IMPROVING THE PROBLEM OF TEACHER RETENTION IN A RURAL MIDDLE
SCHOOL IN SOUTHWESTERN VIRGINIA

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of teacher retention for a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia and to design training strategies to address the problem. A rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia is struggling to retain teachers. The research question for this study was: How can teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia be improved. Interviews with former teachers of the rural middle school were conducted specifically to determine why these individuals left. Survey data was obtained to determine why teachers in this rural middle school choose to stay. Exit documentation from central office was compiled to get more insight as to why teachers chose to leave. Training strategies were developed in order to address the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia based on the results of this study.

Keywords: attrition, middle school, retention, rural
Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to my family, who has always stood by me, encouraging and supporting my dream. To my parents who raised me to believe if you work hard enough for it, you can achieve anything. Without their support, I could never be where I am today. To my husband, Blake, who has spent many afternoons entertaining our children while I work on college assignments without complaint. Lastly, to my girls, Lilly and Kinsley, I hope my diligence and hard work can set an example you can be both proud of and encouraged by. May one day all your dreams come true too!
Acknowledgments

Thankfully there have been so many people who have been willing to assist me through my dissertation journey. So many within my school district have provided me with information necessary for completing my dissertation. These wonderful people need to be acknowledged simply because I would be lost without their help. I am not going to specifically naming these people, because I fear I will forget someone. A special thank you to all the teachers who agreed to complete the survey, all the former teachers who allowed me to interview them, the administration, guidance staff, and all the central office employees. And to each and every one of my coworkers and friends who helped me along the way, thank you!!! Whether I needed encouragement or tough love, you always delivered. You know who you are!

I want to give God all the glory! Throughout all this journey, with the highs and the lows, God was with me. He comforted me when I hit speed bumps in the road and felt utterly discouraged. He provided me with rejuvenation when I felt that I could not write another sentence. I was led, through Him, to find joy in simple accomplishments along the way. Without God on this journey I would have failed, but he allowed me to see His path and follow through on my end.
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Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Jones Middle School (JMS)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Teach for America (TFA)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this study was to identify potential solutions to the problem of decreased teacher retention for a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. Chapter One provides background for this research study. The historical, social, and theoretical background is provided to support this study. Teach for America was examined as being an important historical contributor of battling poor teacher retention in rural areas. Different aspects of teaching in rural areas are discussed from a social aspect. Both the methodology and axiological assumption are presented. The theories of Dewey, Freire, and Skinner are applied to this study. The problem statement is provided. The purpose of this research study is discussed. The significance of this study is explained. One central research question driving this study is provided along with three sub-questions. Definitions of frequently used terms are given to assist with understanding the information specific to this research study.

There are four philosophical assumptions that are applied to research being conducted (Creswell & Poth, 2018), but two are applied specifically to this study. The methodology assumption was conveyed during this study. Interview questions were prepared prior to beginning the interview sessions, however, as the interviews progressed follow-up questions or more information became necessary which required deviation from the preset interview questions. Therefore, the methodology originally followed needed to be adjusted as the study progressed. The axiological assumption was also expressed during this study since the researcher was part of the school district being studied. Due to this, the researcher began the study with recognition and acknowledgement of their own biases, values, and preconceived
notions of the situation. These biases were openly discussed, and the value of the study was actively reported throughout the study.

Background

Jones Middle School (JMS), a pseudonym, is located in a small town in Southwestern Virginia. According to the United States Census Bureau (2018), there are approximately 30,000 residents in this rural town. The median income per household is $41,145, which is in the lowest income bracket for the entire state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Jones Middle School provides an education for students in grades sixth through eighth. There are approximately 900 students attending JMS with 61% of the student body population receiving free or reduced lunch. Teacher turnover within the school district is high, and at JMS it is problematic. Without retaining the most effective teachers, Jones Middle School cannot provide the best possible education for students (Papay, Bacher-Hicks, Page, & Marinell, 2017).

Historical

Since the 1980s, teacher retention has been an issue facing school systems nationwide (Teach for America, 2018). The alternative pathway program was developed in this era in order to encourage teacher retention, specifically in rural areas where recruitment can be difficult (Rooks, 2018). The alternative pathway program allowed teachers to become qualified and enter the profession through nontraditional methods. Many states developed their own alternative teacher preparation programs, including Mississippi and Texas (Rooks, 2018). Teachers who completed alternative teacher preparation programs with an emphasis on education in rural areas yielded teachers who remained in rural school systems more often (Kaden, Patterson, Healy, & Adams, 2016).
In 1989, the Teach for America (TFA) organization was established (Rooks, 2018). By 1990, there were 489 members in this organization covering five states, and three years later the AmeriCorps sector was established through the federal government (Teach for America, 2018). This organization’s purpose was to place teachers into under-resourced rural schools. Research has been conducted to determine if TFA actually improved teacher retention and attrition, and was found to improve it for the first two years (Heineke, Mazza, and Tichnor-Wagner, 2014). Of the teachers trained through the TFA alternative program, more than 84% currently remain in the teaching profession (Teach for America, 2018).

“Teaching has been historically viewed as a low paying job suitable for women raising children” (Gomba, 2015, p. 55). Unfortunately, the cycle of teaching being a low paying job has continued into its current state. Females are still predominantly employed as teachers (Tasner, Mihelic, & Ceplak, 2017). In fact, 80.2% of the teaching workforce is made up of women and that amount increases to 84.6% in elementary schools (Ankers de Salis, Rowley, Stokell, & Brundrett, 2018). Low-income rural schools face issues of lower teacher retention more often than higher income schools (Rooks, 2018). Teacher retention is often tied to teacher age, subject level taught, gender, student poverty level, and the number of minorities found within the school (Gomba, 2015). These characteristics are often describing rural areas.

Social

“Nationally, about a third of new teachers leave the profession within five years” (Kaden, et al., 2016, p. 129). Some traditionally trained teachers have left teaching quickly because of poor administration, low professional support, poor working conditions, low salaries, and personal responsibilities (Heineke et al., 2014). Teachers have often been inadequately prepared to teach in rural areas and universities need to adjust their teacher preparation programs to assist
in resolving this issue (Rensburg, Nobel, & McIlveen, 2015). Some teachers have even been discouraged from pursuing careers in rural towns based on negative stereotypes of the area, such as being disadvantaged, isolated, unsophisticated, and stupid (Hazel & McCallum, 2016). However, teachers can gain a great deal from a rural school system and will need to focus more on that, instead of what they themselves can do for the school (Walker-Gibbs, Ludecke, & Kline, 2018).

For many teachers entering the profession, teaching in a rural area can be difficult (Hazel & McCallum, 2016). Some negative aspects of teaching in a rural area have been found to be the lack of collaboration between colleagues and lack of accessible professional development opportunities (Rooks, 2018). It has also been noted that teachers may feel lonely due to the lack of social opportunities available to them in remote rural areas with high poverty rates (Rooks, 2018). By inaccurately preparing teachers for this type of rural environment and specific community characteristics, retention in these schools will continue to decline (Guha, Hyler, & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Oftentimes in rural areas, getting a good education can in turn provide support to maintain and sustain the entire rural community (Rensburg et al., 2015). Rural communities most often revolve around agriculture, mining, or marine occupations that sustain the area by raising their future generations to continue in those professions (Hazel & McCallum, 2016). Because of this, rural school systems have very unique characteristics and, oftentimes, educational policies do not correlate with these needs (Gallo & Beckman, 2016). Teachers in rural school systems need to be trained in the unique diversity and complexity of their school community in order to make education relevant and assist in sustaining the community (Rensburg et al., 2015).
While many teachers do not elect to work in a rural school system, some teachers deliberately choose to work in them (Hazel & McCallum, 2016). Teachers may choose to stay in rural school settings when they have supportive coworkers and strong school leaders (Heineke et al., 2014). When teachers feel valued and excited about working in a rural environment, along with other external factors such as higher salaries, parental involvement, and newer school buildings, teachers will decide to stay in the area (Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Teachers who were born and raised in rural areas were more likely to return to these types of areas to teach and often remain in the location simply because these teachers can use their own cultural knowledge to assist in student instruction (Deringer, 2017).

**Theoretical**

One theory applied to this research study is John Dewey’s Theory of Valuation. John Dewey developed the Theory of Valuation and believed that all researchers should look at the world in a manner that is intelligent and not as how we think we should see the world (Hammond, 2013). Valuation is basically finding knowledge about what should happen next based not on what we believe should happen, but based on what we have discovered through experimentation (Garrison, 2018). According to the Valuation Theory, all actions are deliberately performed and influenced by the value they create (Ernst, 1974). This has a specific impact on rural educators. Rural areas are unique and need to be looked at in a fresh manner in order to accurately prepare teachers for employment in these areas of large diversity (Avery, 2013), especially when these teachers are not originally from the rural area. Teachers will need to understand the value of teaching in a rural school in order to choose to stay in their positions. This is a direct reflection of Dewey’s Theory of Valuation.
A second theory applied to this research study is Paulo Freire’s theory of critical educational pedagogy. Paulo Freire believed that students should be allowed to become active participants in their own education, and dialogue between the teacher and student is necessary for learning to happen (Kohan, 2018). Rural educators can incorporate outside factors into the classroom so that rural students can better understand why they are learning certain concepts and topics. Teachers can encourage students to question their education and allow them to demonstrate their own understanding and knowledge when connections can be developed. Freire did not believe in oppressing people simply because of a lack of available education (Fernandez-Aballi Altamirano, 2016) and therefore, developed a theory of critical educational pedagogy. Unfortunately, by not being able to retain good teachers in a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia, these students may not receive the best educational opportunities, consequently oppressing their natural abilities. Teachers in rural areas must be accurately trained to incorporate community aspects in their classroom in order to successfully teach students. Freire believed that all students should have the best opportunity to learn (Roberts, 2015). This means the best teachers will need to be retained in rural areas to ensure they have the opportunities other localities are afforded simply because of their close location to community resources (Roberts, 2015).

The last theory applied to this research study is B.F. Skinner’s Theory of Human Behavior. B. F. Skinner developed the Theory of Human Behavior and believed that the choices made by humans can have either a negative or positive impact on their overall welfare (Goddard, 2017). This negative impact can be seen when rural schools suffer from poor teacher retention as good teachers leave in order to obtain positions that offer economic benefits, even if they are temporary (Huffling, Carlone, & Benavides, 2017). Teachers are only as successful as they
perceive themselves to be in certain situations, and if they do not feel successful in rural school systems they will leave (Vargas, 2017). Parts of Skinner’s Theory of Behavior demonstrate how every person’s personality and sense of self explains their behavior (Phelps, 2015), and this could explain why teachers do not want to remain in rural school systems.

**Problem Statement**

Many studies have been conducted and it has been determined that “nationally, about a third of new teachers leave the profession within five years” (Kaden et al., 2016, p. 129). Globally, teacher attraction and retention has been rather exaggerated in rural areas (Hazel & McCallum, 2016). Rural areas are stereotyped as having horrible professional and social aspects (Rensburg et al., 2015). Jones Middle School, a pseudonym, is located in a rural area and has been consistently affected by poor teacher retention. Unfortunately, due to this rural area’s isolation, lack of funding, and small student population, teachers are often lured to urban school systems simply through monetary incentives or promises of graduate tuition, leaving rural areas in need of good teachers (Avery, 2013).

A rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia is struggling to retain teachers and this needs to be studied in order to find ways to improve the problem. Urban areas are often used as places to study teacher retention and rural areas are often left out (Gallo & Beckman, 2016). According to Hazel and McCallum (2016), some teacher preparation programs even push teachers away from working in rural schools. Rural areas have unique characteristics that teachers must be prepared to teach in (Gallo & Beckman, 2016). Oftentimes rural areas have higher test scores and a higher graduation rate when compared to their urban counterparts (Avery, 2013) but retaining good teachers is difficult. Residency programs are attempting to
focus on rural areas in order to avoid poor teacher retention in these school systems (Guha et al., 2017).

Even though rural areas are more susceptible to teacher retention issues (Young, 2018), many studies have been conducted focusing on urban areas. Gallo and Beckman (2016) solely study urban teacher retention. Morettini (2016) studied the effects of mentoring on teacher retention in urban areas. Shifrer, Turley, and Heard (2017) studied only how teacher retention was affected when teachers were compensated for student achievement in urban schools. Many policies have been developed based on the larger school districts in each state but typically do not look at rural areas (Holmes, Parker, & Gibson 2019). This study has attempted to meet the discrepancies in the research by looking at a rural middle school.

Teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia needs to be improved. This study has first focused on why teacher retention is low. Qualitative data was gathered by conducting interviews with five participants who chose to leave Jones Middle School for other teaching positions or other professions. Quantitative data was collected through surveys of current teachers at JMS to determine why they remain in their positions. Exit documentation was studied to glean more information as to why teachers have chosen to leave JMS and the school district. A multi-method research design was best for obtaining information specifically targeting teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia because it allowed all aspects of the problem to be studied.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of teacher retention for a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia and to formulate a solution to address the problem. A multi-method design was used consisting of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The
first approach was structured interviews with five former teachers at Jones Middle School, a pseudonym. The interviewees included teachers who left the school for another teaching position or teachers who stopped teaching altogether but were not of retirement age. The interviews with former teachers provided the most valuable information relevant to the study. The second approach was exit documents obtained from central office from teachers who left the school, either for retirement, other positions, or other occupations. These exit documents provided more information as to why teachers have left the school on a larger scale. The third approach was surveys conducted with current teachers employed at Jones Middle School.

