviors strengthen the establishment of trust between teachers and principals. Questions 12 and 13 engaged conversation about how teachers view their relationships with their principals, and what factors they take into consideration when determining whether or not they can trust their new leaders.

Pas, Bradshaw, and Hershfeldt (2012) found that staff relationships impact teacher self-efficacy, and Urick (2016) highlighted the ways that principals also impact teachers’ retention decisions. Therefore, questions 14-16 specifically sought to understand how teachers believed a change in leadership has impacted their self-efficacy, and how their experiences with principal turnover has influenced their retention decisions. All questions 10-17 were aimed at answering the research sub-question: “How do teachers describe their emotional experiences with principal turnover?”

**Online Focus Groups/“Small Group Discussions”**

Not only does Moustakas (1994) view interviews as necessary for qualitative data collection, he also recommends utilizing focus groups for transcendental phenomenological studies. Krueger and Casey (2014) explained that focus groups are most effective when participants feel comfortable. They also reported that, in the field, referring to focus groups as “small group discussions” eases participants’ minds, “so the process doesn’t seem intimidating or like a big mystery to people” (p. 4). Therefore, in this study, when asking participants to join, I referred to the focus group as a “small group discussion,” so that I could set a constructive tone and have an inviting and comfortable process. The act of using small group discussions for data collection offered additional perspectives from teachers. It also provided a type of data that,
according to research, surfaces best when studying attitudes, behaviors, and dialogue of group members that are working together (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Krueger & Casey, 2014).

Focus groups were conducted after all interviews had been completed and on dates that were most convenient for participants. With the nature of participants’ differences in experiences, the small group discussions provided diverse, rich data that was created through dialogue shared between participants (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

The setting for the groups took place through the use of the online WebEx system (Krueger & Casey, 2014) and the use of FaceTime. Creswell and Poth (2018) and Krueger and Casey (2014) both explained that limitations to online focus groups were the failure to appropriately use technology and the lack of personal interactions. However, because this research sought to gather the thoughts and perspectives of an audience that was diverse and spread out geographically, these online systems were the most appropriate.

In the small group discussions, I asked a series of questions and allowed time for discussion after each question. Participants were told ahead of time to set aside about 90 minutes for group discussion. I outlined expectations for participation in a consent form that participants signed before the start of the online discussions. Following the advice of Krueger and Casey (2014), I attempted to make the process as easy, inviting, and enjoyable as possible to promote a free-flow of thoughts between participants. I described precisely expectations before the start of the first discussion to eliminate any potential guess-work and to help participants feel comfortable. Questions that were utilized for group discussions were:

Standardized Open-Ended Small Group Discussion Questions (Appendix G)

1. Describe your experiences with principal turnover.

2. In what ways does principal turnover impact student achievement?
3. How long do you think it takes for teachers to build trustworthy relationships with new principals? Why?

4. What emotions have you experienced regarding principal turnover?

5. How did your emotions change throughout each phase of the principal transition (before, during, and after)?

6. In what ways do you control the effects of principal turnover?

7. In what ways are the effects of principal turnover out of your control?

8. How does principal turnover impact a teacher’s self-efficacy?

9. Is there anything else that you would like to share with this group about principal turnover that hasn’t already been discussed?

Question one began the online discussion group process by asking a non-threatening question to help build rapport amongst participants (Seidman, 2013). This question was also vague enough to allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words and expand on what their experiences meant to them without any specifications (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Question two sought to build dialogue centered on teachers’ beliefs about the ways that principal turnover has impacted student achievement, which, as noted above, has been shown to decrease as a result of the phenomenon (Miller, 2013). Questions three through five took an emotional approach similar to that of the one-on-one interviews. Patton (2015) suggested that, when trying to gauge participants’ emotions, it is better to have them describe their emotions rather than asking how they “feel.” These three questions provided insight into teachers’ emotions regarding the establishment of trust with principals and their personal emotions that may have been connected to the phenomenon. Questions six and seven addressed Julian Rotter’s (1966) locus of control theory, and question eight addressed teachers’ beliefs about their self-efficacy, which can
change depending upon a leaders’ systems of support (Pas, Bradshaw, & Hershfeldt, 2012). Question nine gave participants an opportunity to discuss anything that was not previously asked or discussed and opened the door for any other thoughts or experiences that they wanted to share.

**Participant Letters**

In conjunction with the interviews and focus groups, I used a third data collection method that fell under Moustakas’ (1944) description of document analysis – participant letters. To have teachers relive their experiences with principal turnover, I asked them to compose a letter to an imaginary teacher who was experiencing principal turnover. The participants had to explain, in detail, the emotions they felt and the impact they saw in relation to student achievement and school culture and climate (Appendix H).

**Data Analysis**

The first data analysis procedure I performed was the process of bracketing, which is pivotal in transcendental phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). This process allowed me to understand what my personal biases were before beginning the data collection process. Bracketing also ensured that I continued to keep bias out of the data as I started to perform the different data collection techniques. Moustakas (1994) explained that this is a necessary step in qualitative, phenomenological work because it sets aside preconceived notions and judgments and allows more purified, carefully-analyzed data to surface. Through the use of a reflexive journal, I tracked these thoughts and experiences from beginning to end.

I had gathered information-rich data through interviews, focus groups, and letters. These three data collection methods provided me with an opportunity to triangulate the data, which led to a more detailed and appropriate analysis. Triangulation also increased the credibility in my findings.
For each of these data collection methods, I utilized Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenological model, which says that researchers must analyze data in four stages: *epoche*, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences.

**Epoche**

The first step, *epoche*, is described as “a preparation for deriving new knowledge but also as an experience in itself, a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84). This process required that I be entirely honest with myself and identify my biases based on previous experiences. I documented what these biases were so as to remind myself throughout the entire data collection process. My biases were recorded on my password protected computer. I continued to track my thoughts and biases throughout the entire dissertation journey. A sample of these thoughts have been placed into an appendix of my dissertation (Appendix I). The entire journal was not attached due to its length of the journal and the confidential information within.

**Phenomenological reduction**

The second step in Moustakas’ (1994) four-step process is phenomenological reduction. For this step, researchers are to carefully try to understand personal biases and view the data without judgment. Doing this required reading, rereading, and rereading another time the written transcriptions. I read through the transcriptions, notes, and memos several times, each time attempting to have a new perspective and vantage point. As a part of the phenomenological reduction process, I made sure to also, “describe in textural language” what I saw and felt during my experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). When I started analyzing transcriptions, all the words and statements from participants held equal value (Moustakas, 1994). However, as I became more familiar with the data, I began to set apart only those statements that were relevant to the
topic and the ones that were unrepetitive. This process was referred to as horizontalization by Moustakas (1994). The horizons, as Moustakas (1994) calls them, were the pieces I used to begin to develop the data into themes.

**Imaginative variation**

The third step in Moustakas’ process was the imaginative variation, which leads a researcher towards developing meaning. Moustakas (1994) explained that imaginative variation is the beginning process of developing themes through collected data. This step required my intuition and an understanding that there were going to be multiple possibilities for pattern development. It also required respect for the structures that led to the development of these patterns (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell and Poth (2018) described this process as coding. After developing these themes in the data, I moved to the fourth step – synthesis of meanings and essences.

**Synthesis of meanings and essences**

Moustakas (1994) defines this step as the gathering of different experiences and combining them to describe the essence of a particular phenomenon. However, as Moustakas (1994) explained, “the essences of an experience are never totally exhausted,” so it was vital to note that these perceptions could change from one study to the next (p. 100). The meanings and essences that were drawn from this research will be discussed and thoroughly explained in later chapters.

I utilized each step of Moustakas (1994) analysis process as I interviewed, transcribed, read, and observed. I set my own biases aside to try to fully grasp new realities through the experiences of others. Through the transcriptions of interviews, the review of focus group conversations, and the composition of letters by participants, I developed an understanding of
what was said and why. After this, I began to uncover patterns and themes in the data that helped provide perspective on the phenomenon of principal turnover and how teachers perceive it. To keep track of these patterns and the themes as they developed, I utilized the coding software NVivo 12, which helped me to stay organized and keep track of what I had already synthesized.

**Trustworthiness**

The nature of qualitative inquiry brings scrutiny from scholars regarding its validity, credibility, and reliability. For this reason, it is crucial that qualitative researchers explicitly explain steps for ensuring trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained:

The basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple: How can an inquirer persuade his audience (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of? What arguments can be mounted, what criteria invoked, what questions asked, that would be persuasive on this issue? (p. 290).

For the naturalistic inquirer, Lincoln and Guba (1985) described four criteria for establishing this type of trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. All four steps, and the plan I followed to establish each, are explained in further detail below.

**Credibility**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that there are several steps a researcher can take for increasing the credibility of findings. For this study, I used member checking to increase data credibility. Patton (2015) explained that member checking involves “verifying data, findings, and interpretations with the participants in the study” even after data collection has ended (p. 523). If further clarifications were needed, I went back and contacted participants and asked them to clarify so that any potential gaps could be filled (Patton, 2015). Triangulation also took place for
each piece of data. Patton (2015) described the process of triangulation as one that seeks to compare the consistency of data across different platforms and timeframes. This step can help a researcher to define any differences in perspectives presented amongst different data sources, which generate questions as to why those differences have been represented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015).

**Dependability and Confirmability**

I took detailed notes during all data collection processes and audio recorded all meetings. All meetings, both electronic and face-to-face, were also audio recorded. I also kept an audit trail to outline all of the processes from beginning to end and described, “small analytic leaps contributing to the analysis as whole” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261). Direct quotes from participants were used as I presented the findings of the study in chapters four and five in order to give participants a more profound voice in the study and to confirm the findings. Finally, I made sure to have colleagues that were experienced with qualitative research to review my data and to act as a “devil’s advocate…[to] keep the researcher honest” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261) which was the basis for a peer review process.

**Transferability**

I ensured transferability by outlining assumptions that I had at the beginning and went through a process of bracketing them to eliminate as much potential bias as possible through the use of reflexive journaling. In the wisdom of Moustakas (1994), motives towards gaining a clear conscious and fresh mind about the phenomenon took place. The process was not to forget my own experiences, but instead, to recognize them and to understand how they may impact my interpretations of the research (Moustakas, 1994). “Moustakas admits that this state is seldom perfectly achieved,” but it was a pivotal first step when attempting to collect transferable,
trustworthy data (Creswell & Poth, 2018, 76). I also provided thick, rich descriptions so that readers will be able to transfer the material to other studies.

**Ethical Considerations**

There are several ethical considerations that I made before conducting this research. First and foremost, I obtained IRB approval through Liberty University before any data collection began. I also gave participants a consent form that explained the data collection process and any potential risks for harm. The consent form explained that at no time were participants forced to follow through with their interviews, focus groups, or letters. It also explained that I would respectfully excuse them at any time if they had wish to withdraw. I made it a priority to provide respect and empathy to participants during all the data collection processes. I explained confidentiality and its limitations to participants and kept all interview notes, focus group notes, and written letters on a password-protected laptop. I only shared confidential information with committee members and used pseudonyms in all data reporting. Pseudonyms were not only used for participants’ names but also for settings, to ensure confidentiality. I created a codebook with participant and site names and kept a record of which pseudonyms were assigned to whom. This information was kept on a password-protected laptop computer. I will be keeping all data and information for three years after the completion of my doctoral journey, and all records will then be permanently deleted.

**Summary**

This study sought to understand teachers’ lived experiences working in schools that have had principal turnover. Through transcendental phenomenological data collection methods, I gathered data from interviews, focus groups, and letters from Virginia teachers in order to understand their lived experiences. I analyzed data through Moustakas’ (1994) four-step process
to ensure data trustworthiness. I was careful to complete each task in an ethical manner and took proper steps to reduce any risk for potential harm.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand teachers’ lived experiences working in schools that have been influenced by principal turnover. This chapter provides background information about each individual that participated in this study, and outlines their unique thoughts and experiences related to principal turnover. The results of the data that was gathered from these participants is presented in themes. Participants’ voices are heard in this chapter through the use of direct quotes that were gathered during interviews, focus groups, and letters. Their words are used in order to provide insight into the research questions that this study sought to answer. All quotes from participants are presented verbatim, which includes verbal ticks and grammatical errors in speech and writing to more accurately depict participants’ voices. This chapter concludes with a summary of all the data that was collected and how this data aligns with the study’s central, and subsequent research questions.

Participants

Considering that this study sought to understand teachers’ experiences with principal turnover, the main criteria for being a participant was that teachers had at least 2 years’ experience and had been in a school that had a change in leadership. I was able to find 11 participants who met these criteria and who were willing to participate in the study. Most of the participants were recruited through collaboration with principals in districts where I had permission to conduct research. However, some participants were gathered through snowball sampling as well. Collectively, the participants ranged widely in years’ experience, subject area, grade-level taught, and age. Table 1 displays participants’ demographic information.
**Table 1**

*Participants’ Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Range of Years’ Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Content Area</th>
<th>Career Switcher Teacher</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
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<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
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<td>15-20 years</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
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<td>5-10 years</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>5-10 years</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Elective Course</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassidy</td>
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<td>15-20 years</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
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<tr>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>25-30 years</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Alice**

Alice was a young teacher with 4 years’ experience. For all 4 years, she has been teaching math at the same high school to students in various grade levels. When speaking about her experiences so far with teaching, she sounded enthusiastic about what she does and expressed a deep love for her students. She talked about the ways that she goes above and beyond her normal duties to show that love to her students by attending their games, building relationships with them, and holding them to a higher standard than what others may do.