**Significance of the Study**

Jones Middle School, a pseudonym, has experienced a high volume of teacher turnover within the last few years. Teacher retention is costly (Heineke et al., 2014) and monetary means to support high rates of teacher turnover is problematic for Jones Public Schools, a pseudonym. The school benefitted from this study by discovering the reasons that teachers are choosing to leave. Strategies were developed to battle against the high teacher turnover rates. This study was specific to a rural area with high poverty and may possibly assist in determining ways to improve teacher retention in rural areas. By improving teacher retention in this rural area, not only will the academic achievement of all students be improved (Kaden et al., 2016), but also the small school system may save millions of dollars, as the cost of recruiting teachers is expensive (Heineke et al., 2014). Retaining teachers may contribute to students being better prepared to become active members of their community and help sustain the economy within this rural area (Gallo & Beckman, 2016). By conducting the study in a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia, results may impact other rural areas and provide them with insight concerning low teacher retention.
Many studies have been completed in urban areas. The effects of mentoring on teacher retention in urban areas have been studied (Morettini, 2016). Shifrer et al. (2017) studied how teacher retention was affected when teachers were compensated for student achievement in urban schools. Although retirements and increased student enrollment are often seen as issues specific to teacher retention, this is not necessarily always the case (Ingersoll, 2001). One major factor of examining teacher attrition across all localities is looking at it from the human capital approach which explains why younger teachers are more likely to leave the profession than older teachers (Kirby & Grissmer, 1993). Inman and Marlow (2004) determined one way to improve teacher retention was by providing teachers with support through the community, coworkers, and administration, and this can directly apply to rural areas.

**Research Questions**

**Central Question:** How can the problem of teacher retention be solved at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia?

**Sub-question 1:** How would former teachers in an interview solve the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia?

**Sub-question 2:** How would exit documentation completed by former teachers inform the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia?

**Sub-question 3:** How would quantitative survey data from currently employed teachers inform the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia?

**Definitions**

1. *Attrition* - The proportion of teachers who leave annually (Kirby & Grissmer, 1993).

2. *Axiological Assumption* - All researchers bring values to a study, but these values and biases are made known in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
3. **Methodology Assumption** - Research questions may change in the middle of the study to better reflect the types of questions needed to understand the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4. **Retention** - Remaining in the same school district, as a classroom teacher, from one school year to the next (Kaden et al., 2016).

5. **Rural** - Small communities which are considerable distances away from other communities (Kaden et al., 2016) and often revolve around agriculture, mining, and marine culture (Hazel & McCallum, 2016).

6. **Sustainability** - Local economy, community well being, a sense of belonging, and the state of the local environment are all factors impacting the resiliency of rural communities (Hazel & McCallum, 2016).

7. **Turnover** - Departure of teachers from their teaching jobs (Kaden et al., 2016).

**Summary**

The problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia needs to be solved. The purpose of this study was to determine how to improve teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. Schools began having poor teacher retention and attrition in the 1980s. Studies have been conducted from that time until the present. Typically, urban schools have been the focus of teacher retention studies, but rural areas also need assistance when it comes to maintaining good teachers. Since Jones Middle School is not the only rural area experiencing poor teacher retention, this study may provide insight to other rural school districts and allow them to also improve their teacher retention.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter two contains the theoretical and conceptual framework that this study is based upon. The theories of Dewey, Freire, and Skinner have laid the platform to support this research study and may provide support for improving teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. Related literature is also discussed at length to determine relevant information pertaining to, and associated with, this study. Major headings within the related literature section have been developed to support the significance of this study and include issues of low teacher retention, provisional licensure for new hires, and improving teacher retention. Improving teacher retention is further divided and discussed including teacher preparation programs, cohorts and mentoring, administration, incentives, and working conditions.

Theoretical Framework

Many educational theories contribute to this research study. This study was based on the theories of John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and B. F. Skinner. Each of these theorists looked at education as a way to level the playing field for students through encouraging values, questioning authority, and developing positive behavioral practices. Teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia may be improved by applying information from each of these theories. John Dewey’s Theory of Valuation specifically related to this study because it provided an explanation about what people value within their profession and adjusts their original beliefs to find value in rural school environments (Kruger & Reinhart, 2017), which can directly improve teacher retention. Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy supported teacher retention at rural school systems by using the natural rural environment to encourage student learning (Matthews, 2014). This place-based teaching and learning allowed both teachers and students to
find a place within their community and assist in maintaining these small, yet nationally important, factors within our country (Avery & Hains, 2017). B. F. Skinner’s Theory of Human Behavior directly related to teacher retention within rural school systems because it assisted in finding attributes of rural areas and properly preparing teachers in teacher preparation programs by changing their preconceived mindset concerning rurality (Johnson, Kohler, & Ross, 2016).

**Theory of Valuation**

In 1939, John Dewey developed the Theory of Valuation (Lamine, 2018). “Valuation as liking and disliking is to be considered in terms of observable and identifiable modes of behavior” (Dewey, 1939, p. 490). Dewey claimed that all thinking takes risk, but that education should encompass democratic ideologies such as courage and imagination (Doddington, Heilbronn, & Higham, 2018). In order to successfully teach students, teachers must be the provider of knowledge and skills by facilitating experiences for a student that incorporates their environment (Harris, 2018). This is especially important in rural education systems due to decreased employment opportunities available in these rural areas.

Dewey’s Theory of Valuation contained two parts: the instant appreciation or reflection and the judgment or evaluation (Lamine, 2018). Prizing and appraising are both contributing factors to Dewey’s Theory of Valuation (Kruger & Reinhart, 2017). Prizing assists in assigning a value to something based on personal desires and interests while appraising compares these desires and interests in an intellectual manner (Kruger & Reinhart, 2017). Teachers must first decide the value of teaching in a rural school system and then compare this personal opinion to the intellectual value of teaching within a rural school district. Teacher retention can be tied into these two aspects (Kruger & Reinhart, 2017). If rural school districts can market themselves to properly display the attributes of working there, the value a teacher places on their professional
decision can be improved (Ulferts, 2015). This perceived added value may then improve teacher retention in rural school systems.

Valuation has been proven to assist in an explanation of individual’s actions and choices (Kruger & Reinhart, 2017). Dewey’s Theory of Valuation provided an explanation as to why teachers choose to leave rural education especially when they are underprepared for what is expected of them. If a teacher assessed the value of being employed in a rural school system as being unproductive, they will not remain in that teaching position (Bjarnason & Thorarinsdottir, 2018). Teachers are often assumed to choose the teaching profession deliberately and simply because it provides them with satisfaction (Stercke, Goyette, & Robertson, 2015) and this may carry over into rural areas. Teacher retention may be improved in rural areas when the school district is able to encourage teacher satisfaction through more than just monetary gratification.

Teachers who are properly prepared to teach in rural areas will be able to provide rural students with a quality education (Rooks, 2018). Quality education in rural school systems is especially important simply because of the lack of available community resources such as access to museums, plays, etc. (Avery, 2013). When teachers value their positions, they are able to more successfully establish positive relationships with students, which can contribute to a more effective education incorporating location-based resources (English, 2016). Stakeholder involvement is important to the functioning of rural school districts (Lloyd, McHugh, Minton, Eke, & Wyatt, 2017). If teachers can foster a collaborative relationship with these community partners, students may be able to find value within their environment and education. This value can translate into improved assessment scores and other positive enrichments for the student, which may also contribute to teacher satisfaction. Satisfied teachers do not leave their jobs.

Dewey (1939) believed that ideas help to guide actions through working hypotheses of
conscience choices. His Theory of Valuation related specifically to this study because teachers must first evaluate if they are initially appreciative of their position in rural education and make a choice to either stay or leave. If teachers are accurately prepared to facilitate student learning by working with stakeholders and bringing in community experiences, they may feel more satisfied with their positions and choose to remain in rural schools. Hence, values can change as the environmental factors change (Mitchell, 1945). This study has expanded on Dewey’s Theory of Valuation and assisted in improving teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia by determining what is valuable to teachers and then developing strategies to encourage them to remain in rural education systems.

**Critical Educational Pedagogy**

Paulo Freire’s development of pedagogy became influential in the 1970s and 1980s, and focused on allowing all humans to make contributions within their community, and the opportunity to become active members in society (Veugelers, 2017). Educating students was often seen as “an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (Freire & Ramos, 2009, p. 163). Through Freire’s critical educational pedagogy developments, it has been determined that this is not the case. The ideas established by Freire have allowed pedagogies to be developed which permit teachers and students to grow into co-learners and can better assist in students becoming critically engaged in their own education (Matthews, 2014). When teachers and students are equally involved in the teaching and learning process, happiness and satisfaction may occur which can improve teacher retention in rural school districts.

Gadotti and Torres (2009) noted Freire’s belief that education should orient people within their own lives instead of just teaching everyone the same information, resulting in a
homogeneous society. Rural communities help to sustain the nation (Rooks, 2018). Teacher preparation programs should not fall into the trap of preparing teachers for standardized school systems, simply because this is not the reality of the teaching profession. By allowing all cultures within our society to be supported we are creating a better world that supports cultural differences instead of suppressing them (Celeste Kee & Carr-Chellman, 2019) and this includes rural communities. Teacher preparation programs should better reflect a program that is supportive of all types of school districts and allow their teacher trainees to obtain field experience in many different localities. By discovering the school environment that teacher trainees prefer and training for that area, teachers will feel better prepared for the teaching profession and teacher retention may be improved.

The teachings of Freire assist with the explanation of the importance of incorporating community aspects into rural education (Avery, 2013). “The teacher’s thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students’ thinking” (Freire & Ramos, 2009, p. 167). If teachers are not trained on how to successfully incorporate community aspects into their classroom teachings, they may leave rural education systems and the students suffer academically (Young 2018). Teacher preparation programs that can accurately incorporate aspects of how to effectively include community and stakeholder involvement in rural school districts can help to fight the battle of low teacher retention in rural areas. Freire’s studies have provided information as to why teachers do not want to remain in rural areas (Veugelers, 2017), therefore based off of this information, teacher preparation programs can better prepare teacher trainees to become successful in rural school districts.

Freire’s teachings encouraged students to "be open to the world, be ready to think; each day be ready not to accept what is said just because it is said, be predisposed to reread what is
read; each day investigate, question, and doubt" (Freire, 1985, p. 181). Educational practices are based on a standardized curriculum often that does not incorporate aspects of rural locations (Sobel, 2005). Frequently, people in rural locations must face high poverty levels, high unemployment, inaccessible healthcare, and inequitable educational opportunities (Zimmerman & Weible, 2017). Because of this, teachers must adjust the way they teach students in rural schools. Incorporating place-based educational practices can help students to question their education and allow them to turn to their environment instead of the knowledge provided from a teacher’s head (Avery, 2017). Rural areas also have a large amount of community partnerships and stakeholders who are involved in educating students, which can be a big asset to the teacher if utilized properly. By taking Freire’s theory and applying it to a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia, teacher retention can be improved through reinventing teacher preparation programs to incorporate the important qualities of rural school systems, which can assist in reducing the stress of the teaching profession.

This study has assisted in determining why teacher retention may be so low in rural areas and further provided information to Freire’s work. When teachers begin to single out certain aspects of their background awareness and reflect upon that, they are able to apply this to the here and now reality to become better teachers (Freire & Ramos, 2009). Freire’s base knowledge can be extended upon by showing that when good teachers remain in rural school systems, students can reach maximum achievement which otherwise would be unattainable. Freire’s studies supported the fact that if equally good teachers do not remain in rural school systems, these students will become educationally oppressed and our country will suffer the consequences.
Theory of Human Behavior

In 1938, B. F. Skinner began developing his theory on the behavior of organisms and in 1943, the significance of his theory on human behavior came to light (Peterson, 2004). Inspired by Watson’s (1925) earlier theories on behavior, Skinner began to wonder how normally functioning individuals behave in their typical environment (Day, 2016). Skinner’s Theory of Human Behavior focuses on solving important real-world problems by modifying a person’s behavior (DeMelo, DeCastro, Lopes, & DeRose, 2015). Every environmental stimulus created a learned response, which could be changed using a different environmental stimulus (Johnson et al., 2016). This knowledge may assist in improving teacher retention in rural school districts.

The philosophy behind Skinner’s theory focuses on the goal of adjusting a person’s behavior by finding what is causing the behavior and changing it (Smith, 2019). One important factor of Skinner’s Theory of Human Behavior is that it explains how environmental factors have a larger impact on a person than genetic factors (Ozcelik, 2017). His theory specifically focuses on “the fact that the task is to change, not people, but rather the world in which they live” (Skinner, 1975, p. 48). By determining environmental factors that can be controlled and targeting this knowledge, people can intentionally change what is causing a behavior (Smith, 2019). So, if an environmental aspect can be the determining factor behind poor teacher retention in rural areas, this environmental factor may be intentionally adjusted to, instead, improve teacher retention in these same rural areas.

In the beginning years of teaching, novice teachers are often overwhelmed and discouraged from working in disadvantaged areas where there could be multiple preparations for each class (Adams & Woods, 2015). Personal issues such as family concerns or illnesses also have an effect on individual behaviors, which can contribute to poor teacher retention (Weldon,
Skinner’s Theory of Behavior is seen every day through normal human interactions with other people or with their environment (Vargas, 2017). Feelings play a huge role in human behavior (Skinner, 1975). The choices of teachers to remain in rural areas can be altered when rural areas are able to express the positive attributes of their school systems (Ulferts, 2015). So, just like Skinner theorized when teachers begin their careers, their behavior can be adjusted to remain in rural school settings if the reasons for leaving can be determined and alternations made (Tang, 2018).

This study focused on improving teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. The environment affects a person and behaviors are produced by that person based on their knowledge and feelings of the place (Skinner, 1975). Being able to discover the correct reinforcements, whether positive or negative, can assist in contributing ideas for retaining good teachers in rural educational systems (Ozcelik, 2017). By determining why teachers are leaving the profession, Skinner’s Theory of Human Behavior can assist in better preparing teachers for rural areas by adjusting their preconceived notions about rural areas (Zhang & Zeller, 2016). Skinner (1975) believed that positive memories create positive behaviors. So, when teachers access their stored memories of rural areas, the probability of their behavior can be assessed, either positively or negatively (Skinner, 1975).

The study has further developed Skinner’s theory by changing the way teacher preparation programs approach the concept of teaching in rural school systems. By discovering the attributes that are required for teachers to remain in rural areas, school districts may be able to change their own behavior towards effective recruitment practices and improve teacher retention (Durksen & Klassen, 2018). These recruitment practices are based on theories developed to create “an intuitive wisdom acquired from experience” (Skinner, 1975, p. 46).
Using Skinner’s theory, rural education systems may experience the effects of improved teacher retention through the implementation of positive reinforcement opportunities for teachers who remain in their systems (Ozcelik, 2017).

**Related Literature**

For one rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia, teacher retention needs to be improved. Unfortunately, there are many reasons not to work in a rural school district. Lack of resources, poor achievement scores, high poverty level, and isolation are just a few reasons that many teachers avoid working in rural school districts (Thornton, 2018). Attempting to retain good teachers in all school settings is problematic on a global level, regardless of their size or history (Young, 2018). One study even showed that when students enter a teacher preparation program at a more selective college with higher SAT scores, they are more likely not to enter the teaching profession at all or to leave soon after entering the profession (Vagi, Pivovarova, & Barnard, 2017). Improving teacher retention in rural areas will assist in sustaining the nation (Hazel & McCallum, 2016) and was the focus of this research study.

**Issues of Low Teacher Retention**

The teaching profession is impacted by a turnover rate that is four times higher than that of other professions, and in some locations the turnover rate reaches 40% annually (Ulferts, 2015). Rural areas often experience negative stereotypes which extend into the education profession and cause early career teachers to be discouraged from becoming employed in these areas (Hazel & McCallum, 2016). Rural schools are often determined to be hard to staff simply because of the preconceptions of rurality (Walker-Gibbs et al., 2018). Superintendents of these school districts noted that recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers was their largest concern (Ulferts, 2015). The cost of recruiting and retaining good teachers for rural school
districts has a negative impact on these small districts (Geiger & Pivovrova, 2018). In some locations, teachers in rural areas can be seen as inferior to teachers in other educational environments (Bjarnason & Thorarinsdottir, 2017).

Demands and expectations from the Department of Education pertaining to teacher preparation programs continue to rise, and vacancies within the teaching profession parallel this increase (Hilton, 2017). The poor quality of teachers may also contribute to the issue that schools face in terms of student achievement and teacher retention (Kelchtermans, 2017). If teachers are unprepared for the expectations and demands of a rural school system, they are more likely to leave the profession, leaving the school district in a bind to quickly find a replacement (Hazel & McCallum, 2016). And this replacement may not necessarily be beneficial to the district or students (Kelchtermans, 2017). Money spent on recruiting and retaining teachers does not return the value that is expected of it since graduates do not often apply for teaching positions that, unfortunately, may dramatically affect rural areas (Hilton, 2017). Recruiting and retaining teachers is costly, and rural school systems can hardly afford it (Geiger & Pivovrova, 2018).

It is difficult to ignore the negative impact that poor teacher retention has had on the school system and students who attend these schools (Kaden et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the schools that are most affected by this turnover are school systems which have students coming from low-income families or have high minority numbers within their schools (Gomba, 2015). It has also been determined that teachers are more likely to leave if they teach science or mathematics (Gomba, 2015). It has been noted that 16% of rural schools have NCLB compliance issues in secondary science and 10% have compliance issues in secondary math (Ulferts, 2015). Retaining effective teachers can help combat student achievement issues but
rural schools may also benefit from not retaining poor quality teachers who are ineffective in their professional role as the teacher (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Keeping poor quality teachers simply for the purpose of improving teacher retention will leave school systems lacking in the achievement department.

Recruiting and retaining teachers has come at a huge cost for the school district, which puts added pressure on rural areas that lack monetary resources (Papay et al., 2017). Administrators have found it difficult to hire and retain good teachers because of their isolated communities and lack of adequate resources (Young, 2018). The cost accrued by a rural school system, however, is not only monetary. Unfortunately, hiring unqualified teachers resulted in lowered student success (Gomba, 2015). A lack of teacher retention has a negative impact on student achievement and the community as a whole (Kaden et al., 2016). Continued reduced student success often leads to an even larger increase in teacher turnover and the cycle continues (Gomba, 2015). Not only does the cycle continue, but one study found that punishments for poor student achievement did nothing to improve the position that the school was in and was directly tied to a lower teacher retention rate (Young, 2018).

Rural school systems often suffer from the revolving door effect where retaining teachers is difficult (Gomba, 2015). These recruiting and retaining issues have caused a significant amount of damage to the education system (Dos Santos, 2019). When schools keep poor quality teachers, they produce poor quality students, who may then become a future poor-quality teacher (Gomba, 2016). This cycle continues and the educational system continues to have poor quality production, and over time the entire human population suffers (Kaden et al., 2016). Unfortunately, rural areas seem to be affected by the impact of poor teacher retention more often than their urban counterparts (Young, 2018). With this regularly occurring large teacher
turnover, students and parents are resigned to the revolving door of teachers within these rural school systems (Kaden et al., 2016).

**Provisional Licensure**

There is a high demand for teachers, but a low supply of them (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2019). In many countries, teacher shortages have been occurring for the past 70 years (Swanson & Mason, 2018). In fact, the teacher shortage is specifically having a negative impact on the entire United States (Lux, 2018). In 2016-2017, 87,000 teaching vacancies across the United States were filled with unlicensed teachers (Sutcher et al., 2019). In order to combat the teacher shortage, Indiana provides a one-year emergency teaching permit, which is a one-year teaching credential for a person with at least a bachelor’s degree who is working towards obtaining teaching credentials (Ritz, 2018). However, by hiring unlicensed teachers, school districts may be perceived as lowering the standards they set for their teachers (Yaffe, 2016). Students are negatively impacted by schools allowing poorly trained teachers who are not monitored or properly prepared into the classroom, and this impact may lead to dangerous outcomes such as mental, emotional, and physical trauma to students (Lux, 2018).

State assessments are not indicative of what teachers know, they are based on how much a teacher can get a student to know, and this process requires extensive training (Lux, 2018). By employing unlicensed teachers in the classroom who have not been properly trained on how to educate, students are getting the short end of the educational stick which leads to lowered learning and poorer assessment scores (Whitford, Zhang, & Katsiyannis, 2018). Funding is often based on these assessment scores and is reduced because policymakers do not want to put money into a system they deem as failing (Lux, 2018). When funding is decreased, money provided to find good teachers is also decreased, which may lead to finding anyone who is willing to perform
the job (Lux, 2018). When teachers are in high demand the policymakers look towards filling positions instead of finding good quality teachers (Sutcher et al., 2019). But not everyone is cut out to work with children, even if they can successfully pass a teaching licensure test (Yaffe, 2016). When this happens, it is implied that proper teacher training is pointless, which leads to underprepared teachers and the whole teaching profession is viewed in a negative light (Lux, 2018). Teachers who are underprepared or have no pedagogical training, are two to three times more likely to leave the profession, which appears to escalate the cycle of low teacher retention rates across the nation (Sutcher et al., 2019).

**Improving Teacher Retention**

Teachers are expected to accurately prepare students for becoming active members of a 21st century workforce in a global economy (Adams & Woods, 2015). Therefore, school systems cannot simply recruit good quality teachers; they must also retain them (Wronowski, 2017) while being able to release teachers that are of poor quality (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Rural areas, along with large cities, are more likely to experience teacher retention issues (Young, 2018). Durksen and Klassen (2018) identified some attributes that teachers may possess to assist them in successfully remaining in a rural education system. These include high resiliency, personal attributes such as motivation, self-awareness, personality, teacher emotions, and teacher-student interactions (Durksen & Klassen, 2018). Being able to identify these characteristics within teacher applicants may assist administrators and superintendents in recruiting teachers who will remain in the profession.

To assist in ensuring student success, high quality teacher recruitment and retention must be improved (Ovenden-Hope, Blandford, Cain, & Maxwell, 2018). Studies have been conducted concerning ways to improve teacher retention and include changes to the teacher preparation
programs (Zhang & Zeller, 2016), providing opportunities to join cohorts (Rooks, 2018), mentoring services offered to new teachers (Morettini, 2016), having supportive administration (Thibodeaux, Labat, Lee, & Labat, 2015), offering incentives for remaining in the school (Kelchtermans, 2017), and improving working conditions for teachers (Harrell, Thompson, & Brooks, 2018). While these things may assist in improving teacher retention, they may not completely resolve the problem of low teacher retention for all school districts. It is important to keep in mind, however, that some teacher turnover is necessary when the teacher is not accurately performing their job or natural retirements are occurring (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019).

**Teacher preparation programs.** The many different teacher preparation programs are often equally rated when they are based solely on the number of teachers produced from their programs (Von Hippel & Bellows, 2018). The Department of Education places vast demands and high expectations on teacher preparation programs, however, many differences can be found within these programs (Hilton, 2017). Several factors contribute to the differences in teacher preparation programs including student selections, faculty, curriculum used, internship opportunities, and placement locations (Goldhaber & Cowan, 2014). To develop the accountability scores of teacher preparation programs, studies have looked at a range of several outcomes including teacher “retention, principal evaluations, licensure exam scores, teacher self-ratings, and student test scores” (Bastian, Patterson, & Pan, 2018, p. 429). The differences in teacher preparation programs may assist in developing an explanation for the teacher retention crisis (Hilton, 2017).

Right before the 2016 presidential election, the U. S. Department of Education required publication of an annual report card for the quality of teacher preparation programs (Von Hippel & Bellows, 2018). The purpose of this report card was to assist future teachers in selecting an
appropriate teacher preparation program, which would provide them with the best baseline for a career in education. However, for the purpose of this research study, the programs themselves are not in question, but instead the information these programs provide. Rural school systems are not considered typical places to teach and special considerations need to be incorporated into these teacher preparation programs to better prepare individuals for teaching in rural areas. A standardized teacher preparation program cannot properly prepare teachers for teaching in an unstandardized school setting (Sobel, 2005). Teacher preparation programs that produce underqualified teachers are contributing to the shortage of qualified teachers and the problem of low teacher retention (Kelchtermans, 2017).

Public schools, regardless of their location, have some things in common with each other but are still very different. It is important to note that “in 2003, more than half of the nation’s school districts and more than a third of the nation’s public schools were in rural areas” (Gallo & Beckman, 2016, p. 1). Unfortunately, pre-service teachers are often under informed about rural education and attracting teachers to these environments requires direct and specific intervention within the preparation programs (Rensburg et al., 2015). New alternative routes of developing teacher preparation programs are needed to assist in the problem of teacher retention in rural areas (Zhang & Zeller, 2016). The alternative routes may need to include a place-based education course to better prepare future rural teachers for remaining in the teaching profession. The changes to teacher preparation programs may have a direct and positive impact on a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia.

Traditional teacher preparation programs focus on ensuring that all teachers are highly-qualified based on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) without much focus on the differences between the location of school districts (Whitford et al.,
These types of teacher preparation programs may leave rural education systems lacking in qualified teachers specific to rural areas. Rural students often learn differently than what the expected standardized teacher preparation program can train for (Sobel, 2005). Reports have directly linked student achievement scores in reading and mathematics to teacher preparation (Whitford et al., 2018). When teacher preparation programs are able to include training specific to rural areas, these discrepancies in student achievement scores may be reduced.