During these first four years of Alice’s teaching career, she had worked under 3 different principals and 5 assistant principals. When talking about the turnovers that she, her colleagues, and her students have experienced, there was concern in her voice. One of her biggest concerns
with the amount of changes that her school has experienced and the inconsistency that stems as a result of turnover. She stated that for students,

> They need the consistency. They need someone that is going to be there every day for them because mostly at home, they don’t have somebody there for them every day. So, when the principals change, or when their teachers change, then they’re just going to sit there and say, well I’m going to see what I can get away with (personal communication, July 18, 2019).

She went on to explain how this contributes to students exhibiting behavioral issues and missing time out of class, which affects them academically.

> Even though Alice has only been at her school for 4 years, she stated that essentially all of the staff at her school was brand new from when she started. She personally believed that the change in principals had much to do with the high rate of turnover because teachers were tired of having to adapt to so many different principals’ expectations. Having to continuously adapt to new principals was something that she described as having a negative effect on school culture and climate because,

> You almost become, like in limbo, because you’re not quite sure what to expect, you’re not quite sure what they expect from you, because what one principal wants the other one basically just looks at you and says, “why are you doing that?” (personal communication, July 18, 2019).

She laughed when talking about how new principals have tried to come in and change things that have been done the same way for many years; insinuating that change is extremely difficult and that teachers are resistant to certain changes. Laughing, she stated, “you can try to change that,
but it’s not going to work. But you can try! I’ll let you try [laughing]” (personal communication, July 18, 2019).

Throughout her interview, she continued to express how important communication and consistency are to her, her colleagues, and her students. She explained that having a principal who is professional, visible, and an active listener are her ideal traits in a leader. Being able to go to someone when you need something, without being afraid or feeling that they will not care, were also extremely important to her. It is for these reasons that principal turnover has been difficult for her because the relationship she has with a principal is very important.

Alice did, however, explain that, regardless of who is or is not in leadership, she felt confident in her abilities to teach her students and expressed a sense of strong self-efficacy. She stated that,

At the end of the day, I know what I need to do. So once my door closes or even if it's wide open and they can hear me yelling at the kids all the way down the hallway, I know what I need to do, and I know how to get the kids where they need to be and what needs to happen and I know what I'm willing to do to get them there and I know what I'm not willing to do, [] so whether a new person comes in or the same person stays, I’m essentially going to do what I need to do (personal communication, July 18, 2019).

Anna

Anna was a career-switcher teacher who, before starting in the classroom, had 9 years of experience in a career outside of education. Since making the switch, she has completed 16 years as a classroom teacher and, for the past two years, has served as an intervention specialist for her school. She expanded on the experiences she’s had at her school for the past 18 years. One of the first memories she had was walking into a school with a principal who had been there for over a
decade. Anna explained that, when she walked into the school, she walked into a “very stable” situation (personal communication, August 25, 2019). She described this environment by saying,

You felt like you kind of knew what was expected, and once you knew after the first year or during the course of year, you began to understand what she expected, and what she wanted, and when you came back each year you weren't learning that all over again, and you didn't feel like you were starting everything all over again (personal communication, August 25, 2019).

She went on to explain that since then, they have had several principals to come and go. What has been the most stressful for Anna, is that many of the new principals have come in with their own initiatives, which has made it hard for teachers, students, and staff to adjust year after year. The impact that Anna has seen take place as a result of principal turnover has been increases in teacher turnover, struggles in meeting state accreditation, and stress on the students who have also been expected to adapt to various changes. She told a story about how, at one of their graduations, one of the student speakers talked about how much change their student body had experienced; and it was in this moment that Anna realized that the students, too, had been feeling the same things as the teachers.

In talking about her students’ adjustments to new principals, she stated that she has seen the way that students “test” new principals, similar to the way they test new teachers. “We actually see it, you see the kids, they test the person the same way they test a new teacher” (personal communication, August 25, 2019). She further said that, with these new principals, students are looking to see if the new person will have consistency and follow through. If they do not, the students feel that they get to be in charge and then disrespect in the classroom and in the hallways takes off (personal communication, August 25, 2019).
When asking Anna about how principal turnover has influenced her thoughts about wanting to stay at, or leave, her current school, she explained that the constant turnover has made it very difficult to stay. She noted this was true, especially with “all of the other stress that comes along with being a teacher” (personal communication, August 25, 2019). However, she attributed her dedication to her school to the relationships that she has been able to build with her colleagues along the way. She stated that there has been a core group of teachers who have managed to stick together for a long time, and because of them, she continues to press on.

Brittany

Brittany is a middle school English teacher with 7 years’ experience. She has been at her same school throughout her entire teaching career. In the years that she has been at her school, the longest amount of time that a principal has stayed has been three years. Aside from that one principal, all other principals have come and gone almost every single year. She said that one of the things that has helped her school transition through so many principals has been the fact that the assistant principal has stayed. In talking about her most recent change in principal, she stated:

Most of the things that our last principal did she handed it on. So, we have the same handbook, and I think that our assistant principal has told our new principal some of the things that were in place, and he decided to keep some, and the majority of them he did keep (personal communication, October 2, 2019).

Regardless of the changes that she has experienced from principal turnover, Brittany explained that she enjoys working at her school and feels that she gets paid well, which is a big perk for her (personal communication, October 2, 2019). One of the only concerns that she spoke about was the discipline issues they have at her school and the ways that principals have handled them over the years. She felt that she could see a pattern in the principals she has had and stated,
“I’ve noticed most of the time that the males are more-so on discipline and the females are kind of more lax towards discipline. I like the ones who actually take a firm stand for discipline” (personal communication, October 2, 2019). This was a major concern of hers, one that she shed light on throughout her interview.

Other concerns that Brittany mentioned when talking about transitioning between principals was that some principals come in with a vision and want to implement their own ideas without asking for the teachers’ opinions or taking time to get to know the students and staff first. She said some of the biggest changes that she’s seen principals make are related to professional development mandates, meeting times (during school or after school), and teacher duties. However, even though she feels that these changes are not productive or beneficial, she said that, personally, she does not feel that principal turnover has an effect on her.

Brittany is a teacher who has a strong self-efficacy. She made several statements that made it obvious how she feels about what goes on inside and outside of her classroom. Brittany felt that she is the one responsible for her effectiveness as a teacher, success of her students, and her happiness in the workplace. She stated that,

I feel like I’m pretty much in control of what happens to me because I run my classroom the same way no matter what principal we have and I do my job. So, I'm not really worried about the different principals; so I feel like I'm in control of myself (personal communication, October 2, 2019).

Brittany also stated that she can tell right away if a principal is coming into her school to “pad a resume” or use the school as a career stepping-stone (personal communication, October 2, 2019) because they come in and immediately start making changes. However, she said that when she meets a new principal who she feels will be good at relationship building, they tend to have
laid-back, open-minded personalities and seem to be willing to listen to the teachers who have been there longer. She mentioned that she particularly likes it when principals come in and she feels comfortable talking with them. (personal communication, October 2, 2019). These types of principals help her feel more at ease, which has led to more supportive, trusting working relationships. Brittany said that she had experienced both types of principals in her time at her school, and because of this, there have been equal amounts of times that she’s been glad to see principals leave as well as sad to see them go.

**Cassandra**

Cassandra was another career-switcher teacher who has been in education for less than ten years. The high school where she teaches is the same one that she graduated from, and it has given her a great sense of pride to be able to give back to her community. Cassandra teaches Culinary Arts and feels that, because of the type of work that the kids do in her class, they are not as affected by what goes on with administration as they might be in the core classrooms. She has, however, had students make comments about their new principal and has heard them say things like, “is he going to be gone in a year or two or is he going to stay?” and according to her, the response she gives to these types of statements is, “Well, administrators change. Teachers stay, but administrators change” (personal communication, September 13, 2019). She said that she responds this way because, in her experience, administrators are always changing, but teachers stay longer because many of them are from the area or are invested in what they’re doing. She said that principals are typically moving on to the next position or the next best thing, and all the while, with the exception of a few here and there from year to year, teachers have remained the same.
Cassandra also talked about how, in her eight years at the school, she has had five different principals and that, “each administrator that comes in has their own agenda and goals of what they want to get done” but, regardless of what a principal’s agendas may be, she said, “I do for myself, and I make sure my kids are straight” (personal communication, September 13, 2019). Cassandra referred to herself as a type of, “mother hen,” who looks out for the kids and wants to see them succeed (personal communication, September 13, 2019). She said that she has “real-life” conversations with her students and has them complete “dream boards” and journals to create 5-year plans for their lives (personal communication, September 13, 2019). Since this is her focus, she said that she does not worry too much about what is going on with the administration. All that matters to her is taking care of her kids and giving them a good learning experience in her class.

Cassandra did talk about one time when she had a principal who was a “micro-manager” and said that this frustrated her because she felt like, “you hired us to do our jobs, we’re here to do our jobs, you need to stay out of it, you know? It’s like, sometimes you didn’t know what to do, so, you know, like I said, I just focus on my kids you know, and just make sure they’re straight” (personal communication, September 13, 2019). She also said that there have been principals who have made adjustments to the schedule when they start, which has impacted her ability to shop for items and such thing for her classroom, which makes it hard on her. Other concerns that she has had, she said, weren’t necessarily related to the principals she’s had but were more because of district policies.

Cassandra also mentioned how sometimes when new principals arrive that teachers try to push their own hidden agendas on the principal, which made her feel like some teachers did
not want the principal to succeed. She said that because of this, principal turnover has created an incohesive school culture and climate amongst her staff. She said:

  Nobody's in one accord. Does that make sense? You know, nobody’s in one accord and the bottom line is about, it's about our kids, you know, and making sure they're straight, you know. Some of the time it feels like it is, like the old people said, backbiting and hidden agendas.

She said actions like this cause her to get upset because she feels that people should not be pushing their own agendas, but instead, they should be focusing on the kids. She went on to say that, because of things like this, she has tended to stay in her own corner and focus on her kids. As long as she gets the supplies she needs to run her classroom smoothly, she does not let the rest bother her (personal communication, September 13, 2019).

There have been some positive experiences she has had with principal turnover. For example, with the principal she has now, she said that she feels like she can trust him because of how involved he seems to be. She talked about how he is visible in the hallways during class changes and not “shut up in his office” all the time, which meant a great deal to her (personal communication, September 13, 2019). But regardless of what types of experiences she’s had with principal turnover, she said that as long as she gets what she needs to run her lessons properly, that is what matters most.

Cassandra attributed her age and life experiences to be the reasons why she has enough patience to not let things get best of her. She talked about being in a life-threatening car accident several years ago, and how that changed her life and her mindset. She said that if people are spending their lives stuck in a job they do not like, that it is, “too much time to be miserable. I don’t care how much money it is. It’s too much time to be miserable” (personal communication,
Cassandra was a teacher who seemed to have a strong self-efficacy, a strong love for her students, and a true passion for what she does every day.

Cassidy was a veteran teacher with almost 20 years’ experience. Over a decade of her career has been at her current middle school. When I asked her how she felt about working at her school, her words were, “I love it” (personal communication, September 14, 2019). Though she loved working at her school, she explained that she and her colleagues have definitely been through some tough times with principal turnover. She explained that her school has had several principals come and go, and that each of them has had very different personalities and leadership styles. She noted that her school had gone from one principal who:

Was the very present, visible principal. He was out in the hallways, he was just talking to the kids, shaking hands. He was very dynamic; and then our principal that came in after that was just different. He was more on the business side of things -- stayed in his office. Then our principal after that was… he actually stayed in his office just like our principal before that, and it was hard because I think not being a visible presence is,…it undermines the, I think, the goal of public schools (personal communication, September 14, 2019).

She continued talking about these changes in leadership and was proud to explain that her principal now is another “dynamic” principal with very transformational-style leadership qualities. She said that, “he’s in lunches, he shakes hands, he’s at the front door when kids walk in in the morning,” and parents are so pleased and have provided great feedback. She said that, as some parents are dropping their kids off in the mornings they “roll their windows down and say, ‘This is amazing! My child is excited to come to school’” (personal communication, September
14, 2019). She explained that, because of this, there have definitely been many positive changes in the culture and climate of the school. Teachers are also happier along with the kids and their parents.

The one challenge that she feels her students have faced, though, is a change in disciplinary expectations coming from the principal’s office. She said that her students have had a difficult time adjusting because, “there are higher expectations for behavior than there has been in the past. They are being held accountable for their actions, their words, their mannerisms, their, everything pretty much,” and she added, “I don’t even have to tell them to sit up like, they know, like the expectation is completely different” (personal communication, September 14, 2019). She did say that these changes are positive, and that the kids have caught on quickly.

Another impact that principal turnover has had on the students is related to their attendance. Cassidy said that this year, their school feels like a “home away from home” for some of the students as well as staff, and for her, “this year compared to last is, it’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced” (personal communication, September 14, 2019). She said that because of the new atmosphere and culture, the truancy drastically has declined. She made this very profound statement:

I think it was like 44 kids that were consistently missing school – that doesn’t include tardies – they are down to like, I think it’s like, 10 kids now. So, there are 10 kids that, you know, came to school the first day and they’ve missed a couple of days, like a sprinkling, but they’re coming to school now. They want to be there and that speaks highly about the school culture and like the atmosphere that Mr. Principal, our current principal has created (personal communication, September 14, 2019).
She even explained that teachers’ absences have decreased. In years past, teachers felt like they just needed a break and would take their sick days, but now, “it’s like we’re coming in, we’re prepped, we’re excited” (personal communication, September 14, 2019).

When principal turnover happens, Cassidy explained that she feels like there are certain things she can control, and other things she cannot. In talking about how principal turnover impacts students, she said she feels that she doesn’t have much control over how students are impacted because, “every new principal who comes in has new rules, policies, changes, and so on” and all she can do is “reinforce those to students” (personal communication, September 14, 2019). When it came to school culture and climate during a principal turnover, she maintained that “I definitely feel like teachers overall have a part,” and that their part is to “support whatever newfangled ideas are coming in” (personal communication, September 14, 2019). Lastly, in speaking about how she can control what happens to and within herself during a turnover, she said that being flexible is key. Her words were: “You have to be able to roll with the punches,” and “you have to be flexible.” She also said that: “I think some of the teachers are not and that makes their job 10 times harder than it really should be” (personal communication, September 14, 2019).

Cassidy talked sincerely about her emotional experiences with principal turnover. This year, she said that she had been, “super-pumped” about getting their new principal, because she had heard so many good things (personal communication, September 14, 2019). Now that he’s there, the teachers have been given a window to open-communication, have been given autonomy, and they have been treated like professionals, which is encouraging (personal communication, September 14, 2019). In the past, however, things have not always been this great. She noted that, “when principals would come in, and they would not value the fact that
you’re a professional, that you went to school for this, that your heart is in this.” it would be discouraging (personal communication, September 14, 2019). She said she’s felt defeated before by principals with punitive leadership styles who would say things like, “your lesson plans need to be submitted by 7 a.m. on Monday morning, and if I can’t access them, then we’re having a discussion” (personal communication, September 14, 2019). She talked about a time that a principal gave her good feedback on her teaching but was still upset with her because she had missed too many days one year.

Cassidy has had both good and bad experiences with principal turnover. She talked about going through times with good principals and, because of them, she became a better teacher. She also recalled the times she’s had with principals who made her feel defeated and unmotivated. There have been times that she has thought about leaving, as well as times she could not imagine being anywhere else. Thankfully for Cassidy, this year has rejuvenated her love for her school, and she pictures herself being there for a long time.

Donna

Donna was special education teacher who had less than 10 years’ experience in education and, during that time, had worked at all three levels within her division – elementary, middle, and high school. It was not until a few years into her career that she experienced her first transition between principals. Since that time, she has gone on to experience multiple principal turnovers at the schools where she has worked. She explained that working in schools that have turnovers can be both good and bad, and that one of the hardest things about it is having to adjust to different principals’ expectations. She stated that when one principal leaves, “you’ve got to change the way you’re doing it all over again because no two principals expect the same thing” (personal communication, September 30, 2019).
Not knowing a new principal’s expectations was something that she believed students also struggle with during times of principal turnover. She said that, “…they don’t know the expectations of the principal. So, they try to see what they can get away with” (personal communication, September 30, 2019). Though she felt that “some students are going to strive regardless,” she explained that, other students excel when they have a principal that sets clear expectations and holds students accountable (personal communication, September 30, 2019). In referencing one of her past experiences with a principal like this, she stated: “we had a lot of students that had a relationship with her. I saw kids doing better. She held them accountable. Whereas principals in the past didn’t build that relationship with the students” (personal communication, September 30, 2019). She also stated that, when working under principals who weren’t building relationships with the kids, the students,

“…didn’t try as hard. They didn’t want to run to the office and be like, ‘Can I please go show the principal what I did? Can I please go show what the grade was I got on this paper?’ and I had that a lot happen when we’ve had like very strong principals” (personal communication, September 30, 2019).

Donna explained that when it comes to expectations changing, some staff members have had a hard time adjusting because, “it boils down to people don’t like change” (personal communication, September 30, 2019). She believed this to be especially true when it comes to veteran teachers who have been teaching for 20 years or more. She said that principal turnover creates negative working conditions because, “there’s people griping, or they’re like, ‘well this is not how we used to do it,’” and many teachers, “don’t want to change each time a principal comes and goes” (personal communication, September 30, 2019). However, there have been times when there was a solid consensus among staff members that certain principals were not a
good fit for the school, and these had been instances where the transition was positive. She said, one time, “[i]t was a principal that nobody liked, and when that principal left everybody was happy” (personal communication, September 30, 2019).

At her current school, she said that the staff members have been through so many turnovers that it has actually brought people together. She pointed out that they, “work harder to build the relationships among each other and take charge and do what they need to do” (personal communication, September 30, 2019). She also stated that, from what she had experienced, if people built a personal relationship with the principal, it was much harder when he/she left, but if the principal was someone that people had a hard time communicating with, people may have been happy to see that person go (personal communication, September 30, 2019).

Donna described what she felt she had control over in regard to principal turnover, which was herself and her students. In talking about how she controls her students’ experiences during these times, she said, “I think you’re in control to the point that you need to just reassure your students that expectations are the same” and that, “you, the teacher, are responsible for upholding the things that you expect from your students” (personal communication, September 30, 2019). She said that she was in control of these things and how she responds, but she stated that, “I can’t control everybody else. I can just try to be positive myself” (personal communication, September 30, 2019). One very noteworthy statement that she made was this:

Well, I think ultimately, we're in control of ourselves, but we really can't control the principal turnover. And now a lot of times when you get somebody that's really good, they don't stay long. So that makes us sad; so, it makes it to the point where you don't want to get close to a principal or you don't trust them; or even yourself, you might get stuck in the, kind of the old ways, but you’ve just got to go with the flow.
Throughout her interview, Donna explained that she is an emotional person so the principal turnovers have an impact on her in many different ways. This was especially true when it comes to her self-efficacy as a teacher because, according to her, “you have to prove yourself so that they know that you’re a good teacher” (personal communication, September 30, 2019). However, despite the pressure, “it shouldn’t change what you perform in the classroom regardless of who the principal is, it’s the same with the students” (personal communication, September 30, 2019).

Donna also explained that she believes principals are held to high standards, and that staff and students look up to them for direction. Therefore, when principals are constantly rotating, it makes it hard to build good relationships. “…You kind of lose that respect as the standards that you hold principals up to because I believe that principals are held to a higher standard than certain individuals at a school, and you want them to love that school as much as you do as a teacher” (personal communication, September 30, 2019). This statement was a testament to her love for her students and teaching. She continued to say that “…teachers shouldn’t be doing it on their own” and that principals should want to be there with them long-term (personal communication, September 30, 2019).

Faye

Faye was an educator who came from a long line of educators. She explained that going to school and becoming successful, “wasn’t an option” for her, but rather, an expectation that her family always had from when she was young (personal communication, September 15, 2019). With these educational roots, she pursued her Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Educational Specialist degrees in education and focused her time on becoming certified in Special Education. She has
almost 20 years’ experience and has worked at every educational level across multiple K-12 school divisions.

Faye has had multiple experiences with principal turnover. In her personal interview, she talked about having gone from one principal with one personality to someone completely different several different times throughout her career. She also noted that each time she had experienced a change in principals, the expectations, policies, and directives have been different. This year, however, had been an exceptional year for Faye. In her words, it has been “like nothing I’ve ever experienced before” (personal communication, September 15, 2019).

In the last few years at Faye’s school, she’s had principals who were not very visible, which made some of the teachers feel that they weren’t being supported. She said that, “you never really saw the principal a whole lot. You would see him in between maybe walking here, walking there, but never a whole lot of interaction” but this year, she said, “my gosh, the kids are in the classroom, the kids are quiet, the kids are respectful. It’s a whole different ballgame. The assistant principal and the principal go into classes every single day” (personal communication, September 15, 2019). Due to the amount of involvement that the principal and assistant principal have shown this year, many things have changed in her school. She talked about how students’ behaviors, staff behaviors, morale, the climate in the school, and many other things have taken a drastic turnaround for the better. Faye attributed this to the amount of effort that her principal has put in to supporting staff, listening, communicating, and relationship building with them and their students on a daily basis.

Last year, she said:

I’m not going to lie, teachers would skip. As soon as the bell rang and the kids were dismissed, some teachers would stay and do bus duty, most of us skipped. And it was
funny because I was one of them, I was like, ‘these kids have given me a headache, I have got to go.’ But this year, nobody is late for work, nobody has been late, and everybody stays until they’re supposed to leave (personal communication, September 15, 2019).

During this year, teachers have also been dancing out front of the school during student drop off, speaking nicely to each other, holding doors for each other, and have had more all-around polite and personable attitudes with each other as the climate was changed from last year.

Another positive that Faye has experienced with this most recent turnover at her school is the impact that it has had on students. She said, “students are arriving to class on time,” and “there’s very limited disruptive activities in the class, kids are focused, the kids are doing what they need to do. So, the learning environment is, like, completely different” (personal communication, September 15, 2019). She said that she could not say enough about how great their year has been and about how wonderful this experience had been for her.

In the beginning, though, when Faye and her colleagues found out that they would be getting a new principal, she said, “all of us were like, okay, how should we feel? Should it be happy? Should it be mad? Should it be sad? Should it be… how should we feel?” This transition, therefore, started out with a great deal of uncertainty and nervousness (personal communication, September 15, 2019). However, Faye explained that many of their anxieties went away over the summer because the principal asked to meet with everyone one-on-one at the school so that he could get to know them and figure out what their needs were. She said that this made her feel heard and supported. She talked about several other things that the principal had done at the beginning of the year that really made a huge impact on the staff and made them feel that he truly cared about them and wanted them to have a successful year.
Faye said,

You never know what’s wrong until you see what’s right. You know what I mean? But in order for you to realize, not being funny, how off last year was, and the year before, and the year before, you had to come to a point when you see something different and better (personal communication, September 15, 2019).

When saying this, she talked about how principals in the past were not necessarily “bad” because they would “leave you alone” and “not bother you,” which seemed good at the time, but this year, the impact that has taken place on the morale of her school has opened her eyes to what school can actually be like when led by an administration that is very transformational (personal communication, September 15, 2019). Having a principal who builds relationships within the building has resulted in Faye feeling that she has control over herself, her students, and the culture and climate of her school. She said, “I feel like we had a lot of control because he, he talked to us about what I thought was… how we felt about things, and then he implemented some of the things that we said” (personal communication, September 15, 2019).

The actions taken by the new principal resulted in Faye feeling that her principal is a trustworthy leader. Since he is trustworthy, moreover, she also explained that she feels that he is going to “get the job done” (personal communication, September 15, 2019). She said, “I don’t feel burned out” (personal communication, September 15, 2019). Her stance on this was very evident when she stated that,

Last year, like I said, many of us were burned out, and it was only the second week of school because we were the mother, we were the father, we were the counselor, we were the police officer, we were the principal, we were the nurse, we were everything. And this year, we are who we have to be. So, if your role in that school is a counselor, that’s
what you’re doing. If your role is an inclusion teacher, such as myself, that’s what I’m doing. If your role is the SRO, the school resource officer, that’s what he’s doing. If your role is the principal, that’s what he’s doing. And he lets them know, it’s just like you have many parts of your body, you have your arm, your hand, your leg, your feet, you have … everything works together but everything has its own function to make it work together.

That’s what he’s shown us (personal communication, September 15, 2019).

**Gloria**

Gloria was a high school special education teacher with four years’ experience. She worked in her local community where she had been raised and has been at the same school for all of the years that she has been teaching. In her short amount of time as an educator, she had experienced three principal turnovers, but did not let it bother her too much.

The first turnover for Gloria was the hardest because the principal who left was someone who she knew from her community and someone who had mentored her, so they had a pretty strong relationship. This was the only time a turnover gave her such anxiety and really made her question whether or not she should leave the school where she was working. She said that the principal leaving was, “sort of like a letdown, you know, I really didn’t think I was going to make it, I really…but I just continued to do what I … what she had trained me to do and things like that” (personal communication, October 9, 2019). Thankfully she did stay because now that she had been through one turnover, she says it did not affect her much anymore.

The hardest part of turnover for Gloria is, “just getting used to how they want the school to run. ‘Cause different people like different things” and when principals change then policies and expectations change as well (personal communication, October 9, 2019). She also said that, with her newest principal, it seems like “it’s more meetings and more volunteering” and things
like that, but she feels that “as teachers, we need to get involved in what the students are doing and what clubs they’re in and things like that. So, I guess we should have been doing it anyway.”

So, this type of change does not bother her at all (personal communication, October 9, 2019).

Gloria has not seen any way in which principal turnover has impacted her students. As she said: “at the beginning, the students were, like … it seemed like they were a little more disciplined and stuff like that. But now… I think it’s more laid back now” (personal communication, October 9, 2019). She believed that some of the same protocols that were followed in regard to discipline and expectations were similar to that of what their previous principal had in place, so things have not changed too much. Gloria stated that she has just been trying to do her part with students by “trying to get them to follow the rules and the expectations here at school,” but she feels like, even when she tries, at the end of the day, “we can’t make them” (personal communication, October 9, 2019). The most control hat Gloria believed she had was her own efforts that she puts in to try and guide her students to do what is expected of them, which was not in any tied to principal turnover.