Traditional teacher preparation programs also typically serve individuals who do not have prior teaching experience and generally conclude with the individual obtaining a bachelor’s degree or teaching certification (Whitford et al., 2018). These traditional teacher preparation programs focus on basic teaching practices such as content knowledge, classroom management, pedagogical methods, and moral character development (Nguyen, 2018). Newer expectations include some types of technology instruction to better prepare students for a future requiring 21st century skills but do not focus on certain school environments (Graziano & Bryans-Bongey, 2018). Traditional teacher preparation programs will need to be adjusted to better fill openings within rural schools, which will have a direct impact on a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia.

Teach for America (TFA) emerged in the 1980s to develop alternative teacher certification programs as a response to low teacher retention rates (Heineke et al., 2014). This organization targeted all ages of people and recruited them specifically for a school district that allowed the person to glean teaching experiences while obtaining their teaching certification (TFA, 2018). Teachers are continuing to be recruited through this organization still today. The RETAIN programme was piloted in the UK in 2015 to assist early career teachers in educating students from disadvantaged areas, typically found in rural locations (Ovenden-Hope et al., 2018).
2018). This program attempted to support teacher retention, but after the commencement of the program it was determined that it did not make a large impact in regards to teacher retention. Both of these alternative teacher preparation programs focus on rural areas and preparing teachers for working in these types of environments and may assist in improving teacher retention in these rural areas.

Rural school systems have several aspects that are unique to their location and these factors require special attention in terms of teacher preparation programs (Gallo & Beckman, 2016). Increased support in how to meet the challenges of a rural school system, such as the high level of poverty, must be incorporated into teacher preparation programs so novice teachers do not experience a reality shock (Ovenden-Hope et al., 2018). When teacher preparation programs can incorporate an understanding of place-based education, teachers are able to more effectively teach students in rural areas (Azano & Stewart, 2016). Developing a social and cultural familiarity with a rural area throughout a teacher preparation program can assist in improving teacher retention in these areas (Eppley, 2015). Each of these ideas may contribute to an increased teacher retention rate in a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia.

It is a well-known fact that people learn more by actually performing a task instead of just observing or reading about it and this statement rings true even for teaching (Williamson & Hodder, 2015). A residency program allows pre-service teachers the opportunity to co-teach and develop strategies that assist in student learning and can be beneficial in rural education systems (Ricci, Persiani, Williams, & Ribas, 2019). If teacher preparation programs are able to incorporate residency programs specifically targeting rural school districts into their curriculum, teacher retention at these locations may be improved. Residency programs are able to prepare pre-service teachers specifically for the type of school environment that they will be teaching in
(Hammerness & Craig, 2016). This hands-on experience allows teacher trainees to become familiar with the expectations of teaching in a rural school system and better mentally and pedagogically prepared for a future career in a rural school. The residency programs have become more abundant in attempting to rectify the shortcomings that teacher preparation programs have for rural education.

Residency programs allow students in rural school districts to receive high quality instruction while addressing recruitment and retention issues (Guha, 2017). Incorporating residencies into teacher preparation programs can assist pre-service teachers in developing a deeper understanding of the profession and better prepare them for employment opportunities in rural contexts (Williamson & Hodder, 2015). This is very similar to place-based education programs currently being incorporated into public school curriculums. When a teacher is able to learn about the community in which they will teach and develop relationships within the community, it may lead to a better education for students within that area. If a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia can incorporate residency programs into their school, they may be able to battle against the low level of teacher retention that they are currently experiencing.

Student teaching and field experience is another component included in many teacher preparation programs. The effects of student teaching and field experiences have been found to have a positive effect on teachers continuing in the profession (Ronfeldt, 2012). They also impact attitudes, practices, and beliefs of pre-service teachers, but only when locations are chosen based on their ability to provide the student teacher with proper professional development (Ronfeldt, 2012). It is absolutely necessary for teachers to have a positive experience during student teaching and field experience if teacher retention is going to be improved (Steyn & Kamper, 2015). Poor experiences may lead to negative feelings towards teaching and lead the
pre-service teacher to leave before ever being hired by a school system. Student teaching and field experiences may have a positive influence in preparing teachers for working in a rural school system.

**Cohorts or mentoring.** Many studies have been conducted concerning mentoring as a means to improve retention in a vast array of occupations. In the healthcare profession, mentoring has been found to improve retention (Colford et al., 2018). Nurses have been provided with faculty mentors in order to complete research, which can provide support and assist with retention (Kessler & Alverson, 2014). Doctoral mentoring occurs at the university level between the faculty and students to encourage retention in the program (Brill, Balcanoff, Land, Gogarty, & Turner, 2014). Having a positive support system is important for many occupations and may lead to improved retention.

The findings of these studies can be applied to education as well. New teachers who are in strong cohorts tend to be happier and better adjusted to teaching in rural schools because of the support that cohorts provide (Rooks, 2018). Most often these cohorts are made up of people who are similar, such as a group of novice teachers, being led by a person in a similar position, such as a veteran teacher. Studies have shown that when teachers receive combined supports within their first years, including mentoring, it may improve teacher retention (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). This is especially significant since modeling professional practices is important for new teachers to learn how to effectively conduct their own class (Jaspers, Prins, Meijer, & Wubbels, 2018). By encouraging teacher trainees to work closely within cohorts, they are able to receive instruction, which may be more specific to their future employment options (Jay & Miller, 2016).

Almost all school systems offer some form of mentoring for new hires as a method of
improving teacher retention (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). Good mentors may increase the resiliency for teachers who remain in the profession (Arnup & Bowles, 2016). For first year teachers, mentoring has been found to be one of the most valuable and effective factors of emotional support within the profession (Morettini, 2016). Teacher retention has been improved by using mentoring as a strategy to make teachers feel vitally supported when beginning their profession (Spooner-Lane, 2017). Providing novice teachers with mentoring services in rural school settings may strengthen relationships and improve teacher retention in these areas (Petrovska, Sivevska, Popseka, & Runcheva, 2018). Specifically, mentoring programs improve retention, increase job satisfaction, and improve job commitment, which also increases student achievement (Callahan, 2016).

First, mentors should be veteran teachers who understand how to collaborate with and provide support to a novice teacher. For mentoring to be successful, it is of the utmost importance that mentors be properly trained through specific professional development that targets successful mentor-mentee relationships and how to teach adults (Sanchez, Roegman, & Goodwin, 2015). Mentors should receive a certain level of training in order to be an effective support system for new teachers. Thus, professional development opportunities should include defining mentor/mentee roles, identifying teaching beliefs, developing strategies for effective communication and reflection, and expanding pedagogical knowledge (Betlan, Clary, & Jones, 2019). These professional development opportunities will help to assist mentors in effectively supporting novice teachers and may lead to improved teacher retention. Keeping highly qualified veteran teachers as mentors may assist in increasing teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia.

Characteristics of successful mentoring to improve teacher retention include well-planned
professional development practices, recognize short- and long-term teacher needs, provide open and honest communication, and focus on novice teachers’ beliefs and experience levels (Callahan, 2016). Mentors should be available and accessible to novice teachers in order to answer questions and provide support when these new teachers feel completely lost (Poorman & Mastorovich, 2017). For mentoring to be effective, some coaching must be a part of the program in order to reduce stress and create a positive performance (Brashear-Alejandro, Barksdale, Bellenger, Boles, & James, 2019). If a rural school in Southwestern Virginia can consistently incorporate these characteristics into their mentoring program, they may improve teacher retention.

Co-teaching is another form of mentoring that can assist in improving teacher retention. The purpose of co-teaching is to support new teachers in their ability to deliver information to their students and successfully meet the diverse needs of these students (Ricci et al., 2019). This involves pairing a novice teacher with a veteran teacher in the same classroom for the purpose of developing skills for the new teacher to properly support student achievement. Co-teaching allows novice teachers to observe and experience how to run a classroom and how to interact effectively with students. For students who receive special education services, co-teaching may be especially important to ensure understanding is occurring and can support the success of both the novice teacher and the student (Sinclair et al., 2018). Co-teaching allows the experienced teacher to guide the novice teacher in successful methods for delivering information to get students to reach the intended outcomes (Cohen, 2015).

For effective teaching and learning to occur, teachers must have an end in mind of what they want their students to learn throughout the school year (Cohen, 2015). By allowing new teachers to have common planning time with an experienced teacher, it has been found that
teacher turnover and movement were reduced by 33%, while the odds of leaving the profession were reduced by 40% (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). Having a common planning time with teachers of the same subject and grade level can be very important for supporting new teachers in understanding how to teach the curriculum, how to handle student behaviors, and understanding how the school runs. Ensuring common planning time occurs at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia may assist in improving teacher retention.

**Administration.** The leadership ability of the school principal plays a major role in whether teachers choose to continue working in that location or move on to another location (Holmes et al., 2019). Administration has been found to play a significant role in teachers’ intentions to remain in the profession merely by creating an environment in which teachers want to work (Stander & Stander, 2016). Culture and community, established by the administration within a school, are extremely important to supporting and improving teacher retention (Holmes et al., 2019). School leadership is loosely explained as the influence that school administrators have on their employees and the management style they impress upon them (James, Connolly, & Hawkins, 2019). Principals play a vital role in supporting teachers’ personal and professional achievements, fostering a positive work environment, and supporting positive staff morale; all of which supports positive school culture and high student achievement (Funke, 2017).

Teacher resiliency may be improved simply because administrators are able to create a positive school culture (Arnup & Bowles, 2016). Teachers should be seen as a fountain of knowledge that they can continue to build upon and share with others (Price & Weatherby, 2017). Allowing teachers to feel respected and necessary within their positions may improve teacher retention. However, if teachers are not effectively supporting student achievement, administrators can impact their retention choices by nonrenewal of their contracts or finding
ways to make the job less appealing (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Knowing that teacher movement and release is inevitable, many administrators have chosen to provide an abundance of new teacher support services, as well as placing veteran teachers into key positions that will assist in supporting a positive work environment and encourage student success (Torres, 2016).

Job satisfaction has been found to be an important factor contributing to teacher retention (Arnup & Bowles, 2016). Ensuring veteran or novice teachers feel valued is an important aspect that assists in teacher satisfaction (Suriano, Ohlson, Norton, & Durham, 2018). When teachers feel that they have some type of control over their work life they are more satisfied within their profession (Stander & Stander, 2016). “Teachers gain job satisfaction through working with children, having supportive colleagues, observing student improvement and working within a positive school climate” (Arnup & Bowles, 2016, p. 231). Unfortunately, job satisfaction can be reduced simply due to greater demands placed on teachers, such as high percentages of minorities, high percentages of students living in poverty, and higher levels of behavior problems (Roch & Sai, 2017). These characteristics are represented in the rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia that was researched for this study.

Teachers who have good, positive relationships with their school administrative staff are more likely to remain in their positions (Urck, 2016). If teachers feel secure in their teaching position, they will choose to stay in their teaching position (Funke, 2017) and good leadership can create this security. One study even found that a higher quality of leadership within a school resulted in a higher rate of teacher retention (Whipp & Geronime, 2015). Supportive administration, along with other school supports, has been found to improve teacher retention by 12% and reduce teacher movement by 11% (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). A teacher’s perception of their administration may be an indicator of whether teachers plan to remain in their
positions or leave (Torres, 2016). “Rather than leave bad schools, teachers leave bad principals” (Holmes et al., 2019, p. 27).

Good leadership may be based on the four C’s: character, competence, context, and communication (Grunberg et al., 2018). In order to create effective administrators, these characteristics must be developed over a period of time. Most often male leaders take on the task-oriented leadership style, while female leaders usually take on the relationship-building leadership style (Kairys, 2018). A combination of these traits may create the appropriate school leader. Leaders should be able to draw from several different leadership styles, dependent upon the situation, while remaining flexible and adaptive (Grunberg et al., 2018). Ethical leadership should guide all decisions made by school leaders in order for the school to function properly and teachers to feel confident in the leadership within their school, which in turn may improve teacher retention (Arar, Haj, Abrarnovitz, & Oplatka, 2016).

“School leadership is a critical component for strong performance and student achievement” (Anderson, 2017, p. C1). When teachers view their administrators as partners who are committed to educating students, then teacher retention will improve (Urick, 2016). Administrators, who are able to support the workload impressed upon teachers, may contribute to improved teacher retention within their schools (Thibodeaux et al., 2015). Leadership that is well established to provide teacher autonomy, shared decision making, teacher empowerment, and create an overall positive environment has been found to have a positive impact on teacher retention (Urick, 2016). Knowing how teachers are quickly leaving the profession, school leaders must be careful to meet the needs of their teachers, create a positive school culture, and continuously provide opportunities for teachers to improve their skills (Suriano et al., 2018).

When new policy reforms are demanded upon teachers, the role of the school leader will
have a large impact on the satisfaction that teachers have in their jobs (Sims, Waniganayake, & Hadley, 2018). These policy mandates are steps that the school system must follow but may not be in the best interest of the specific school (Holmes et al., 2019). This can make teachers feel powerless within their own classroom environment. If administrators can counterbalance these feelings and make teachers feel empowered in their positions, they are more likely to remain in their teaching position (Burkhauser, 2017). Supportive administrators can have a positive impact on teacher retention when school discipline is enforced and positive behavior practices for students are established (Steyn & Kamper, 2015). Recent administrative changes at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia have changed the administration-teacher relationships and may contribute to improved teacher retention.

**Incentives.** External factors, including parental and community involvement, age of the school buildings, and competitive salaries, may contribute to teacher retention (Podolsky et al., 2017). Several school systems have the options to offer incentives to recruit and retain teachers. “Such incentives may include wage premiums, subsidized housing, travel allowances, and even preferential transfers” (Bjarnason & Thorarinsdottir, 2018, p. 788). Although this is not always the case, many incentives are not provided in rural areas due to the lack of available finances or resources.

The attractiveness of becoming an educator in a rural area has been diminished due to large disparities in incomes between rural education systems and their urban counterparts (Rude & Miller, 2018). Increased teacher pay, based on performance, may play a large role in motivating teachers to either stay in a school or leave (Shifrer et al., 2017). Financial incentives have been found to improve teacher absenteeism and can be applied further to improving teacher retention and student achievement (Dang & King, 2016). Increasing teacher income may also
counterbalance uncertainties about job security due to expectations placed upon teachers from government entities (Rajput & Talan, 2017). Unfortunately, added stress may be placed onto teachers when government entities impose stricter expectations on the administration (Holmes et al., 2019) and offering incentives to teachers may help alleviate this burden.

Students in small schools were found to benefit more from financial incentives offered to teachers for achievement gains, which may also result in higher teacher retention (Eren, 2019). Specifically speaking, because rural areas are considered less competitive, teacher retention bonuses have been found to improve teacher retention in these locations (Springer, Swain, & Rodriguez, 2016). Financial incentives have also been found to improve the retention and performance of lower-performing teachers (Dee & Wyckoff, 2015). The Department for Education in England is even looking into providing cash incentives for new teachers to obtain training and have access to curriculum resources, as well as monetary benefits for remaining in the classroom instead of looking for leadership roles (Faragher, 2019).

Teacher happiness is linked to positive student achievement (Bower & Carroll, 2017), and happiness has also been discovered to be a large predictor of teacher retention (Stercke et al., 2015). When teachers feel that they are performing meaningful work and creating meaningful relationships they will be more satisfied within their positions, which will result in increased retention (Lavy & Bocker, 2018). Meaningful work can counteract stressful working conditions and improve motivation and engagement (Fouche, Rothmann & Van der Vyver, 2017). Many teachers have been found to be happy in rural school systems because their happiness may be based on outside factors such as age, family dynamics, and gender. It may also be based on internal factors such as administrative support, salaries, and training, all of which may contribute to improved retention (Tang, 2018). Being able to balance both workload and expectations at
home while developing coping strategies for things that cannot be personally controlled were found important to the happiness and well-being of teachers (Wells, Dickens, McBraer, & Cleveland, 2019).

Another incentive provided to teachers is a reduction in student-teacher ratio and may assist in improving teacher retention due to lowered stress levels (Duflo, Dupas, & Kremer, 2015). When lower-achieving students are in a smaller class they have been shown to perform better, which can provide teachers with more job satisfaction causing an improved teacher retention rate (Ruff, 2016). Unfortunately, when teachers do not remain in the profession, the student-teacher ratio increases and has a direct negative impact on the students and remaining teachers (Kelleher & Weir, 2016).

**Working conditions.** Highly qualified teachers are expected to raise student test scores, provide an environment to support their student’s social and emotional development, manage classroom behaviors, provide instruction on content material, and encourage critical thinking all while using the provided materials in a minimalistic, underfunded, under resourced environment (Blazar & Kraft, 2017). Working conditions have a huge impact on teacher retention rates. These working conditions may include the resources available, parental involvement, number of expected class preparations, student poverty level, student performance level, policies, and student discipline issues (Harrell et al., 2018). When these working conditions are poor, teachers tend to feel the stress from the demands of their job, which leads to negative attitudes towards their profession; this results in lowered teacher retention (Fouche et al., 2017). Often times, the working circumstances of teachers is perceived as unacceptable, causing many to avoid the occupation altogether (Steyn & Kamper, 2015). Increasing resiliency may be one explanation as to why teachers are able to bounce back from negative working conditions (Arnup & Bowles,
By improving working conditions, teacher retention may also be improved.

One study conducted by Lindqvist and Nordanger (2016) focused not on recruiting new teachers but instead on re-recruiting teachers who chose to leave the profession of their own accord. The study focused on five people who were trained to be teachers and had optimum potential of becoming great at their chosen profession. The study determined that these potentially highly skilled teachers left the profession because of the working conditions. Due to having alternative career options these former teachers were able to exit the profession after not being able to establish themselves within the schools in which they were hired. When asked what accommodations would entice them into returning to teaching, one answered better colleagues and another responded with smaller class sizes when working with poorly disciplined students (Lindqvist & Nordanger, 2016).

Improving teacher quality through professional development opportunities is one way to improve retention in rural areas by preparing them to teach in rural environments (Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Zijlstra, & Volman, 2015). Studies have shown that professional development for beginning teachers will positively influence their intentions to stay in the profession (Coldwell, 2017). Classroom management skills, curriculum development, and student motivation were found to be important aspects of professional development for assisting novice teachers and encouraging retention (Touchstone, 2015). Through professional development opportunities teachers are able to reestablish their commitment to the profession and strengthen their efficacy, which improves retention (Burke, Aubusson, Schuck, Buchanan, & Prescott, 2015).

A recent study found that an increased workload had a direct impact on teacher retention (Manuel, Carter, & Dutton, 2018). Increased teacher workload, such as multiple class preparations, creates a stressful working environment and may lead to burnout (Geiger &
Pivovarova, 2018). Teachers often work more than 60 hours each week, which leads to poor teacher retention after the first few years simply because teachers cannot keep up with this type of work expectation (Torres, 2016). High levels of job commitment can lead to emotional exhaustion and stress (Cancio et al., 2018). Dedication such as this, however, shows that teachers are gaining some feelings of significance towards teaching, which can foster feelings of enthusiasm, inspiration, and pride (Stander & Stander, 2016). If having only one class preparation can reduce the workload of teachers, the stress level will also be reduced and may improve teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia.

Disadvantaged schools need highly qualified teachers more than other locations but are often fighting the battle of keeping these teachers (Zhang & Zeller, 2016). Novice teachers often report feeling underprepared for the demands of disadvantaged school systems (Whipp & Geronime, 2015). Studies have shown that as student poverty level increases, teacher retention decreases (Harrell et al., 2018). Oftentimes, schools found in areas of high poverty tend to have less desirable working conditions (Burkhauser, 2017). The reduction in teacher retention has been found to be related to the working conditions and not necessarily because the students are disadvantaged (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). Jones Middle School is found in a location of poverty, so if the working conditions can be improved, the teacher retention rate may also be improved.

Teachers are in the profession to ensure students are learning and academically successful. Often teachers will miss their lunchtime, give up their planning periods, and forgo bathroom breaks simply to ensure students are successful (Woodbury, 2017). One way for teachers to positively affect student success is to have confidence in their own teaching abilities, which results in higher teacher retention (Pedota, 2015). When there are higher achieving
students, teachers tend to remain in their teaching positions (Harrell et al., 2018). Teachers can also express student success within the classroom on a regular basis instead of just focusing on high stakes testing that happen one time each year and may not actually be representative of student knowledge. Celebrating the small victories of achievement can create an environment of support and improve the relationships between teachers and students, which extend into improving teacher retention (Pedota, 2015).

When different personalities get put together in a classroom for approximately two hours each day, discipline issues will arise. When hostile behaviors impact classroom practices, the school culture may be compromised and teacher stress levels will increase (Holmes et al., 2019). Severe discipline problems and disruptive students play a large role in lowered teacher retention (Harrell et al., 2018). Studies have shown that if teachers can have five positive interactions with students to every one negative interaction, then student discipline will be improved and teachers may choose to remain in the profession (Cook et al., 2017). If school administrators are properly and efficiently disciplining students, teachers are more likely to stay (Burkhauser, 2017). When school rules are consistently followed, teachers feel more job satisfaction due to lowered stress and anxiety levels, which leads to improved teacher retention (Kapa & Gimbert, 2018). Improving student discipline practices may improve teacher retention rates at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia.

Job security is another factor contributing to teacher retention issues (Torres, 2016). If students are unable to achieve up to a certain standard, teachers are often blamed. When this happens, teachers may be reprimanded and feel they must leave the profession they love simply because they cannot reach these unattainable goals placed upon them (Torres, 2016). Demands placed on teachers may contribute to feelings of inadequacy, which will lead to teachers feeling
as if they have no control over the tasks required to complete their job effectively (Rajput & Talan, 2017). Insecurities within the teaching occupation may lead to a lack of job satisfaction, increased teacher turnover, and poor physical and mental health (Richter, Naswall, Lindfors, & Sverke, 2015). If teachers continue to feel stress from the pressures and expectations from the Department of Education and government, their health may be at risk (Rajput & Talan, 2017).

Many policies affect the working conditions and expectations of teachers that will in turn affect teacher retention. A policy of ESSA promotes parental involvement as a factor that contributes to the improvement of student academic achievement (Thompson, Herman, Stormont, Reinke, & Webster-Stratton, 2017). Accountability policies are continuously being developed and implemented based on teacher effectiveness and to evaluate the quality of education (Ryan et al., 2017). Policies that demand such high standards for the teachers being hired can negatively impact teacher retention (Torres, 2016). However, some policies restored by the ESSA allow the school district the flexibility to determine the program’s priorities, which is beneficial to many rural school districts (Rude & Miller, 2018). Some mandates passed down may not apply to every specific school district (Holmes et al., 2019). As policies continue to be created and enforced, teacher retention will continue to need improvement.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to solve the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. The works of John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and B. F. Skinner bring to light different philosophical aspects that guided this study. Many studies have been conducted to determine what factors contribute to improved teacher retention in different school environments, but they are mostly in urban areas. This study focused on a rural area. Factors contributing to improved teacher retention in rural areas include changes to teacher preparation
programs, providing cohort or mentor services, establishing good leadership, offering incentives, and improving working conditions. Teacher retention is important for improving student achievement and discovering the factors that contribute to improving teacher retention is imperative. Teacher retention in a rural middle school is a location that has not been studied often. This study has contributed information that specifically targets a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia and may apply to other rural school districts.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to determine ways that teacher retention can be improved at a rural school in Southwestern Virginia. The problem guiding this study was how to improve teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. Factors affecting teacher retention were also determined. This chapter will discuss the multimethod approach used to obtain information from Jones Middle School in regard to teacher retention. Pseudonyms were used for all participants, school district, and location. Interviews were conducted with former teachers at JMS to determine why they chose to leave. Surveys were conducted to determine why current teachers have chosen to remain at JMS. Exit documentation was explored to establish a record and get further insight as to why teachers leave the school district. The data analysis techniques of matrices, open coding, and descriptive statistics are discussed. By finding commonalities between each data collection method, conclusions were made to determine ways to improve teacher retention at a rural school in Southwestern Virginia.

Design

In order to determine ways to improve teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia, this study utilized a multimethod research design that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. The goal of this study was not to develop a theory; therefore, a grounded theory approach was inappropriate. This study did not focus on cultural aspects, so ethnography was not appropriate. Since several individuals participated in this study, a case study approach was not appropriate. An applied research study multimethod design was most appropriate for this study because themes from both the exit documentation and interviews were used to examine teachers’ personal perspectives as to why they chose to leave.
JMS, while survey information determined why other teachers are choosing to remain. This allowed for the important viewpoints of former and current teachers to be represented and studied. The information was then developed into strategies to assist with the problem of teacher retention. “The applied research environment is often complex, chaotic, and highly political, with pressures for quick and conclusive answers yet little or no experimental control” (Bickman & Rog, 2009, p. x). Because a school system is this type of environment, applied research using a multimethod design was the best design for this study.

The qualitative data collection method for this study was interviews with former teachers at JMS. Interviews were important to this study because they help to gain perceptions from participants who have experienced teaching in JMS and have chosen to leave (Joyner, Rouse, & Glatthorn, 2013). These interviews assisted in determining why these teachers made the choice to leave JMS. By discovering why teachers leave, changes that need to be implemented were determined and teacher retention may be improved. Surveys of currently employed teachers served as the quantitative data collection methods. Surveys were important to this study because they help to establish the opinions, perceptions, and attitudes of current teachers at JMS (Joyner et al., 2013). The surveys provided information as to why teachers have chosen to remain at JMS. This was important information to this research study because determining what keeps teachers here may improve teacher retention in the future. The other qualitative data collection method was the use of exit documentation analysis retrieved from central office. A record of teacher retention was established by obtaining and examining exit documentation (Joyner et al., 2013). Exit documentation provided information that may discover outlying factors contributing to teacher retention on a large scale for the rural school district where JMS is located.