When it comes to the culture and climate at the school, Gloria also stated that not much had changed in the culture and climate of the school. She noted that she had heard teachers make “the side-eyed comments like, ‘she’s coming trying to change things, it’s not going to happen,’” but “others just go along with it.” That is what she tries to do – just go along with it (personal communication, October 9, 2019). For her personally, Gloria tried to see the bright side of every situation and has learned to just accept the changes as they come. She stated that her new principal had been informative, professional, and insightful, and she has also had one incident where she had to confide in her [the principal], and she appreciated the way it was handled.
Gloria made several statements that indicated that she is a teacher with a strong self-efficacy and a love for her career. She said, “I enjoy what I do” (personal communication, October 9, 2019). When asked what else she would like to tell me regarding her experiences living through principal turnover, she explained that, “I think for me, it’s just because I like it. I like doing the job. You know, I enjoy doing the job here, and the principal is the least of my worries.” She stated that the only reason she thinks she was anxious during her first experience with turnover was because she was a first-year teacher at that time (personal communication, October 9, 2019). But now, she has grown confident in her abilities and in her love for what she does and does not feel that turnover affects her or her students very greatly.

Henry

Henry was a career-switcher teacher who began teaching after serving in the military for many years. He has had less than 5 years’ experience in the classroom and has only experienced one instance of principal turnover. Henry said that he sees some similarities between the educational field and the military, but with one big difference:

Structure and discipline in school, you know, what I've, what I've noticed is its… one really has to get a lot of buy-in to anything new that they're proposing, and you can’t... one can't just assume that because they're the principal that teachers will follow suit just as a matter of hierarchy or anything like that. It really… it really does take authentic buy-in for folks to come on board (personal communication, September 20, 2019).

Henry explained that this is very different from the military because, in the military, everyone is used to new leadership taking place about every two years. Change is something that is the norm for them, and people are expectant. From what he has found out, education is very different in this way.
Through the one turnover that Henry has experienced, he was able to see both the advantages and disadvantages of principal turnover. He explained that, “consistency in leadership does benefit the students in that they kind of know what the norms and expectations are and they’re established, and they’re used to it,” but he also thought that change in leadership can benefit students, “in that people come in with a real emphasis and focus on how are we going to make things better for them instead of just doing what we’ve always done” (personal communication, September 20, 2019). He stated that he also believed that “rapid or routine turnover every few years certainly is not good” but the ideal situation would be to have someone who “is constantly looking to make things better” while also having “that stability over time,” even though this type of situation doesn’t seem to be the norm (personal communication, September 20, 2019).

The new principal at Henry’s school has brought increased expectations. He mentioned that, “the workload has certainly increased” (personal communication, September 20, 2019). However, he said that, according to both him and his colleagues, “we feel like all of the new things we’re being asked to do are good things, but they are even more, you know, more… more load,…more tasks on an already full plate” (personal communication, September 20, 2019). Despite these new expectations, he explained that “the culture and climate is moving in the right direction” (personal communication, September 20, 2019).

When it came to the impact that this turnover has had on his students, Henry stated that, he feels like he has a “large degree of control” with his students (personal communication, September 20, 2019). He said, “I think good teachers see themselves as a buffer between turnover and change and their own students and can help to kind of minimize the turbulence or protect them from the turbulence” (personal communication, September 20, 2019). Henry also
said that he had a large degree of control over the school’s culture and climate during principal turnover in that he can, “support the new principal in what she’s trying to do” (personal communication, September 20, 2019).

The majority of Henry’s thoughts about his experience with principal turnover were optimism, enthusiasm, and excitement, because he is a new teacher, and having a new principal, he said, “was an opportunity too for me because… because I was building the new” (personal communication, September 20, 2019). However, over the time that he’s gotten to know his new principal and has seen how she’s trying to manifest her vision, he noted that his emotions have changed a little. He said he has become “a little more realistic, or grounded” in realizing that change cannot come about as quickly as he would have hoped, and that the principal has her own hoops to jump through that are making it difficult to implement any real change (personal communication, September 20, 2019).

Henry attributed his open-mindedness with turnover to being a new teacher. He said that, “I have a benefit as a new teacher saying, I’ve been learning these couple of years, and I know that I have a lot to learn and. . . that I have a lot to improve on.” Because of this, he does not feel any real effects to his self-efficacy because of the turnover (personal communication, September 20, 2019). Some of his colleagues seemed to be more resistant and more offended by some of the changes taking place.

Henry also explained that, along with the principal turnover, there had been some drastic changes taking place within his district. As a result, he believed it was even harder for his principal to transition smoothly. However, regardless of the changes taking place, he noted that it was his job to support the principal in her endeavors and be a supporter of change. As someone who likes change, doing that came easily.
Kendrick

Kendrick was a veteran teacher with almost 30 years’ experience in the classroom. His love and passion for education and his community were evident throughout his personal interview. When talking about working with students and working for his community, he had a high energy that came through in his voice. He was proud to say that, “I’m basically an alumnus of the school system” (personal communication, September 21, 2019).

Throughout his career, Kendrick had been faced with several principal turnovers at various different schools. He said that the key to getting through it was to be adaptable and understand that, “principals are like presidents, they have their four-year tenure, and then they leave, and so my experience is just to adapt to what they want” (personal communication, September 21, 2019). Kendrick believed that these types of changes are “all for the best” because each person that comes in is coming in with a motive to help make the school, staff, and students better (personal communication, September 21, 2019). He also argued that when one principal leaves, that person leaves his or her mark on the school. Then, the next person picks up where the other left off, so truly, it’s not that much change happening at once.

Kendrick attributed his adaptability to the number of years he’s been teaching. He pointed our:

Like I said, I’m a 28-year vet, going on my 29th year, so my environment doesn’t really change. I mean I want to do what the person asks me to do and kind of keep it moving.

My motto is, I’m going to do what you ask me to do, and when I go in my room, I want to do what's best for my children (personal communication, September 21, 2019).

Though Kendrick has this pretty strong mindset in his own life and classroom, he did not feel that principal turnover has had an effect on the culture and climate in a school. Drawing on a
previous experience, he talked about having gone from one principal who was invisible and wasn’t people-oriented and said that he could see the morale in the building going down (personal communication, September 21, 2019).

Though he had witnessed the culture and climate getting worse during some principal transitions, Kendrick thought that he has had control over the culture and climate during these times, because he is a trusted veteran teacher and community member. He also has good control over students during these times. As well, he is one of only a few African-American male teachers in his school, and people lean on him for advice and insight with kids that need more attention. He stated; “you can control what happens with the students regardless of what’s going on in the principal’s office, if you do your part, then you feel like you have control over how they respond” (personal communication, September 21, 2019).

Kendrick said that he could never imagine leaving his school. He had a great deal of time invested there and it was the community where he was raised, so principal turnover would never cause him to feel like leaving. Principal turnover did not affect his self-efficacy because, as he stated, “I’m going to do what I need to do,” and it did not matter who the principal was. All Kendrick looks for in order to be able to trust a principal is someone who is honest and will tell him if he is doing things that he or she wishes would change. He said that whatever a principal wants, that is what he is going to do, because that is the way he was raised. He said, regardless of what happens, “I open my class every morning saying I love my job. So, principal turnover, I’m still going to love my job. I will adjust” (personal communication, September 21, 2019).

**Lynette**

Lynette was a teacher with almost 30 years’ experience. She has been at her current school for a little under 15 years and loves working with her students. She explained that her
school was going on principal number four, so she has experienced quite a few turnovers in the time that she has been there. Each of the principals that she’s had have all been very different in leadership style and personality. Her new principal, she believed is a great fit for the school and is implementing changes that seem to be effective.

Lynette said that this year, her students’ learning environments had been impacted by the change in principal because her students were saying that “everything is so much better and everyone’s more positive, and there’s all these cool things around the school” (personal communication, September 16, 2019). She noted that her students had really become aware of how much the principal has tried to encourage them and helped to create a fun, safe place for them to learn. She also talked about feeling like his arrival would have a positive impact on her students’ achievement, because they seem to be invested, and their new principal really wants them to do well.

According to her, past transitions have not always been as positive, though. As she mentioned: “it’s been, you know, hard sometimes with, you know, you have a different personality every time somebody new comes in, and they all want to leave their own little legacy behind, you know, so yeah, it’s hard sometimes” (personal communication, September 16, 2019). She added that each of the principals who had come in have had a different leadership style and that she had “started with a principal who was very professional, and he treated the teachers like professionals, and then, the next principal was very much a micro-manager, and people really resented him and the morale went down” (personal communication, September 16, 2019).

Part of the reason why Lynette believed her principal in the current year had been so successful was because, “he has outlined very clearly what the… what he wants the kids to do,
what he expects from them. He’s outlined that very clearly with the teachers and the students.” Because of this, “everyone knows what happens, you know, it’s consistent” (personal communication, September 16, 2019). Last year, that had not happened, and the kids and the teachers felt very differently. Their previous principal had not been very visible, so the kids felt that he did not support them, and when the teachers called on him for help, he was also not around (personal communication, September 16, 2019). As a result, the previous year had been very hard, and the transition to the new principal had seemed very exciting.

Lynette is another teacher who stated that she has some control over what happens to students during principal turnover because it is up to her how she handles her classroom. However, she did say that the turnover can sometimes create “a little chaos” when the kids know that a change is coming (personal communication, September 16, 2019). When it comes to staff, she said that this year most people had been positive, but even through the good, “there’s always going to be someone to complain” (personal communication, September 16, 2019).

At the end of the day, Lynette is a teacher who tries to be adaptable and conform to whatever the vision of the principal is because she feels that is her job as a teacher. Her ideal relationship with a principal was having someone who “is going to listen to what I have to say, you know, respect my opinions, and just try to work with me to, you know, do the best job that I can in the classroom, and we all want the same thing” (personal communication, September 16, 2019). She explained that she had this now with her new principal, adding: “I feel like now I have that, so I’m lucky” (personal communication, September 16, 2019).

**Results**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study has been to understand teachers’ experiences working in schools that have had principal turnovers. After conducting
interviews, focus groups, and reading participants’ letters, the themes that emerged were clear. These themes became even more noticeable as I began to transcribe audio recordings and coding each piece of data I had gathered. This section will highlight those themes and the subthemes within each.

**Theme Development**

Five main themes and various subthemes have emerged from the data (Table 2). These themes were found by reading and re-reading again, several times, the participants’ transcripts and letters. As I began to recognize significant words and statements, those pieces were coded into nodes in NVivo and organized accordingly. Table 2 displays these themes and the corresponding subthemes for each. Following Table 2 is a discussion of each theme and subtheme using participants' own words that were gathered from all three data collection methods.

Table 2

*Themes and Subthemes from All Data Sources*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjusting to New Leaders</td>
<td>New Leaders’ Personalities and Leadership Styles</td>
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<td></td>
<td>New Visions and Expectations</td>
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<td>Adapting To or Resisting New Visions</td>
<td>Some Will Adapt</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Some Will Resist</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teachers are Primary Decision-Makers in the Classroom</td>
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<td>Turnover Impacts Students</td>
<td>Behaviors and Achievement</td>
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Adjusting to new leaders. The first theme incorporated the idea that teachers have several adjustments to make when new principals arrive. When conducting personal one-on-one interviews with participants, I began to see that most participants reflected on their experiences with principal turnover as being a tune if transition that required adjustments to a new leaders’ expectations, visions, and leadership style. Different teachers had different experiences with this, and but they often had to transition between a micro-manager to a principal who was very laid-back or vice versa. Others talked about going from principals who were not very involved in the school or with students to those who were. The adjustments that teachers discussed having to make during principal turnover fell into one of two subthemes: new leaders’ personalities and leadership styles, and new leaders’ visions and expectations.

New leaders’ personalities and leadership styles. Teacher-participants spoke extensively about how, when new leaders came into their schools, how they had to go through an experience of transitioning from one principal’s personality to another. Sometimes these experiences were positive, and sometimes they are negative. As Alice noted:
One principal will love you and go to you for everything, and you can go to them for everything, and the next one comes in and you don't know like, if your personalities are going to match or if they're gonna want to talk to you right now.

Other participants talked about gaining principals who were dynamic and outgoing, and how their motives created fresh climates of motivation and drive among staff. Some even mentioned being glad to see a principal leave because of their leadership styles.

**New visions and expectations.** Another frequently talked about topic when teachers discussed their experiences with principal turnover was that they had to go from one principal’s way of doing things to another. Regarding multiple adaptations, Cassidy noted when discussing lesson plan formats:

> You know, when I first came to my current school, it was kind of like, you know, you do… I trust you. Do whatever it is that you need to do. And then our next principal that came in started with, well, here is the county lesson plan format, these need to be in Google Drive by 7 a.m. Then our principal after that was kind of more, laid back, but not present; and then, when our old assistant principal came in, she was, like, they need to be in there. Then, when our new principal came in it was like, I trust you. If I have a question, I might ask you to see them…” (personal communication, September 14, 2019).

Almost every participant at some point during their interview, focus group, or letter, stated something to the effect that: “all new principals come in with their own visions” and it requires an adjustment period on the teachers’ part to learn what that vision was and adapt to the requirements set forth for reaching that vision.