**Research Questions**
Central Question: How can the problem of teacher retention be solved at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia?

Sub-question 1: How would former teachers in an interview solve the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia?

Sub-question 2: How would exit documentation, completed by former teachers, inform the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia?

Sub-question 3: How would quantitative survey data from currently employed teachers inform the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia?

Site

To protect the identity of the school and participants, pseudonyms were used. This study was conducted at Jones Middle School (JMS) in Jones County. The researcher works in this school, making the location a convenient site to perform the study. This school is a rural school in Southwestern Virginia. Although teacher retention is a nationwide issue, very few studies have specifically looked at rural middle schools; therefore, this site was chosen for this study. It also was a convenient location for the researcher to perform this research study. In the 2017-2018 school year, Jones County hired 21 teachers, four of which were hired to work at JMS. During this same year, there were six teachers in the county working on a provisional license. In the 2018-2019 school year, the county hired 34 new teachers with eight going to JMS. The county had five teachers working on a provisional license during this school year. There were 10 new teachers hired in Jones County in the 2019-2020 school year with one of them going to JMS. By November of that school year, there was only one teacher working in the county who had a provisional license.
Table 1 illustrates the demographics of this site. This particular middle school consisted of 809 students in Grades 6-8. Of this total, 46% were males and 54% were females. The student body consisted predominantly of Caucasian students. Twenty-seven percent of the student body received special education or gifted services. Sixty-one percent of the students received free or reduced lunch. The school consisted of one principal, two assistant principals, and 66 teachers. Caucasians made up 98.5% of the teachers at Jones Middle School, while African Americans made up 1.5%. Females made up 76% of the teaching staff. All three of the administrators at JMS were Caucasian and 67% of the administrative staff were females.

**Participants**

According to the United States Census Bureau (2018), there were approximately 30,000 residents living in Jones County. The median income per household was $41,145, which is in the lowest income bracket for the entire state. The population was 95% White, 0.8% African American, 0.3% Alaskan Indian, 0.2% Asian, 3.2% Hispanic, and 0.8% two combined races. Between the years 2012 and 2016 it was determined that 2.1% of people living within Jones County were not born in the United States. During this same time span, 2.9% of people ages five and up spoke a language other than English within their home. There were only 78
establishments owned by minorities while there were 1,988 establishments owned by non-minorities. The participants for this study were chosen using convenience cluster sampling methods. These participants were easily accessible to the researcher and were chosen to participate based on their current and former employment at Jones Middle School.

About 98.5% of the teachers at Jones Middle School were Caucasian, with 1.5% being African American. Seventy-six percent of the teachers were females. The administration was 100% White, and consisted of one male administrator and two female administrators. All 66 teachers were given the opportunity to participate in the survey (Bickman & Rog, 2009). Using the returned consent forms, 41 participants completed the survey. The survey sample consisted of 10 males and 31 females who worked within a middle school, consisting of Grades 6-8, and covered all subject levels. Survey participant ages ranged from 18 to greater than 60. Five participants were selected to provide interviews (Bickman & Rog, 2009). Participants being selected to provide interviews were chosen using purposeful nonprobability sampling based on their former employment as teachers at JMS. “Nonprobability samples are used to guide data collection about the specific experiences of some members of the study population” (Bickman & Rog, 2009, p. 78). The interview sample consisted of two males and three females who formerly worked within JMS, consisting of Grades 6-8, and covering different subject levels. Interview participant ages ranged from 27-43. Data from the exit documentation was included in the study. The exit documentation sample consisted of seven males and 18 females who formerly worked within Jones County Public Schools, consisting of Grades K-12, and covering different subject levels and employment roles. Exit documentation participant ages ranged from 20 to greater than 60.
The Researcher’s Role

I was motivated to conduct this study because I work at Jones Middle School. The teacher turnover rate has dramatically increased each year as my time there extends. I can see a difference with student achievement scores and know that having decreased teacher retention may contribute to this decline. Although I was a teacher within this school, I took on the role of the researcher during this study. The participants understood that I was researching the decreased teacher retention and bracketing out my biases. All participants were provided with complete confidentiality and autonomy of their identity in order to ensure no repercussions occurred based on their survey and interview responses. Consent forms for participation were sent to all teachers of Jones Middle School but it was anticipated that not all of them would be returned. Because of this there would be some nonsampling biases due to the entire school population of teachers not participating in the study.

The following assumptions were based on the philosophical assumptions written by Creswell and Poth (2018). The axiological assumption, relating to the value of the research and the researcher recognizing their own biases, was represented although some biases were present because of the researcher’s personal teaching background and experiences within the participating school, but these were openly discussed. The methodology assumption, which relates to using emerging design as the study progresses, was represented because the researcher was able to revise interview questions based on responses during the interview process. I personally accessed the exit documentation provided by the central office staff. Survey validity was determined using a pilot study. The survey was validated using a panel of experts. This panel included a female teacher who teaches college and high school classes, a male director of technology, and a male elementary teacher who is also an education leadership graduate student.
During the pilot study, the responses to each question were discussed with me in depth. As the researcher, I emailed out an invitation to complete the electronic survey to all participants. The responses to the survey were retrieved electronically and automatically imported into a Google spreadsheet. Based on the literature, I developed interview questions and conducted the interviews. As the interviews were conducted, questions were adjusted based on participant responses.

**Procedures**

Before this study was conducted, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained (see Appendix A). The IRB monitors all studies containing human participants to ensure each participant’s safety, confidentiality, and privacy (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Face-to-face meetings occurred between the researcher and both the superintendent and school principal. Written permission to conduct the study was then obtained from the superintendent (see Appendix B) and principal (see Appendix C) of the participating school. The researcher conducted a meeting to explain the purpose of the study to all possible participants. The meeting included an explanation of why the study was being conducted, what was expected of all participants, and what happened with the results. All questions were answered at this meeting and assurances of confidentiality were provided. All information was kept confidential on a password-protected computer in a password-protected program. Site information was kept confidential and participants remained anonymous. Pseudonyms were used for both the site and the participants. For up to two weeks after this meeting was conducted, consent forms were received from all participants (see Appendix D).
Data Collection and Analysis

Training and retaining high quality teachers are very important for educational systems to be successful (Ovenden-Hope et al., 2018). Many reasons can contribute to new teachers leaving the profession, including personal and professional demands by the school for which they work (Ovenden-Hope et al., 2018). Studies show that approximately 40% to 50% of new teachers exit the profession within the first five years of their careers (Papay et al., 2017). Unfortunately, rural areas and large cities are hit hardest in terms of teacher shortages (Young, 2018). Because of this, the study looked at a rural middle school in order to determine ways that may improve teacher retention. Studies have shown that mentoring can drastically reduce teacher turnover in an urban school system (Morettini, 2016). Other studies have found that teacher retention was slightly higher when teachers were compensated for student achievement in urban schools (Shifrer et al., 2017). Decisions to remain in the teaching profession were also affected by the leadership within the school (Urick, 2016). Other studies have also found that teachers leave the profession because of “lack of administrative support, teacher workload, and student discipline” (Thibodeaux et al., 2015, p. 227). Each of these reasons were included in the study as part of the interviews (see Appendix E), surveys (see Appendix F), and exit documentation analysis to determine how to improve teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia.

The research question for this study explored how to improve teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. Qualitative data was collected through interviews with former teacher employees at JMS. This data was transcribed for data analysis purposes. Surveys with currently employed teachers were conducted. Common themes were developed using descriptive statistics as part of the quantitative data analysis process. Exit documentation from former employees was obtained from central office to determine a pattern as to why teachers are
leaving. Open coding was used to determine common themes. Percentages of each theme were calculated and bar graphs were developed.

**Interviews**

The first sub-question for this study explored how former teachers would solve the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. Five former teacher participants were purposefully selected based on their choice to leave JMS and were interviewed in a face-to-face, semi-structured setting using open-ended questioning (see Appendix E). These occurred off-school grounds in a local library conference room or quiet restaurant at the end of the day or on the weekend.

All interviews were audio recorded to ensure correct transcription. All interview questions were developed from previously completed studies and grounded in the literature. Morettini (2016) studied the effect of mentoring on teacher retention and found mentoring to be beneficial. Shrifrer et al. (2017) studied financial awards for student achievement and its effect on teacher retention and found that it had a slight positive effect. Papay et al. (2017) studied how educational policies effected teacher retention and found that more information is needed. Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) stated “the common factors that spur teachers worldwide to leave the profession include low salaries, poor working conditions, quality of teacher preparation programs, and overwhelming workload” (p. 604-605). Knowing this information, all interview questions pertained to these topics in order to find out how to improve teacher retention in a school in rural Southwestern Virginia.

Qualitative data was analyzed by transcribing the interviews verbatim. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested memoing while transcribing the interviews to help determine themes. Open coding was used to organize data into categories based on information from the
participants. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), this process was important because it allowed the researcher to discover similarities within the information. Themes from the interview responses became apparent and were given numerical values. Percentages were calculated for each theme based on the numerical value assigned. Bar graphs were created also using the assigned numerical value.

**Exit Documentation**

The second sub-question examined how exit documentation, completed by former teachers, would inform the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. Each time a teacher leaves Jones school district, an exit questionnaire is provided by central office staff. The employee fills out the questionnaire and returns it to the personnel office. This questionnaire focuses on why the person is leaving and what incentives could be offered for the person to stay. This data was obtained from central office records. The exit documentation provided information about why teachers leave and may offer ways to improve retention.

The qualitative data provided a history of information specific to retention issues in Jones school district. Themes from the survey responses became apparent and were put into matrices. The matrices were input into a database for analysis based on their common themes. Percentages were calculated for each theme based on the numerical value assigned. Bar graphs were created also using the assigned numerical value.

**Survey**

The third sub-question explored how currently employed teachers using quantitative survey data would solve the problem of teacher retention. Survey validity was determined by conducting a pilot test. Three experts in the field of education were purposefully selected to
participate. The pilot test was distributed on paper to the pilot participants. The researcher and participants sat down face-to-face to go through each of the survey questions. Discussions were conducted with these participants to determine if the survey questions made sense to them. Problems focusing on lack of clarity, basic appearance, and grammatical errors were addressed and the survey questions were adjusted accordingly. Suggestions were taken for any additional items that need to be addressed using the survey.

Surveys were electronically distributed using Google forms. All responses were anonymous. The survey was available to participants for two weeks. Items for the survey were delivered using the static web instrument Google forms. According to Bickman and Rog (2009), static web instruments are easy to implement and allow participants to view all survey items at one time. Closed-ended questions elicited responses for the survey (see Appendix F). The closed-ended questions had click tags, such as check boxes and radio buttons. Instructions for this survey were embedded at the top of the page. Pop-up instructions were also used “to provide more detailed instruction without lengthening or disrupting the continuity” (Bickman & Rog, 2009, p. 429). When participants finished the survey, they had to click a submit button. Participants knew they had submitted the survey when a thank-you screen appeared. The responses were then immediately sent to the researcher. All closed-ended responses were pre-assigned into a numerical format and automatically imported into a Google spreadsheet for analysis.

The quantitative data, collected using an online survey, was analyzed using descriptive statistics. According to Gall et al. (2007), descriptive statistics were appropriate because they summarized the data using measures of central tendency to include mean, percentage, and
frequency counts. Matrices were also created to determine common themes. After this was completed, bar graphs based on the themes were created.

**Ethical Considerations**

This study did not discriminate based on “ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social class, or disability” (Joyner et al., 2013, p. 8), but participants were required to be over 18 years of age. Pseudonyms were used for both the site and participant information. All interview information was electronically stored on a password-protected computer, and any paper transcriptions were in a locked file cabinet. Exit documentation was kept in a locked file cabinet. Survey information was also saved on a password-protected computer in a password-protected file. All information remained confidential throughout the duration of the research study and will remain confidential for a minimum of three years. This study did not result in any emotional or physical pain for the participants (Joyner et al., 2013). All information retrieved throughout the duration of this study was reported honestly, objectively, and without deception.

**Summary**

Teachers are the most important factor when establishing an environment that supports both teaching and learning (Funke, 2017). It is very important for school districts to put in the time and effort to identify the most effective teachers and retain them (Papay et al., 2017).

“Each year, over one million teachers enter, exit, or transition between schools and districts in the United States” (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018, p. 605). Most studies that have been conducted have focused on urban school districts. The information they discovered may not apply to rural areas. This study was able to determine if rural areas were impacted similarly to urban areas. Interviews were conducted to determine commonalities for decreased teacher retention and how to improve it. Surveys were utilized and exit documentation was examined to glean more
information concerning how to improve teacher retention, as well as what is causing this decline, at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. Data analysis procedures included transcription of the interviews verbatim. Common themes were determined from the interviews and the exit documentation. Exit documentation was reviewed to find commonalities. Matrices were created in order to find commonalities among the data. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest memoing in the margins while listening to transcriptions in order to develop these common themes, and this was actively completed during the interviews. Percentages for each theme were calculated and bar graphs created. Survey data was analyzed using a computer database. From the surveys, themes developed and percentages calculated. Descriptive statistics were calculated. Bar graphs were created. Determining commonalities among the information obtained, creating matrices and graphs, and calculating descriptive statistics assisted in the analysis of the data collected. “Teacher retention is important because teacher turnover creates instability and costs and negatively impacts teaching quality—especially in schools that most need stability” (Zhang & Zeller, 2016, p. 74). The decreased teacher retention is costing school systems approximately $2.2 billion for recruiting, hiring, and training new teachers (Harrell et al., 2018). Rural areas do not have an abundance of finances and replacing teachers can become a burden. If something is not done, teachers will continue their mass exodus at this alarming rate for all the wrong reasons (Kelchtermans, 2017).
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to determine ways that teacher retention can be improved at a rural school in Southwestern Virginia. The problem of this study was how to improve teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. This chapter describes the participants who were interviewed, surveyed, and turned in the exit documentation. Results from the interviews, surveys, and exit documentation are discussed. Data is presented in the form of themes and includes charts, graphs, and tables. Results for sub-question one, how would former teachers in an interview solve the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia, are discussed and themes developed. Narrative themes were generated from the interviews. Results for sub-question two, how would exit documentation completed by former teachers inform the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia, are discussed and also led to themes. Exit documentation results were calculated into percentages. Exit documentation results were also presented using frequency tables. Results for sub-question three, how would qualitative survey data from currently employed teachers inform the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia, were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including finding mean, percentages, and frequency counts. Common themes were found. The survey results are presented using charts.

Participants

This applied study utilized a multimethod design consisting of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Interviews with former teachers of JMS were conducted and contributed to the qualitative data. Exit documentation obtained from central office made up the remainder of the qualitative data and included former teachers of Jones County. Quantitative
data was based on surveys of currently employed teachers at JMS.

**Interview**

Five former teachers were interviewed for this study, three females and two males. All interview participants were Caucasian. Ages for the interview participants ranged from 27-43. Interviews took place at a local restaurant or library. These interviews were audio recorded for accuracy and then transcribed using a word document the same day. Each interview participant was provided a copy of the written transcript to ensure accuracy and make changes if needed.

**Female 1.** Female 1 met the requirements to participate in this study because she previously worked at JMS. When the interview was conducted she was 32 years old. She began her teaching career on a provisional license. She began teaching at a different middle school in Jones County and taught there for two years. Since Female 1 was already teaching, she was not required to complete student teaching to obtain her teaching license. While working, she received her post-graduate professional licensure. When that school consolidated with JMS, she was transferred there. She taught math 8, including inclusion courses, and Algebra I to 8th graders at JMS for a total of three months before leaving.

When asked about her teacher preparation program, specifically if she had any courses pertaining to teaching students who live in poverty or rural areas, Female 1 paused. After much thought, she honestly couldn’t remember any courses specific to those areas while taking her teacher preparation courses, but she did remember a special education class. She mentioned having more extensive training on teaching students who live in poverty and rural areas since her initial teacher preparation program, but didn’t remember any during her initial teacher preparation program. The interviewer asked, “How do you think your teacher program prepared you for teaching in that environment?”, to which Female 1 replied, “I feel like I maybe was
about 20-30% prepared...You will learn more your first year of teaching than you will ever learn in your education at college.” She then mentioned that she did not have to do student teaching during her teacher preparation program because she was already teaching on a provisional license. She felt that student teaching probably would have better prepared her for actually teaching in her own classroom.

Next, the interviewer asked if Female 1 was offered any incentives to teach at JMS. She explained that when transferring to JMS, she was told that she would only be teaching geometry to advanced 8th grade students. Having only one class prep was an incentive for her, as was being able to teach the advanced students. By knowing what she was going to be teaching, she was able to prepare for the course throughout the summer. However, when the time came for school to start, Female 1 discovered that she was instead teaching algebra 1 and 8th grade math to advanced students, general education students, and special education students in an inclusion setting. Because of this sudden change, Female 1 felt that she started off unprepared because of the time spent during the summer preparing for a course that she was no longer teaching. She felt that it was difficult to mentally switch gears that abruptly. Had she known at the beginning of the summer the correct course to prepare for, she would have gone into the school year with a different mindset and would have been more comfortable. At this point in time, Female 1 had never taught an inclusion course because her previous teaching position contained classes of all advanced students. The course change itself did not play a role in Female 1’s decision to leave, but it led to other factors that contributed to her leaving.

During her time at JMS, Female 1 did not recall having a mentor. However, after the interview ended, Female 1 said she thought she may have had a mentor. She knew she had one before at the prior school. It was a veteran English teacher. Female 1 felt that having a mentor
would have been helpful since she had to teach an entirely new course with a new class make up. Female 1 had quite a bit to say about how the school administration played a huge part in her leaving JMS. She began by saying that the school administration was under a lot of pressure because of the merging of schools. She felt that her schedule was laid out crazy, which sometimes could not be helped. At the beginning of the school year, Female 1 had attempted to find solutions to the scheduling issues by speaking with other teachers who were willing to help her, but the school administration ignored her requests. Female 1 spoke to the school administration several times about her concerns and struggles. Again, she felt ignored. She stated that “if there was some kind of cooperation” from the school administration it would have made a difference in her feeling alone and drowning. Because the school administration was unwilling to help her or fix anything, Female 1 left JMS after being there for only three short months.

Working conditions were discussed next. Female 1 had three class preparations. She began her day teaching Algebra 1 to advanced students. Her next class was a math 8 class with general education students. Her last class of the day was the math 8 inclusion class. The fourth block inclusion class was her largest class. Female 1 noted that having her special education students at the end of the day made the class difficult because students were often leaving early and had a short attention span at that time of day. She was also not given a special education teacher, but a paraprofessional who was also new to the curriculum. Not receiving appropriate support in the classroom while feeling that she didn’t know what she was doing was very stressful for Female 1, and she remembers crying every day because she felt like a failure. She felt that she was a disservice to her students and was truly miserable. This situation, along with the lack of administrative support in this area, also contributed to her decision to leave. Lack of
parental support and student behavior issues were also working conditions mentioned by Female 1. She stated, “In the area that we live in, students are disciplined more at school than they are at home. And, I think, the parents want us [teachers] to raise their children.” She felt that poverty level contributed to this more than just the rural area alone. The discipline problems, she noted, were due to the fact that mostly boys were in the inclusion class and boys seemed to be more hyperactive. Her class was filled to the brim. She remembers having a very small classroom with every desk filled and having to sit students at side tables.

When asked what her main reason for leaving JMS was, she stated it was basically the administration and the lack of support she received from them. She later amended this statement. She said that although she does lay blame on the school administration, she also felt her lack of preparation and appropriate classroom support also contributed to her leaving. Had she had more training and knowledge of how to teach inclusion classes with special education students, it may have made a difference in her leaving. She mentioned that having a seasoned special education teacher by her side would have also made her time at JMS easier. Female 1 taught a total of two years and three months. Upon leaving the profession she did not pursue a teaching position again for several years. When asked why, she said honestly she just couldn’t even imagine teaching again. She had such a bad experience that she didn’t even want to look for another teaching position. After a few years out of the profession, she decided to try teaching again because she felt that teaching was meant for her. Currently, Female 1 is employed as a teacher in a neighboring county teaching high school math, including inclusion classes.

Female 2. Female 2 met the requirements to participate in this study because she previously worked at JMS. When the interview was conducted she was 31 years old. She began her teaching career on a provisional license at a middle school in a neighboring county. She
obtained her post-graduate professional license within her first year teaching. Teaching for this year on a provisional license took the place of student teaching. Female 2 was asked to talk about her teacher preparation program. She did not remember taking a course specific to rural education or teaching students who live in poverty. Laughing, she admitted that her teacher preparation program did not prepare her to teach in a rural area with high poverty levels. She stated, “It didn’t prepare me much at all, quite honestly.”

After a few years of teaching in a different county, she was hired in Jones County at a combined middle/elementary school. The following year, she transferred to JMS to teach geometry to 8th graders. Female 2 was not offered any financial incentives to teach at JMS, but she was given only one course to teach and prepare for, which she considered herself lucky. She also knew that the intention of her school administration was for her to teach all the honor’s classes eventually; this was considered a perk by Female 2, but it did not have an impact on her choice to leave teaching. When Female 2 began teaching at JMS, she was not given a mentor. She stated, “I wish I would have had one.” She felt that having a mentor would have assisted her in getting a better start to her employment in Jones County, which would have made her job much more enjoyable.

Female 2 expressed that the school administration did not have an impact on her leaving JMS, but it did play a role in her choosing to teach in Jones County. In her previous teaching position, there had been some administrative issues that caused her to look for employment opportunities in Jones County. When asked about working conditions, Female 2 explained that the lack of parental support played a part in her choice to leave, but even if she had loved the profession she would have left it. Being a stay-at-home mother was always her intention and she had her daughter earlier than she had anticipated. She taught at JMS for one year before leaving
to stay at home with her newborn daughter. Female 2 taught approximately five years. With just one more year left before receiving loan forgiveness, Female 2 still decided to leave the teaching profession. She currently runs a successful photography business and homeschools her children.

**Male 1.** Male 1 met the requirements to participate in this study because he was a former teacher at JMS. When the interview was conducted he was 30 years old. He began his teaching career with a North Carolina post-graduate professional teaching license in kindergarten through sixth grade, but not a Virginia teaching license. Male 1 completed student teaching as a part of his teacher preparation program. He didn’t remember taking any courses specifically on rural education or teaching students living in poverty, but it was covered on more of a broad spectrum throughout the entire program. He felt that the teacher preparation program properly prepared him for teaching in his own classroom. Male 1 stated, “The best way to learn is by experience and I think the biggest thing I learned from was my student teaching and my internship.” The firsthand knowledge made a big impact on Male 1’s understanding of how to teach.

He was hired as a Title I teacher at a combined middle/elementary school in Jones County. During this time, he obtained his Virginia teaching license for K-6. However, he never obtained licensure in Virginia to teach middle school. After three years in this position, he was let go due to budget cuts. He was hired at JMS the next year to teach algebra readiness. There were no incentives offered for Male 1 to teach at JMS. He does recall the school administration speaking very highly of the school and other teachers and expressing the good qualities of teaching at JMS. Male 1 did later say that being able to teach at the middle school without a secondary teaching license could have been considered an incentive.

Male 1 was never given a mentor when he began his teaching profession in Jones County. He felt that he was on his own while teaching at JMS. There were teachers he could talk to or
ask questions, but he didn’t want to bother other teachers with his problems knowing they had problems of their own. By not having a mentor, Male 1 felt it was an expression of confidence by the administration. However, he stated,

I kinda wish I had somebody. It’d be kind of nice to just have somebody to just talk you through some stuff and everything. Just to kinda, you know, talk to specifically about what I’m doing and why and, you know, what’s going on every day and stuff. Had mentoring been offered to Male 1, he would have gladly taken the support.

When asked about the school administration, Male 1 felt that they did a pretty fair job. “Middle school is crazy anywhere you go. I do think sometimes they kinda let some stuff go by that I probably would have been a little more hard on them.” However, he did say that you have to pick your battles with students and let some things go. He said, “I thought overall it was a good, well-ran administration.” It was noted that he felt the last year, with some administrative changes, was his best year at JMS. As for other working conditions, he felt that because he was the male figure in the classroom, he was often looked to for implementing the discipline. Discipline issues took away from his ability to just teach. At times he felt more like a babysitter than a teacher. Resources for the classroom were always given to him if he made any requests, so that was not an issue. He felt that if there had been some professional development opportunities made available specifically on how to communicate with middle schoolers, or how to get the best out of them, he would have been interested in attending them.

He remained in his position at JMS for four years. While at JMS, he taught mainly 8th grade students, but sometimes worked on pre-algebra skills with 7th graders. He never had a classroom of his own, but was assisting math teachers in their classrooms. Male 1 stated that his main reason for leaving JMS was that he wanted to return to the elementary level. The algebra
readiness position was also a year-to-year teaching position funded by a grant. Not knowing if he would have a job from year to year made keeping that position difficult, especially in years of budget constraints and cuts to grant funding. Male 1 also wanted his own classroom so when a position opened, he believed it was the perfect transition for him. He transferred back to the combined middle/elementary school in Jones County where he began his teaching career and currently teaches math to 6th and 7th graders in his own classroom.

**Female 3.** Female 3 met the requirements to participate in this study because she was a former teacher at JMS. When this interview was conducted she was 43 years old. She originally was hired at an elementary school in Jones County. When Female 3 began her teaching career she had a provisional license in special education. While teaching, she took courses to obtain her K-6 teaching license. She continued working as an inclusion teacher while taking master’s-level classes in special education. During this time, she decided just to focus on elementary education and never became certified in special education. During her teacher preparation program, Female 3 did not recall ever taking courses specific to rural areas or poverty. She remembers taking classes on student behavior, but not poverty or rural areas. Because she was already teaching, she was not required to do student teaching. Since Female 3 was an inclusion teacher, she had the opportunity to assist in six different classes and grade levels. She stated, “That actually probably prepared me more than student teaching ever would have.” After teaching for a few years in elementary education, Female 3 decided to stay home with her youngest child who needed extra support and attention.