**Adapting To or Resisting New Visions.** The second theme involved teachers’ tendency to want to adapt or to resist new principals’ visions. Not only did teachers talk about their
experiences with new principals who come in with new visions, but these experiences often related to how staff members to adapted or resisted these new visions and how their peers and colleagues experienced this as well. However, despite what visions are set in place by new administration, teachers talked about how, no matter what happens, they always do what they believed was right as far as their classrooms are concerned.

_Some will adapt._ One of the biggest adjustments that teachers talked about having to make is having to adapt to and accept a new principals’ expectations and vision. Ten out of the 11 participants, in their one-on-one interview, issues related to being adaptable or open-minded during times of turnover. Most of them acknowledged that education, in general, is an ever-changing world, and that being able to adapt is a necessity. Kendrick attributed his willingness to adapt to the way that he was raised, “to respect your boss,” and Henry said he was good at adapting simply because he’s an optimistic person. Others noted that, keeping an open mind and being adaptable came with the territory, and that they really did not have much choice in the matter.

_Some will resist._ Though no one directly admitted to resisting a new principal’s vision, many talked about witnessing their colleagues doing so. One reason that teachers said their colleagues were resistant was because of their years of experience and their feeling that they did not need to be told new methods or processes for the classrooms, which tended to occur when a new principal was trying to implement new initiatives. Henry saw this happen at his school and said that principals needed to be “very careful about how they propose change and make sure that it doesn't sound like we're saying the way you've been teaching for the last 20 years is all messed up or is an inadequate.” He also noted that the way a principal sends a message or invokes change really matters when it comes to veteran teachers adopting or resisting new
visions. Cassidy stated that, “You have to be flexible. You know and I think some of the teachers are not, and that makes their job 10 times harder than it really should be.” Others simply described those who resist visions as people who “don’t like change” and prefer to keep doing things the way they have been doing them for years.

**Teachers are primary decision-makers in the classroom.** According to the participants, there are times that teachers adapt to change and times that teachers resist. However, most of them agreed that, regardless of what visions are in place or being changed, within the school, the teachers have say over what goes on in the classroom, and that they will do what is necessary to make sure their students succeed. According to Alice:

> Whether a new person comes in or the same person stays, I'm essentially going to do what I need to do because I'm the one that has to go home or I'm the one that has to look at that kid and say, I'm sorry, I was told to do this and we both know that wasn't going to work right because you have a classroom of 30 kids that you have to get to graduation.

Kendrick also said that, “My motto is, ‘I’m going to do what you ask me to do, and when I go in my room, I want to do what's best for my children.’” Some teachers added that going from one principal to the next had started to wear them down, so instead of focusing on what principal’s visions were, they would focus on what they know needed to be done for the kids. Anna’s view was:

> So you start to get into this cycle of, okay, I'll just go on into my room and do what I think works best with kids that I see in front of me every day, because the messages and what's communicated from above is constantly changing, and supposedly, this is the way it should be, but then if that's the case, then why does the next person always want to do something different and ridicule what was done before?
Turnover Impacts Students. The third theme that emerged was the various ways that turnover impacted students. As I continued to gather data from each participant, I began to see that their beliefs about how students were impacted could be categorized into two subthemes: behaviors and achievement. Teachers spoke of the ways that their students try to “feel out” new principals, just as they do with new teachers. Many participants also explained that their students were very aware of what changes were taking place in the building and recognized which were bad and which were good.

Behaviors and achievement. Donna, Anna, Alice, and Faye all made specific reference to the ways that students “try to see what they can get away with” when a new principal comes. Alice, in particular, said: “We actually see it, you see the kids, they test the person the same way they test a new teacher.” Most participants felt that principal turnover has had an impact on students’ behaviors because students are going through a period of learning the expectations of the principal just as the teachers are.

The teachers said that a new principal’s leadership style played a major role in how students respond. For example, Lynette explained that “When a principal is not visible, the kids pick up on it, and they feel like they can pretty much get away with things if there's not going to be any, you know, anyone really watching them to see.” On the other hand, Cassidy saw a new, incoming principal with strong leadership skills who affected students’ behavior positively. She was excited when stating that this year, “I don't even have to tell them to sit up like, they know, like, the expectation is completely different. . . from last year to this year – it's been so positive.”

Participants explained that principal turnover can have an impact on student achievement as well. In the letter that she wrote to an imaginary teacher, Faye explained to the teacher that,
the type of school climate that the new principal creates, due to his/her leadership style, can have one of the biggest impacts on student achievement.

For example, if he/she is laid back and doesn’t inject a thriving school climate, things may not go so well. On the other hand, if they do inject a thriving climate, things will be awesome. Having the latter climate would be the one to elevate student achievement as the students would feel from [them] the importance of always doing their absolute best.

When Henry explained his outlook on this as well, he said that turnover can negatively affect student achievement teacher and students must be “constantly reacting to changes in rules and regulations.” But according to Kendrick, during a time of principal turnover, achievement can be impacted positively. He stated that, as long as “students and teachers buy into the ‘new vision,’ scores, grades, and behavior will improve.”

*Students recognize and feel changes.* One of the biggest reasons why participants felt that students were impacted behaviorally and academically due to a change in leadership is that they can recognize and feel when changes are taking place in their schools. Participants shed light on what types of changes were positive for their students and which type were negative. Whether or not the change was positive or negative depended on what changes took place, how teachers reacted to those changes, and the follow-through or consistency on the leader’s part.

One particular situation stood out to Alice, and she mentioned this moment in both her personal interview and her small group discussion. She talked about being at their graduation one year and hearing a student-speaker talk about how many changes in leaders the students had experienced and how that was a hurdle for them on their road to graduation. Alice said that, “I was thinking about that same stuff from an adult perspective. It was interesting because the kids were thinking and feeling the same thing -- constant change and upheaval.”
In her letter, Gloria wrote that, “some students may have a sense of tension about the new principal, and how they may change things at the school.” As a special education teacher, she talked about how her students take notice when a principal is “social” with them and how they appreciated getting to know their principal. Lynette also mentioned that “it definitely creates. . . . there's a little chaos there, sometimes, when the kids know that a change is coming” but in her experience in the change this year, the administration has been so dynamic that it has been a very big positive that has resulted in various changed behaviors and effort on the students’ part. Several participants also felt that, as the teacher, they play a big part in “buffering” the impact that the change may have. For example, Anna said, “How you and your colleagues respond to the changes can be a stabilizing influence for the students and their success.”

**Teachers’ Emotions Surrounding Turnover.** The fourth theme that emerged related to the teachers’ emotions with the phenomenon if principal turnover. Throughout the interviews, small groups, and the reading of the letters, it was apparent that every teacher had some kind of emotion related to the phenomenon of principal turnover. For some, their experiences had been positive, some were negative, and some were pretty neutral in their feelings about what they had been through with various leaders. Others had very mixed emotions about principal turnover. Their feelings varied from leader-to-leader or situation-to-situation. Teachers admitted to feeling happy when someone left who they believed was ineffective at the school, or who was a leader “that nobody liked.” But even when there were some satisfaction, there was stress that came along with transitioning between leaders, as well as feelings of uncertainty regarding whether or not the new person would be just as bad or better. In the end, most participants sensed that
change was inevitable and that principals were no longer “in it for the long haul.”

**The positives.** The participants expressed many positive emotions about to their experiences with principal turnover. Some of these positives came when the schools had leaders that had not been a “good fit” or had personalities that clashed with the teacher’s own. As Brittany said, “I’m going to be honest. . . some of the principals, , , I’m kind of glad to see them go just because ,like I said, some of their personalities are, like, they’re going to do it their way and they’re not gonna take any opinions from anybody else.” Donna and Lynette also admitted to having similar feelings when some of their principals left.

Other participants spoke of how they liked a change in administrators every once in a while. Though most of them agreed that steady, rapid, turnover can “certainly be negative,” when turnover happened every four or five years, it contributed to keeping teachers from becoming complacent. Kendrick argued:

> It keeps me on my toes. A buddy of mine, we talk almost every day, I was saying, I’ve got to bring my game up because this guy wants my game up. I know with the old guy, I had gotten kind of complacent, I’m not going to lie. So, I kind of... I kind of enjoy the turnover.

Henry agreed with Kendrick’s point of view, saying: “I think people get used to doing things the way they’ve done them and it… and they’re not necessarily looking for a newer, better ways of supporting our students.” Others felt positively when principals came in who were more transformational in nature than the prior administrator. When new leaders arrived at a school who were personable and “really in it for the kids,” the teachers had more optimism and hope for a good school year.
The stressors. It became evident throughout participants’ personal interviews that many of them felt that principal turnover brings added stress. Cassandra felt strongly about this, and talked about how, when new principals come in, teachers try to take advantage of the new person and get what they want out of them. She talked about the effects that turnover has had on her school’s culture and climate, explaining:

It’s no um... nobody’s on one accord, does that make sense? You know, nobody’s on one accord and the bottom line is about... it’s about our kids, you know, and making, making sure they’re straight, you know? Some of the, sometimes it feels like it is, like the old people said, back backbiting and hidden agendas.

Any time a new principal came in, the participants agreed, some things have to change. Two big stressors that many participants spoke of specifically concerned the format of their lesson plans and the expectations that leaders had for meetings. Teacher anticipate two changes with new leadership that were particularly stressful to adjust to. According to Donna:

...one principal will want lesson plans one way, which is awesome and you can do this, and then another one comes in and wants you to write four pages and wants you to stay in meetings every other day after school when the school ran perfectly fine with the principal that didn’t require you to do all this... . [W]hy is this new principal coming in thinking we have to stay after so much?

Even Henry, who had argued that principal turnover was positive for his school and the students, talked about how adjusting to new protocols can be stressful, even when the changes are for the better. According to him and his colleagues, “we feel like all of the new things that we’re being asked to do are good things, but they are even more, you know, more... more load, more tasks, on an already full plate of things that we must do.”
The uncertainty. All participants expressed uncertainty during times of principal turnover. Many explained that it was a natural, human nature feeling to wonder and anticipate what the new leader will be like and what things are going to change. In her letter to her imaginary teacher, Brittany described her thoughts stating that: “Obviously, when we get a new principal, you don’t know what they’re going to be like, so you might be a little bit, I guess, curious about who’s coming and what’s going to happen.”

For others, there was some fear associated with the uncertainty. Lynette spoke about this in her small group session, saying: “you always…run the risk of getting someone, you know, that is awful.” Faye also discussed this in her small group:

You know, last year when I found out we were getting a new principal, I [went] all to pieces. I was like, oh my gosh, you know we had,… you know, it could be a good thing and it could be a bad thing. If you have a principal that’s kind of laid-back and they don’t say a whole lot that could be good, and it can also be bad. It can be good in the fact that they let you come in and they let you do your job. It can be bad in the fact that they don’t say anything, you know anything can happen because it can go whichever way.

Alice also expressed this in the letter she wrote telling her imaginary teacher that: “It is okay to be nervous or excited or scared. We all react to change in a different way, and this is a big change; somebody new is coming into your place of work.” For others who talked about their uncertainty, they used words like, anxious, anxiety, stress, worry, scared, frightful, and anticipation. Alice also offered an insightful metaphor in her small group discussion:

I just kind of feel like the whole thing, you kind of… it’s almost like you’re walking through, like, a field full of landmines because you’re not quite sure where to step or what to do or what to expect, and you kind of feel like you’ve finally gotten everything
straight and then like the person in front of you just kind of puts their foot on one and you’re like, oh wait, let me back up because that’s where I was going to step next. So, I think it’s just a little... I don’t know, kind of just… you never know what to expect and where you’re going.

*Turnover is expected.* Regardless of what emotions the teachers had about principal turnover, there was a consensus among most that they expect turnover to happen at some point. Various teachers had different reasons for this expectation. Brittany felt principals tend to use her school as a steppingstone for their next career goal, as did Lynette who stated: “They’re only there for say five, seven, you know, years, and then they go on to bigger and better things.” Anna added that because of this, she questions new principals who come in and wonders:

Are you here to be here, or are you here to add another section to your resume so you can go on to bigger and brighter things? Because we saw that with some of the ones we’ve had too, they were just here long enough to become a superintendent or an assistant superintendent somewhere else.

Cassandra and Kendrick felt that it’s just the generation of educators that have come aboard recently, and that “things aren’t like the used to be” back when they were in school or when they first started teaching. Several teachers mentioned that it seemed like, principals change just as frequently, if not more frequently than teachers do.

Due to the constant change in principals, some participants explained that they had neutral emotions or negative emotions about the phenomenon because it has happened so often. Kendrick was one who had neutral emotions and compared principals to politicians, stating that, “they have their four-year tenure, and then they leave.” However, having been impacted by turnover so many times, Donna was one who felt afraid to get close to administrators because
she felt that every time she got close to a principal, he/she would leave. So now she is careful to not get too close.

**What Teachers Want from Incoming Leaders.** The final theme that surfaced was what teachers want from new, incoming leaders. As teachers discussed their experiences with principal turnover, it seemed that the incoming leader’s personality or leadership style had much to do with whether or not the teacher’s experience was positive or negative. Several things helped make the transition easier or harder, depending upon how it was handled. Above all, teachers had more positive experiences when the incoming leader provided effective communication, allowed time to pass before implementing too many new initiatives, respected the teachers as professionals and masters of their craft, and had a visible presence in the school with staff and students alike. If the teachers had these things, they spoke positively of their experience with principal transitions. If they did not have or do at least one these things, the transition typically was not quite as smooth.

**Communication and time.** Communication and time were two concepts that teachers talked about recognizing or needing during principal turnover. Teachers wanted a voice, wanted to be heard, and wanted to know, clearly, what a new principal’s expectations would be. In his personal interview, Henry explained:

> An ideal relationship would be where a new principal comes in and explains some of the things that they want to do differently or that they want to change, but also take, you know, just as much time to hear and listen to what, what their teachers want or what their staff wants and what they want to hold on to.
Brittany talked about how she feels that new principals coming to her school had not been very effective because “a lot of things just remain the same; they never really do a whole lot with information. They ask us but they don't do anything with it.”

On the other hand, Faye, Cassidy, and Lynette each had principals who had one-on-one conversations with them to ask what they wanted for the new school year, what their expectations were, and had had principals who also were very clear in their expectations for staff and students, which contributed to their feelings of optimism, excitement, and contentment with a particular principal turnover experience. Gloria was also off to a good start with her new principal because she felt that the new principal had been very informative and given the staff a clear understanding of what their goals would be for the year.

Participants talked about needing time to get acclimated to a new principals’ expectations and time to adjust before they begin making too many changes. Alice noted that she had had to make numerous changes this year with her new principal and felt that, “it was way too much, way too fast, and everybody in the school is drowning.” One of Cassidy’s experiences with this phenomenon and how it was not only disruptive for staff, but for students as well. She said, “I think that when the new principals come in, sometimes, and they radically change something, change procedures, rules, practices, it's overwhelming. It's disruptive for the kids, you know…” For many teachers, the time and communication lead to them to feeling trusted and respected as individuals and professionals. Kendrick wrote in his letter that new principals need to: “TRUST your staff, get to know your staff, and let your staff do their job.”

Visible. One final subtheme was the question of a principal’s visibility in the school. Cassidy talked about a time her school had to transition between a leader who was very present to one who was not, and how that it made the transition difficult. She said:
He just was a very different type of principal, you know, Dr. Principal was a very present, visible principal. He was out in the hallways, he was just talking to kids, shaking hands; he was very dynamic. And then our principal that came in after that was just different. Was more on the business side of things, stayed in his office.

In her letter, Gloria wrote that if she could offer the new principal one piece of advice for making the turnover, “I would suggest to do your best to interact with students and teachers to establish a rapport with them.” Most participants talked about the importance of principals having a presence in the school, how important it is to the success of students and the establishment of a positive school climate, especially during times of principal turnover. As someone who feels that she was experiencing a positive change in administrators, Lynette said:

I think the principal has to be visible, not just with teachers but with students; I really think that’s the key to a better environment in the school. You know, when the teachers see the principal and the assistant principal all the time and the kids see them, they talk to them, they know their names; it makes a difference.

**Research Question Responses**

The purpose of this study was to understand teachers’ experiences working in schools that have had principal turnover. The research questions that shaped this study centered on how teachers describe their experiences overall, as well as how the experience impacted student achievement, school culture and climate, and their personal locus of control. Responses to each of these questions are explained in detail below.

**Central Research Question.** The central research question for this study asked: *How do teachers describe their experiences working in schools that have had principal turnover?* The participants in this study described their experiences through various lenses that were positive,
negative, and neutral in nature. Teachers discussed their beliefs about turnover, noting that going from one principal to another required several adjustments from both the staff and students. Transitions between principals meant adjusting to new visions, new expectations, and new ways of doing things, which meant perceptions differed depending upon how the new visions were communicated and the leadership style of the incoming principal.

Sub-question 1. The first sub-question for this study was: How do teachers describe influences that principal turnover has on student achievement. The influence that principal turnover had on student achievement, according to teachers, was highly dependent on the climate that a principal created in the school, which, in turn, was reflected in individual classrooms. Participants expressed that principals play a pivotal role in the establishment of the rules, policies, and expectations in the school. Cassidy, Donna, Alice, and Anna talked about how students may test new principals the way that they test new teachers and will try to see what they can “get away with.” The impact on student achievement was indirectly affected through the student’s learning environment and learning environments have a tendency to be dependent on a principal’s leadership style. If the leader does not follow-through or build rapport with students, Anna noted, “you see it right in front of your face” the way that students exhibit behavioral issues and become disruptive to the learning environment either because they think they are in charge, or that there will be no consequences for their bad behaviors. Conversely, if a leader is transformational, supportive, and clear in his or her expectations, said Faye:

There's very limited disruptive activities in the class, kids are focused, the kids are doing what they need to do. So, the learning environment is, like, completely different, and it's so much better for the students, because the time is being maximized, and it’s as best as it can be.
Sub-question 2. The second sub-question was: How do teachers describe ways that school climate and culture are influenced by principal turnover. Participants discussed various ways that a school’s culture and climate were impacted due to a change in leadership. There were positives and negatives associated with a change in principal. One of the most positive changes to the school culture and climate occurred when someone new comes in with fresh ideas, fresh motivation, and new visions that can help complacent teachers regain a “new fire.” Faye said at her school this year, the atmosphere has completely changed, “nobody misses work,” and “people are holding doors for each other.” When a principal comes in who is dynamic, transformational, and an effective communicator, students recognize the change and the transition is easier. This was the case for Cassidy, who said that this year her students did not need a “honeymoon phase,” because they came to school the first day knowing that there were high expectations for behavior. However, if principals arrive and try to make “too many changes too fast,” it can result in negative impacts on school climate because teachers can start to “feel like they are drowning,” as Alice noted in her interview, and become overwhelmed with all the new tasks at hand. Teachers spoke about the ways that some teachers in the school attributed a positive or negative school climate when they either supported the new visions and initiatives, or were resistant to, and had negative feelings about change.

Sub-question 3. The third sub-question asked: How do teachers describe their emotional experiences with principal turnover? Many emotions surfaced as teachers talked about their experiences with principal turnover, ranging from excitement to being “super pumped,” as Cassidy stated, to nervousness, anxiety, sadness, stress, worry, etc. Most of these emotions were attributed to the uncertainty that went along with change and not knowing if they would be getting someone “awful” or someone great in place of a previous leader. Others felt neutral and
expectant during these times, because “that’s just the time we’re living in.” Cassandra and
Kendrick both felt that it is typical for administrators to come and go while teachers remain for
longer periods of time. However, regardless of what emotions teachers had as it related to their
experiences with principal turnover, there was a consensus among participants that, emotions are
eased when principals are effective communicators with clear visions. Henry, Alice, Anna,
Cassidy all felt that time is an important part of transitions because teachers need time to
get become accustomed to a new principals’ expectations before too many initiatives are started;
and principals need time to make their ideas come to life. Visibility also helped teachers to feel
that they, and their students are being supported. Gloria, Cassidy, and Lynette each talked about
how, when a principal was visible, the tension of turnover was eased because the new principal
became someone the kids and the students both knew was invested in them and their school.
When principals came in that were visible, or when principals who were not visible were
replaced with those who were, it is was good for the overall climate in of the school and it helped
staff and students alike to feel more supported.

Sub-question 4: The final sub-question was: *How do teachers describe their locus of control regarding principal turnover?* Teachers were asked specifically to describe to what
degree they thought they were in control of their students, their school’s culture and climate, and
themselves during a principal turnover. Most teachers held that, no matter who the principal was,
at the end of the day, they had the strongest control with their students. As Henry explained: “I
think good teachers see themselves as a buffer between turnover and change and their own
students, and they can help to kind of minimize the turbulence or protect them from the
turbulence.” Kendrick, Brittany, and Gloria considered that they had control over themselves
because they did a good job as teachers. Kendrick specifically stated that his “scores speak for
themselves,” referring to his standards of learning (SOL) test scores. Donna, Henry, Hope, and Cassidy took a similar stance stating that they had control over their work output and believed that they carried a great deal of responsibility for getting their students “where they need to be,” regardless of what may be going on around them. Though Donna, Gloria, and Henry said they could not control other people, they noted that their way of controlling their school’s culture and climate was to, as Donna said, “put, like, a positive spin on it, like, ‘yeah, but let's look at this like…’ you know? I try to be positive and keep a smile and try[] to lift the spirits of other people that may be struggling with the change.”

Summary

Chapter four has described detailed information about each participant in the study and discussed the process that was used to organize the study’s data into themes and sub-themes. In order to delve into this phenomenon in a qualitative manner, interviews, focus groups referred to as small group discussions, and written letters were collected as data for the study. After analyzing the data that was collected, relevant words and statements were separated into themes were extracted to develop the five main themes. These five themes were: adjusting to new leaders, adapting to or resisting new visions, turnover impact on students, teachers’ emotions surrounding turnover, and what teachers wanted from incoming leaders. Though the topics that each teacher discussed were different had many differences, the many commonalities in the responses contributed to the creation of the study’s themes. The experiences were both positive and negative.

The data that collected in this study addressed the central research question as well as the four subsequent questions. Teachers described their experiences with principal turnover as a phenomenon that affected not only them, but their students as well. Participants often pointed out
that when leaders were effective communicators, visible, and acted professionally towards teachers that tensions during transitions would be eased. They discussed how students also needed that reinforcement from incoming principals, as well. When principals took time to get to know the staff and were careful when they implemented their new ideas and visions, this also alleviated some of the stress associated with a principal change. Other participants did state that while change can be a good thing, some teachers simply did not like change, which could also cause challenges in a school when principal turnover happens. Overall, the participants expressed a pride in their job and felt great responsibility for supporting their students, acting as a “buffer” for them during times of change. Teachers further noted that change was inevitable, and they needed to be adaptable.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand teachers’ experiences with principal turnover. Participants for this study were 11 teachers from across the state of Virginia who had experienced principal turnover within the last two years. This chapter will include a summary of the findings from the study, an empirical and theoretical discussion of the findings, the study’s theoretical, empirical, and practical implications, as well as delimitations, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

Data collection for the study was undertaken through the use of personal one-to-one interviews, focus groups, and participant-written letters. During data analysis for each of these tools, five main themes emerged that described the experiences teachers had had with principal turnover: (a) adjusting to new leaders, (b) adapting to or resisting change, (c) impact of turnover on students, (d) teacher emotions surrounding turnover, and (e) what teachers wanted from incoming principals. Each of these themes addressed the study’s central research question and subsequent questions as well.

The central research question for the study asked, *How do teachers describe their experiences working in schools that have had principal turnover?* This research question was addressed through the various experiences that teachers expanded on in each phase of the data collection process. Participants told stories about losing good principals and getting ineffective ones, losing micromanagers and getting transformational leaders, the impact that turnover had on school culture and climate, their personal struggles or excitement about the phenomenon, and the ways that students were impacted by the coming and going of principals. The participants had
positive, negative as well as neutral experiences, and their comments were described through these lenses. Teachers who had been in the field for longer amounts of time were able to recall the a number of experiences they had had with principal turnover through the years. These participants talked about times when turnover was positive because the incoming leader was someone who was effective, personable, and treated them as professionals. Other times their experiences were not so good because they did not think that the new principal was visible enough in the school or simply was not well liked by them or their colleagues. When discussing turnovers in which a principal was not notably bad or good, the teachers usually held a neutral attitude. Teachers who had less experience with principal turnover were able to, through their one or few experiences, see the ways that principal turnover would change a school’s climate, and the impact that it had on both students and colleagues, similarly to what veteran teachers experienced.

Teacher-participants described their experiences through the lens of their own experience, some feeling that change was good and could ignite a “new fire,” while others highlighted stress, worry, and anxiety about getting new principals. All agreed that uncertainty went along with a new principal as well as a tendency to wonder what he or she would be like and whether or how the school may be changed. Turnovers were a time of transition and having to adjust to the good or bad of a new leader’s personality, leadership style, visions, and expectations, depended on the individual teacher’s preferences and the new leader’s ability to effectively communicate.

The first sub-question for this study was, How do teachers describe influences that principal turnover has on student achievement. During times of principal turnover, teachers noted that students are aware of new leaders and whether or not they are strict, laid-back,
punitive, supportive, or visible in the school. Participants added that the principal turnover could impact student achievement because if students see that the principal does not “follow through,” they start to learn what they can “get away with,” and test their limits. This impacts their success in the classroom because it results in disciplinary issues if they determine that a principal will not care about them or their behavior. Conversely, if a school gains a supportive, transformational principal, students notice this as well, which impacts the school climate. As a result, students are more likely to want to come to school. If a principal builds relationships with students and takes interest in them by being visible and implementing motivating incentives, students also are more inclined to want to succeed. Additionally, part of a student’s success during times of principal turnover, according to participants, was dependent upon how teachers adapt to the new vision. Teachers who adapt and support new initiatives contribute to a cohesive environment in the school.

The second sub-question for the study was: How do teachers describe ways that school climate and culture are influenced by principal turnover. Principal turnover influence over school culture and climate was a very popular topic amongst participants. Their experiences varied. Some participants had new principals who created dynamic, transformational climates, whereas others had turnovers that resulted in damaged climates, and some experienced no change one way or the other. There were two major ideas that participants believed were “make or break” regarding how the climate and culture were influenced during principal turnover. One such idea had to do with the new principal’s leadership style, personality, and communication skills. For participants who had transformational leaders that exhibited professionalism and communicated expectations clearly, the turnover created a climate that was positive and cohesive among staff and students. For teachers whose new principals were not visible in the school,
micromanagers, or did not follow through on their promises, teachers attributed this to a bad experience with turnover and said that it created negative a school climate.

Another influence on school culture and climate related to the way that teachers responded. The participants explained that, sometimes during turnover, some teachers were adaptable while others were not. When teachers did not learn to adapt or were resistant to the changes that were being made, the environment was incohesive. This happened more often when principals arrived and wanted to make several changes quickly and did not ask for teachers’ opinions and input on the new ideas. However, participants noted that sometimes, no matter what happened, a few people simply did not like change. However, for the 11 participants in the study, they each explained that being adaptable was a key part of working in education this day in age and that learning to adjust is a must.

The third sub-question was: How do teachers describe their emotional experiences with principal turnover? This was another topic that varied based on teacher experience and the types of leaders they were transitioning between. All of the participants had some type of general curiosity and uncertainty when getting a new principal. This was attributed to a natural sense of curiosity about what the new leader will be like and what changes will be made. Teachers who had experienced a turnover from an ineffective leader to someone whom they considered to be effective expressed excitement, content, motivation, enthusiasm, and an overall happiness with the turnover. Those who experienced the opposite had feelings of stress, anxiety, along with a tendency to stay to themselves. Most of the participants expressed that there was a need to have turnover every so often to keep teachers from becoming complacent, but when rapid turnover happened, it was not a good experience.
Whether teachers had experienced excitement or dread with their turnovers, there was an understanding that education was always evolving, and that the principal’s position was not how it used to be, where principals stayed for decades at a time. Teachers were not shocked when turnover happened because it was an expectation and knew it would happen sooner or later. With this in mind, the teachers talked about how they try to do their best to be positive and do their job to the best of their abilities because at the end of the day, it is “all about the kids.”

The fourth sub-question asked: *How do teachers describe their locus of control regarding principal turnover.* Teachers believed that they had the most control of their self and their students during times of principal turnover. Participants expressed that, regardless of what was happening outside of the classroom wall, when the door closed, it was their personal responsibility to do what needed to be done to make sure the students were learning. Sometimes this involved dismissing ideas and initiatives that the principal wanted to see in order to do what they knew was necessary and more important for the kids. Other times it required marrying their own ideas with the principal’s so that all parties were satisfied with the structure and practices in the classroom. Teachers also argued that they played a major role in how turnover influences students by acting as a buffer between them and the changes. This was another way they had control over their students during a transition.

Teachers, further, thought that they had control over how they responded to change, and they stated that they did their best to be adaptable in all situations. The sense of having a strong locus of control was widespread among the participants when it came to themselves. Some argued that it was their responsibility to be positive for their colleagues who may be having a hard time. Even so, they, overall, said that there was little control over the school’s
cultural and climate because it is difficult to control other. Instead, they chose their actions and words wisely when speaking with colleagues.

Discussion

This study contributed to the empirical and theoretical literature in a variety of ways. These findings contribute to the literature on the phenomenon of principal turnover and expand on Julian Rotter’s Locus of Control theory as well.

Empirical

Studies in the literature regarding principal turnover mostly highlight the negatives that surround the phenomenon, although a few highlighted some positive effects. Herman et al. (2008), in their study, was found that change can be successful when leaders who were ineffective are replaced with new, transformational leaders. What made these leaders successful and effective was, in part, that they were “communicating a clear purpose to school staff, creating high expectations and values” and “demonstrating a willingness to make the same types of changes asked of their staff,” all of which are ideals that have been confirmed by this study. This study also reinforced the conclusion of Dhuey & Smith’s (2014) study, which found that improved principal quality can have a positive effect on student achievement. This study’s teachers talked about their experiences with principal turnover and also noted that when a more dynamic, transformational leader came in, students were more likely to push drops in student achievement during turnover occurrences (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Miller, 2013) by acknowledging that students may “test” new principals to see what they can get away with, and if students have a principal who does not follow-through on certain behavioral expectations or build rapport with them, they may not behave as well or work as diligently as possible.
Another concept explored in this study was how principal turnover impacted student achievement, what the direct impact that teachers have on students during these times, and how their own attitudes and beliefs about the new principal can have an influence on students. Several participants in the study believed that they were the buffer for students during times of principal turnover and that it was their responsibility to “protect” students from whatever may change as a result of gaining new administration. The participants explained that some teachers easily adapted to changes and immediately get on-board with the principal’s new vision in order to make the transition as smooth as possible. However, several participants noted that some of their colleagues did not do this, creating tension with the students and within the school. Participants believed that how they responded was a major factor in their students’ success during these times.

Other empirical studies on principal turnover found, with great certainty, that more than anything else, principals play a major role in establishing a school’s culture and climate (Bellibas, 2015; Burkhauser, 2017; Rangel, 2018; Winn, & Reedy, 2017; Wills, 2016). This study echoed this, with participants stating that their school’s culture and climate was worse when new principals came whom teachers did not like, as pointed out in Hanselman’s (2016) research. Furthermore, the climate improved when the principal was effective, personable, visible, and treated teachers as professionals. A study by Burkhauser et al. (2012) found that when principals try to make too many changes at once, it increases the likelihood that a school’s climate will deteriorate. This was also confirmed by this study, which also discovered that the one thing that teachers want from new principals is time. Participants wanted a new principal to take time to listen to the staff and acknowledge their needs and get to know the school before making too many changes. This study confirmed that, in some cases, teachers were appreciative
for principal turnover because the school’s culture and climate benefitted from the change in leadership because it reduced complacency and brought a fresh perspective.

Previous studies had found that principals need to be effective communicators in order to be successful (Alqatani, 2015; Cansoy & Parlar, 2018; Yoon, 2016). This research confirmed this. Teachers that had positive experiences with principal turnover pointed out that their new principals met with them individually to gain insight about the school, clearly outlined expectations for staff and students, and were consistently following-through on practices they had set in place. Teachers that had not had that experience typically said that principals were punitive, micromanagers who did not listen to what teachers wanted or ask for their input at all. This also earlier literature that stated that transformational leaders were much more effective that all other leaders (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017a; Berokovich & Eyal, 2017b; Goswami, Beehr, Grossenbacher, & Nair, 2016; Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Tesfaw, 2014; Griffith, 2004; Zheng, Yin, & Wang, 2018).

Overall, this study contributed to the field of education by expanding perceptions of how principal turnover impacts school culture and climate, student achievement, and the importance of principals being effective communicators and transformation leaders. It highlights the importance of visibility of a principal in easing a transition in that visibility helps teachers to feel supported by principals and to know they are invested in the staff and their students. The study also adds to the field of education through finding that educators are not shocked at the phenomenon of principal turnover, but rather, expect it to happen regularly. With this in mind, some teachers noted that they would be at their schools longer than the administrators, so if an administrator is someone they do not like, chances are, he or she will not be there long. This also conforms to the findings in the literature about teacher retention and principal turnover. Thus,
even though teachers may think about leaving during times of principal turnover (Béteille et al., 2012; Miller, 2013), they also know that if they wait it out, the principal will leave.

**Theoretical**

This study’s theoretical framework was centered on Julian Rotter’s (1966) locus of control theory which states that people either believe it is their own actions that determine their fate (internal locus of control), or environmental factors take predominance (external locus of control). This study extends what is known about locus of control theory by specifically studying teachers and their locus of control during times of principal turnover – this research contributes to understanding a teacher’s perspective. Our research showed that, during a principal turnover, teachers have a strong locus of control in regard to how turnover impacted students. Teachers held themselves accountable for the success of their students, and therefore, believe that it is their responsibility to protect them, or continue to serve them in a successful manner, regardless of who is in leadership.

Additionally, teachers described having a strong locus of control in relation to themselves. Teachers were asked to describe the degree to which they had control of themselves during times of principal turnover. All of the participants perceived that as long as they did what they were required to do, they had no reason to show stress or be worried about the principal. These teachers felt strongly that they were successful, effective teachers and that principals did not impact their self-efficacy or their ability to perform in the classroom, even if they did not agree with the expectations the principal.

School culture and climate was an arena where teachers thought they had the least amount of control, and that external factors were dominant during principal changes. Teachers discussed how they were unable to control how other people respond, but could only control how
they themselves responded. Each of these ideas explore Julian Rotter’s (1966) LCT in new ways. Thus, during times of principal turnover, teachers could or could not control what went on around them.

**Implications**

There are several theoretical, empirical, and practical implications to note about this study that contribute to various stakeholders in the field of education. Each of these areas will be discussed individually.

**Theoretical**

This study used Julian Rotter’s (1966) locus of control theory was the framework for this analysis. Locus of control theory (Rotter, 1966) was used as a means for viewing teachers’ experiences and, establishing to what degree, they were in control during times of principal turnover. This theory suggests that individuals either have an internal locus of control and have a belief that they themselves determine their fate. On the other hand, people with an external locus of control are only able to contribute to how situations unfold (Rotter, 1966). Principal turnover is a phenomenon that teachers typically do not control or expect, to understand how they experienced it from an internal or external locus of control perspective revealed new insight into how teachers are impacted by major change.

This study found that teachers have the strongest internal locus of control in how they feel about the ways their students are impacted by turnover and over themselves. The teacher/participants felt they a strong sense of responsibility when it came to ensuring the success of their students. As the leaders in the classroom, teachers argued that, regardless of what may be going on outside of the classroom, it was their duty to run a successful classroom, and they would do whatever it takes to make that happen. As for themselves, teachers understood
that, in the ever-changing world of education, they needed to learn to adapt. Teachers that did not do so made it harder on themselves. Teachers could control how they responded to situations and reported that they were also responsible for controlling the their own responses around their colleagues to try to be a positive influence on them as well.

Teachers had a stronger external locus of control about the school’s culture and climate during a period of principal turnover. Many participants thought a principal played more of a role in determining the school’s culture and climate. On the other hand, they, the teachers, could not control whether or not the climate gets better or worse. Even though teachers said they could play some role into helping create a positive climate, overall, the culture and climate is determined more by the principal and the success of the transition.

**Empirical**

This study adds to the current literature on how high quality, effective principals can result in an environment in which principal turnover is positive (Herman et al., 2008; Dhuey & Smith, 2014). Further, it contributes to what is known about how principal turnover impacts student achievement (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Miller, 2013). Teachers typically reported that principals’ leadership styles, discipline style, and relationship-building with students plays a major role in determining student achievement during times of principal turnover. This study highlighted, in particular, the important role that teachers play in adapting to the visions and expectations of the new principal. Furthermore, when approached positively, they have an important role to play in influencing students to adapt to the new changes.

Additionally, this study confirms that principals play a major role in establishing the school’s culture and climate (Bellibas, 2015; Burkhauser, 2017; Rangel, 2018; Winn, & Reedy, 2017; Wills, 2016) and that principals need to be effective communicators (Alqatani, 2015;
Cansoy & Parlar, 2018; Yoon, 2016), as well as have a transformational leadership style (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017a; Berokovich & Eyal, 2017b; Goswami, Beehr, Grossenbacher, & Nair, 2016; Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Tesfaw, 2014; Griffith, 2004; Zheng, Yin, & Wang, 2018) in order to ease the natural uncertainties and anxieties that teachers having during principal turnover transitions.

**Practical**

The participants in this study explained that being adaptable to change is one thing that makes principal turnover transitions easier. Understanding that new principals have new visions, expectations, and leadership styles is the first step to adjusting to the change. When teachers are resistant to administrative changes, according to the participants, it creates a negative school climate and makes their jobs harder than need be. Additionally, this study found that teachers know that students are impacted by changes in leadership as well. Participants explained that students can “feel” when there is a negative or positive climate taking over their school. However, if teachers set their own clear expectations and show that they are also supporting the principal’s visions, it helps the students on-board with the change and contributes to a climate of cohesion. As a result, teachers need to consider the impact that their actions, words, and motives has on their students and understand that being adaptable is critical to a smooth transition.

Principals who are taking the rein as the new principal at a school, need to be aware of the importance of communication, visibility, and time when implementing their visions and expectations. Teachers value having a voice and having a principal take action with the teachers’ expressed wants and needs in mind. They also respect a leader who is seen around the school interacting with staff and students. When a principal comes in who is supportive in these ways, teachers are more likely to get on board with what the principal wishes to initiate. Students are
also more likely to sense that the principal is taking initiative in their lives as well when he or she is seen interacting with them in the halls, between classes, and during other times throughout the day. Students and teachers both want and need clear expectations and time to adjust to changes during times of principal turnover. Too many changes at once can leave everyone feeling like they are drowning, but transformational steps in the right direction, which contribute to a positive school climate, can make a potentially bad experience become very productive.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

There were several delimitations and based on the nature of this study. One delimitation that the researcher imposed was utilizing a sample of 11 teachers from one geographical location, the state of Virginia, that acted as a representative group. This representative sample was also limited in that participants had to have experienced principal turnover within the past two years. These delimitations were put in place to ensure that participants had experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and that they had experienced it within a certain amount of time so that they would be able to recall their experience.

A limitation to the study is that, during participant recruitment, the sample that was formed consisted of middle school and high school teachers. It is possible that if elementary teachers had responded and been participants in the study, that they would have different insights. Additionally, this study was limited due to the nature of qualitative research. In order to limit researcher bias, Moustakas’ (1994) processes of *epoche* and researcher bracketing were utilized. I also used a researcher journal to continuously reflect on my experiences and recognize bias should it have surfaced.
Recommendations for Future Research

This purpose of this study was to understand teachers’ experiences working in schools that have had principal turnover. The participants for this study were 11 teachers from across the state of Virginia who have experienced principal turnover within the last two years. The sample included only teachers working in middle schools and high schools. The field of education may benefit from future studies with participants from other geographical locations and teachers working at the elementary school level.

Future research on teachers’ experiences that consider the number of turnovers teachers have experienced would be beneficial as teachers who have experienced several turnovers have a different perspective than those who have only experienced it once or twice. The same could be said for the number of years’ experience, teachers’ educational levels, gender, and their emotions or locus of control surrounding the phenomenon of principal turnover. Additionally, targeting rural, urban, high-poverty and low-poverty areas illuminate other issues.

Qualitative studies that explore students’ experiences with turnover would provide more understanding about their positive or negative experience on their end, what they look for in a principal, and whether they believe that principals can have an impact on their achievement. Principals’ insights into their own experiences, implementing new visions, and the steps they take for having a successful transition, were not researched, but would contribute to understanding the full picture of what both principals and teachers may be experiencing during these uncertain times. A study focusing on principals’ experiences could discover what actions they believe are necessary to take immediately versus over extended periods of time. It could also investigate their personal emotions regarding change, the challenges they face during their transitions, the amount of input they received from teachers before implementing change, their
personal beliefs on being visible in the school, and what they consider when seeking a new school position.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to understand teachers’ experiences working in schools that have been influenced by principal turnover. This study was framed by Julian Rotter’s (1966) locus of control theory and aimed to answer five research questions -- one central question and four sub-questions. Through the use of participant interviews, focus groups, and written letters, I was able to address each of these five research questions in depth.

This study found that teachers’ experience principal turnover differently depending upon their own personality and that of the new, incoming leader. During these times, there are various emotions that are felt by both teachers and students. One of the greatest hurdles when teachers get a new principal is having to adjust to a new leaders’ visions and expectations. Teachers admitted that, even if they were adaptable, some of their colleagues may not be. The way that teachers adapted to or resisted change influences the school culture and climate, and the way that students respond. When teachers support the principal’s vision, the environment for learning was more positive and cohesive.

Overall, teachers had a strong sense of control over their students and believed that they are responsible for their students' success regardless of who is in the principal's office or what is happening outside of their classroom door. However, teachers felt more supported when their experience with turnover was positive. When principals had a transformational style of leadership including being visible, building relationships with students, communicating ideas effectively, and giving new ideas time to come to life, he or she eases the transition during principal turnover and creates a more positive school climate.
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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 29, 2019

Carrie Link
IRB Exemption 3802.052919: A Phenomenological Study of Teachers’ Lived Experiences Working in Schools Influenced by Principal Turnover

Dear Carrie Link,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if… the following criteria is met:

(iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu

Sincerely,

[Redacted]

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Teacher:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to understand teachers’ lived experiences working in schools that have had principal turnover and I am writing to invite you to consider participating in my study. In order to participate you must meet the following criteria:

1. Have experienced principal turnover at your current school
2. Have been employed as a teacher at your current school for the last 2 years

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

1. Participate in a one-on-one interview that should last between 45 minutes to one hour. You will have the ability to choose your preferred method of interviewing (web-conference, or face-to-face). This interview will be audio recorded.
2. Participate in an online small group discussion with other teachers in this study. You will be asked to join a WebEx online video conference meeting and actively participate with others for 90 minutes on a designated date. The small group discussion will be audio recorded. If you do not wish to be seen on video, there is an option to call in and only give the group access to the audio on your computer, phone, or other device.
3. Participate in writing a letter to an imaginary teacher. You will be asked to use your imagination and pretend that you have just found out that a teacher you know will be getting a new principal. The letter will ask you to describe your thoughts, emotions, and experiences with principal transitions. This may take anywhere from 15-30 minutes to compose.
4. Review the transcripts of your interview data and your part in the small group discussion to ensure that they are accurate. This should take about 15 minutes for you to complete.

Your name and/or other identifying information will be collected as part of your participation, but this information will remain confidential. As a token of my appreciation for your participation, you will be compensated with a $35 Amazon gift card once your interview, focus group, and written letter are complete.

To participate, please complete the screening survey below to determine your eligibility. The screening survey should be completed by clicking on the link provided. If you are selected to participate, you will receive a follow-up email with the consent document and instructions to schedule your interview. The consent document contains additional information about my study and should be signed and returned to me in order to schedule the interview.

Please email me at [email protected] or call me at [phone number] if you have additional questions. Thank you for considering this option to participate in my study.

Sincerely,

Carrie Link
Doctoral Candidate at Liberty University
Screening survey web-address - http://bit.ly/2PLLjA0
APPENDIX C: SCREENING SURVEY

This survey was sent out electronically via Google Forms.

Introduction: Hello prospective participants! My name is Carrie Link and I am a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University. I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to understand teachers’ lived experiences working in schools that have had principal turnover. The following survey is designed to help me find potential participants for this study. Thank you for your time.

1. First Name and Last Name: __________________________

2. E-mail address: __________________________

3. Were you employed at your school the year before and the year after an occurrence of principal turnover? Yes or no

4. Should you meet the criteria for this study, would you be interested in participating? Yes, No, Maybe
Dear Teacher:

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study. I have attached a consent form that is required for your participation. It must be signed and returned to me before we can schedule your interview. Please sign, scan and return it to me at [redacted] or you may type your information directly into the form and attach it in an email. Also, when forwarding your consent form, please let me know which method of interviewing you prefer (web-conference or face-to-face) and what dates within the next week that you are available to meet. Thank you so much for taking the time out of your busy schedule to participate in this study. I look forward to working with you and learning from your experiences!

Best regards,

Carrie Barbour Link
Doctoral Candidate and Liberty University
APPENDIX E: CONSENT FORM

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 5/29/2019 to -- Protocol # 3802.052919

A Phenomenological Study of Teachers’ Lived Experiences Working in Schools Influenced by Principal Turnover
Carrie Link
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of how teachers experience principal turnover. You were selected as a possible participant because you are employed at school that has experienced turnover within the last two years. You were also selected because you are a teacher that was at your school before, during, and after the principal turnover. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Carrie Link, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to understand teachers’ lived experiences working in schools that have had principal turnover.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Participate in a one-on-one interview that should last between 45 minutes to one hour. You will have the ability to choose your preferred method of interviewing. This interview will be audio recorded.
2. Participate in an online small group discussion with other teachers in this study. You will be asked to join a WebEx online video conference meeting and actively participate with others for 90 minutes on a designated date. The small group discussion will be audio recorded. If you do not wish to be seen on video, there is an option to call in and only give the group access to the audio on your computer, phone, or other device.
3. Participate in writing a letter to an imaginary teacher. You will be asked to use your imagination and pretend that you have just found out that a teacher you know will be getting a new principal. The letter will ask you to describe your thoughts, emotions, and experiences with principal transitions.
4. Review the transcripts of your interview data and your part in the small group discussion to ensure that they are accurate. This should take about 15 minutes for you to complete.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, no more than you would encounter in everyday life.
Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. However, you may benefit from participating in a small group discussion with other teachers who have experienced principal turnover. The field of education may benefit from the results of this study by gaining a better understanding of how teachers experience principal turnover.

Compensation: Participants will receive a $35 Amazon gift card once their interview, focus group, and letter are complete.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.
- Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym to protect his/her identity. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others cannot easily overhear.
- Interviews and small group discussions will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the small group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from small group discussion data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Small group discussion data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the small group discussion will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Carrie Link. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at cnbarbour2@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty advisor, Dr. Gail Collins at glcollins2@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.
Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

____________________________________________________________
Signature

____________________________________________________________
Date

____________________________________________________________
Signature of Investigator

____________________________________________________________
Date
APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself and what it’s like working at your school.

2. Describe your experience working in a school that has had principal turnover.

3. Describe the ways that your students’ learning environments have been impacted due to a change in leadership.

4. Describe how this relates to impacts on student achievement.

5. Describe the nature of your working conditions during principal turnover.

6. Describe the ways that you believe principal turnover has impacted your school’s culture and climate.

7. To what degree do you feel that you are in control of what happens to students during principal turnover?

8. To what degree do you feel that you are in control of what happens to your school’s culture and climate during principal turnover?

9. To what degree do you feel that you are in control of what happens to you during principal turnover?

10. Describe the emotions you had when you found out that your school would be getting a new principal.

11. Describe any other emotional experiences you’ve had related to principal turnover.

12. Describe what you believe would be an ideal relationship between you and your new principal.

13. What factors do you believe help lead to the establishment of trust between yourself and a principal?
14. To what extent do you feel that a change in leadership impacts your self-efficacy as a teacher?

15. What other ways do you feel that principal turnover has impacted you as a teacher?

16. How has principal turnover influenced your thoughts about wanting to stay at or leave your school?

17. What else should I know regarding your experience living through principal turnover?
APPENDIX G: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Describe your experiences with principal turnover.

2. In what ways does principal turnover impact student achievement?

3. How long do you think it takes for teachers to build trustworthy relationships with new principals? Why?

4. What emotions have you experienced regarding principal turnover?

5. How did your emotions change throughout each phase of the principal transition (before, during, and after)?

6. In what ways do you control the effects of principal turnover?

7. In what ways are the effects of principal turnover out of your control?

8. How does principal turnover impact a teacher’s self-efficacy?

9. Is there anything else that you would like to share with this group about principal turnover that hasn’t already been discussed?
APPENDIX H: PARTICIPANT LETTER INSTRUCTIONS

Participant Instructions: Imagine that you are writing a letter to a teacher who just found out that he/she is going to be getting another new principal. In your opinion, describe the ways that each of the following were impacted as a result of a change in principal: 1. Student achievement, 2. School culture/climate, 3. Your emotions. Which of the three areas did you feel was the most impacted and why? To what extent do you believe you had control over the ways that these three things were affected? If you could go back, what suggestions would you have offered the new principal that would have helped him or her meet the needs of students and teachers?
APPENDIX I: PART OF REFLEXIVE JOURNAL

Interview Thoughts

Participant # - Discipline concerns. Doesn’t feel too impacted by the turnover. Male v. female discipline procedures? Appreciates strict discipline. Students can get an idea of how strict a principal is through the way he/she handles other students’ issues. Meetings and PD stuff changes but not much else. Some teachers decided to leave because they liked the principal who also left. The assistant principal who stayed influenced the incoming principal so that may be why things have not changed much.

Participant # - First adjustment with turnover was hard because the school lost someone who was “amazing.” That person went on to be a superintendent somewhere. Talked about the great principal being visible and the new one staying in his office a lot. Talked about the importance of visibility amongst staff, students, and parents too. Said the principal this year is great because of his visibility and how that’s making a big difference in the climate and culture. Students are behaving because they know there are different expectations. Her students are also wanting to come to school which she feels is positively affecting their achievement. Teachers are also coming. Feels that her biggest control of students is communicating her feelings in staff surveys about culture and climate. New principal = new rules and expectations. Kids are resilient.

Small Group Thoughts

Since students don’t spend that many years at the middle school, it may not have as big of an impact on them because they are there and then gone within 3 years anyway. A dynamic principal has had a good impact on some kids, though, at participant 4’s school. Teachers working with older high school students felt like, aside from curiosity, they weren’t too impacted by the change because they are more worried about graduating. One teacher felt like principals that changed a lot and implemented a lot of new ideas were trying to “prove” themselves by pushing everyone hard. There’s a consensus that principals don’t stay in one place for long anymore. Principals are more concerned about data and test scores than anything else sometimes according to participant 2. Participant 4 stated again that she wants to be treated as a professional. Micromanagers are hard to work for. Laid-back principals are good but not great. Communication is important. A lot of uncertainty about what’s coming next. However, turnover keeps teachers from becoming complacent.

Letter Thoughts

There’s an expectation that things are going to change when new principals come. Teachers need to learn to adapt. Change can be a good thing. Clear expectations helped Participant 2 have a smooth transition. These expectations were outlined for teachers and students alike. For Participant 3 it was hard to see the phenomenon in exclusion because there are so many factors that play into turnover. But based on his experiences, there have been positives and negatives. School culture/climate one of the biggest impacts. District expectations are also important because a lot of change comes from the district, too. Procedures are impacted. Teachers want to be heard and see follow-through. Every principal will be different, teachers just have to learn to adapt.

There were a lot of teachers that talked about change being inevitable. Teachers need to learn to adapt. The expectations are going to change no matter what. Everyone gets a little nervous, that’s human. However, there can be a lot of good that comes out of the turnover so teachers need to keep an open mind. The way the principal impacts the climate can really determine whether it goes good or bad.
APPENDIX J: AUDIT TRAIL

Audit Trail

Expert Review

Expert 1 reviewed all sources for data collection

Pilot Study

Expert 2 reviewed all sources for data collection

Data Collection

Interviews

Focus Groups

Letters

Transcribe

Transcribe

Coding

Theme Development

Chapter Four