After just one year at the elementary school, Female 3 transferred to JMS. While at JMS, Female 3 taught science to 6th graders. This included inclusion classes. Female 3 was not offered any financial incentives to teach at JMS. However, she noted that teaching at a middle
school was an incentive to her. While she was in the elementary school she often had to stay late preparing for her classes. The elementary school day consisted of Female 3 keeping her students all day, except for her planning time, and teaching seven different subjects. The elementary setting was very demanding of Female 3’s after school hours. She said, “I would go in at 7 and I’d leave at 5. You know, your cutting everything out, you’re prepping everything…” She wanted to do a good job and felt that staying late was part of doing a good job. She felt that being able to teach only one subject daily on a block schedule was an incentive of being in a middle school. While at the elementary school, Female 3 did have a mentor who was another elementary teacher from a different elementary school in Jones County. After one year of having a mentor she teamed up with a teacher in the same grade level at her school to work together on planning. Female 3 noted that her teammate “didn’t get paid to be my mentor. There was nothing documented. But she just kind of took that on as her own little thing, like many teachers do.” Female 3 did not have a mentor at the middle school, but said it would not have made a difference in her choosing to leave.

The school administration did not play a part in Female 3’s choosing to leave JMS. There were two sixth grade science teachers at JMS while Female 3 was there. Each year a newly hired teacher was Female 3’s counterpart. The administration saddled Female 3 with assisting the new teacher with understanding the curriculum and helping the new teacher figure out what they were doing. She said having to do this for three straight years and looking forward to the next year with a new teacher coming in yet again helped her make the choice to leave. As for other working conditions, Female 3 didn’t feel that she had a lot of behavior problems with her students. She did have difficult classes, such as the inclusion classes, which needed more teacher attention. However, she felt that because the subject she taught was science it allowed
her to have the students up interacting and engaged more than if she taught a different subject, such as English. Female 3 felt that she had appropriate parental support. “I really tried to take care of everything and be very proactive. You know, some you’re never going to get any support from so you just move along.” Any professional development opportunities that Female 3 was interested in taking, she had the administrative support to attend them. If she asked to go to any professional development trainings, she was always allowed to go.

She taught at JMS for three years before deciding to leave due to family dynamics. Her husband owns his own business and that required Female 3’s help. She also felt that she wasn’t able to teach and be an involved mother. Because substitute teachers are difficult to plan for, Female 3 felt that she wasn’t able to take her children to doctor’s appointments or orthodontist appoints, which made her husband take the day off. If her husband didn’t work, he didn’t get paid. She didn’t want to leave teaching or JMS, but she wasn’t the breadwinner of the family being a teacher. Taking classes to become a guidance counselor was also something Female 3 wanted to do. She felt that it would be best for her family and herself if she stopped teaching and was able to help with the family business while taking classes. Female 3 is currently working in the family business while taking classes to become a guidance counselor.

Male 2. Male 2 met the requirements to participate in this study because he previously worked at JMS. When this interview was conducted he was 27 years old. JMS was the first school that Male 2 had been employed as a teacher. He was hired in January for the spring semester and then continued to teach there for two more years. He had a post-graduate professional license. The teacher preparation program Male 2 went through required him to do student teaching and blocking. The courses he took during his teacher preparation program were not specific to rural areas or teaching students who live in poverty. However, during his student
teaching and blocking he worked at a school with a very high poverty rate. He said, “Being able to work with these kids opened my eyes and taught me more about poverty than any class could do.” Male 2 felt that his teacher preparation program properly prepared him for the realities of teaching, mainly through the student teaching and blocking requirements. While at JMS, Male 2 was given a mentor, which was especially supportive in getting him settled during his first year there. This, however, did not play a role in his leaving.

Male 2 was never offered any incentives to teach at JMS. However, he did mention the supportive school environment and helpful coworkers as being a positive aspect of working there. While at JMS, he taught world history I to 8th graders and civics and economics to 7th graders. Male 2 taught both inclusion and advanced classes. He mentioned that having to prepare for two different courses was difficult because multitasking was not his strong suit. Over half of Male 2’s time at JMS, however, he only had to prepare for one class. Male 2 spoke highly of the administration at JMS. He said, “The administration at JMS was the best I have ever worked with. They were understanding, firm, and compassionate in the times when I felt overwhelmed and stressed.” As for other working conditions, Male 2 felt very supported by both administration and other teachers. Having a lot of pride in his work and feeling that he was unable to perform his best when having multiple class preps was extremely challenging and stressful at times. He felt that student behavior at JMS was typical of any middle school, and this was not a problem for him. JMS always provided Male 2 with essential classroom supplies whenever he asked, as well as access to updated technology and equipment.

Male 2 taught at JMS for two and a half years before leaving. The main reason that he left JMS was because his wife worked in a different county. By moving school districts, he was able to commute to work with his wife. Driving two hours a day was difficult for him and put
unnecessary wear and tear on his vehicle, so it was an added bonus that the neighboring county was also closer to his home. Additionally, he received a small yearly pay increase at the new county. Male 2 left JMS to teach high school in a neighboring county, where he currently teaches. However, he did state, “If JMS was about 20-30 minutes closer then I would still be there.”

Exit Documentation

Twenty-five exit documents were reviewed. Eighteen were females and seven were males. All exit documents were filled out by White teachers employed full time. The average age of the employees filling out the exit documents was 53.5 years old. Teachers’ subjects and grade levels taught ranged from K-12 and across all core classes and exploratory courses. These teachers taught an average of 20 years. Every person who filled out the exit documentation marked that they would recommend Jones County as a good place to work.

Survey

Before the survey for this study was administered, a pilot test was conducted. The pilot test was conducted using three experts in the field of education. These experts included a female high school history teacher who also teaches college courses, a male director of technology, and a male elementary school teacher currently in a master’s program. The survey questions were discussed and some minor adjustments were made, including: question clarification, grammatical errors, and formatting. Upon completion of this meeting the survey was deemed ready to be administered to the participants.

A total of 41 teachers completed the survey. Subjects taught by these participants include core subjects and exploratory classes. These participants taught grades 6-8. Their average age was 44.25 years old. Females made up 76% of the participants surveyed and males made up
24%. Two percent of the participants were African American and 98% were Caucasian. Sixty-one percent of the survey participants began their teaching career with a post-graduate professional license and 39% began with a provisional license. Their average years teaching was 16.75 years. Table 2 illustrates the demographics of the survey participants.
Table 2

Survey Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Provisional License</th>
<th>Post Graduate Professional License</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th>Average Age</th>
<th>Average Teaching Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>44.25</td>
<td>16.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Interviews were conducted with five participants who were former teachers at Jones Middle School in order to find themes related to their experiences at this school and to determine reasons that they left. Several themes emerged from the qualitative analysis. Second, exit documentation of former Jones County employees was reviewed to find themes on a larger scale and determine ways to improve teacher retention. Finally, a quantitative survey was administered to current JMS employees to inform the problem of teacher retention.

Sub-question 1

Sub-question one for this study was: How would former teachers in an interview solve the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia? Interviews were conducted with former teachers from Jones Middle School in order to find themes related to teacher retention at their school. The themes uncovered in the qualitative analysis were relating to the teacher preparation program specific to rural environments with high poverty levels, school administration, mentoring, and working conditions. Table 3 shows codes and the frequency of the codes specific to these themes.
### Table 3

*Frequency of Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did not take courses specific to rural areas and poverty levels</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was not offered incentives to teach at JMS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy with the school administration</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught 8th grade</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught at a prior school</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught Math</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was not given a mentor</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was prepared for teaching at JMS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First teaching experience</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had only one class prep</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources were made available</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught 6th grade</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught science</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught social studies</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme One.** The teacher preparation programs were something each interview participant discussed. All three female participants began their teaching career on a provisional licensure, while the two male participants had their post-graduate professional license. Because of the licensure situation, the three females were not required to perform a semester of student teaching. These three female participants did not feel as if their teacher preparation program properly prepared them for teaching in an actual classroom. Female 1 stated, “I feel like I maybe was about 20-30 percent prepared. I think that the student teaching would probably have prepared me more than the 20-30 percent.” When asked if the teacher preparation program prepared her to teach in a rural area with high poverty levels, Female 2 stated “It didn’t prepare me much at all, quite honestly, for any form of any of it.” Female 3 felt that being an inclusion
teacher who worked with six different teachers prepared her more than student teaching ever could have. Both male participants did go through a semester of student teaching. When asked about his teacher preparation program, Male 1 stated “I think it really prepared me for what was coming my way. I think the biggest thing I learned from was my student teaching and my internship.” Male 2 stated, “My preparatory program prepared me greatly for my time at JMS.” The three females took courses to complete their licensure in their first year of teaching. None of the participants remember taking courses specific to teaching students who live in poverty or rural areas. Male 1 said, “There was some information in [the foundational classes] about that stuff but there wasn’t a specific course designed to teach in that particular area.” Male 2 remembered, “It was sprinkled through all of our classes about different types of students.” He also felt that his student teaching “taught me more about poverty than any class could do.”

Theme Two. The impact of the school administration was another theme that emerged through these interviews. Female 1 felt like the school administration played a large part in her leaving. She needed help and when she made suggestions, she was not listened to. She said, “Because of the situation and school administration not being willing to change or help or fix anything, I left.” The administration did not have an impact on Female 2’s choosing to leave. She said, “I actually did really like the administration there.” She had left her previous school due to administrative issues. When Female 3 was asked if the administration impacted her choice to leave, she said, “Not at all. I was very happy with the school administration.” Male 1 said that the administration did not have an impact on his leaving JMS. He did state, however, that he thought “sometimes they kinda let some stuff go by that I probably would have been a little more hard on them”, referring to student behavior. Male 2 was also happy with the administration and said that they did not impact his leaving. He said, “The administration at
JMS was the best I have ever worked with. They were understanding, firm, and compassionate in the times when I felt overwhelmed and stressed.”

**Theme Three.** Mentoring was another theme that emerged from these interviews. According to Jones County procedures, every new teacher is given a mentor when hired. While at JMS, Female 1 did not remember having a mentor but stated, “I think it would have helped.” Female 2 did not have a mentor either. She said, “At the end of the year, someone said something about a mentor, and I was like, what were those? I wish I would have had one.” She also said that having a mentor may have helped her get started off on the right foot and “would have impacted how much I enjoyed it”, talking about teaching. Male 1 was not assigned a mentor at Jones Middle School either. He stated that if he had questions he would just ask another teacher, but “it’d be nice to just have somebody to just talk you through some stuff and everything.” He said, “I kinda wish I had somebody. Just to talk to specifically about what I’m doing and why and, you know, what’s going on every day and stuff.” Female 3 did have a mentor and felt that it was very beneficial to her. She also noted that when she moved to another grade, a teacher of that grade level teamed up with her to help her learn how to teach that grade. Female 3 said of this person, “She just kind of took that on as her own little thing, like many teachers do.” Male 2 was given a mentor while at JMS. He said this mentor “sat down with me and helped to get my footing, especially during my first year of teaching.” This did not play a factor in his choosing to leave, however.

**Theme Four.** Working conditions was another theme that emerged during the interviews. Female 1 noted that her inclusion class contained more students having accommodations than not, and she was not provided a special education teacher to assist with the class. She had multiple class preparations for three different classes that she taught. As for
student discipline and parental involvement, Female 1 stated, “In the area that we live in, students are disciplined more at school than they are at home. And I think the parents want us to raise their children.” She attributed this issue to the high poverty level that the students at JMS experience. Female 1 also noted that having a large class size and issues with student behavior negatively affected her experience at JMS. Female 2 pointed out one of the difficulties of working at JMS was that “you felt like you didn’t have parent support.” Female 3 found a decent amount of parental support but did note that, “some you’re never going to get any support from, so you just move along.” She also stated that she “didn’t really have a lot of behavior problems” even though she had inclusion classes, which tend to be more difficult. She felt that the subject she taught, science, allowed her to keep students engaged better than other subjects allowed. As for professional development opportunities, Female 3 said she always felt supported with any of her requests. Male 1 felt that he was usually in charge of the classroom discipline. He stated, “I want to be a teacher, not a disciplinarian babysitter”, which is often the issues you run into with middle school. He would have been interested in professional development on “learning how to communicate more with middle schoolers and learning more about how to work with them and get the best out of them”, however, it wasn’t offered. Male 2 felt that having more than one class to prepare for was difficult. He said, “Student behavior was like any other school.” As for resources, Male 2 said, “I never went without when it came to essential school supplies.”

Sub-question 2

Sub-question two for this study was: How would exit documentation completed by former teachers inform the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia? Exit documentation from Jones County central office was reviewed to find themes
related to teacher retention. The themes uncovered in the qualitative analysis were the overall experience of these employees, their main reasons for leaving, and the incentives that would have made them to stay.

**Theme One.** Forty-eight percent of the exit documentation was filled out by teachers who were retiring. The overall experience of the former employees who completed the exit documentation was rated positively. Twenty-nine percent of former employees rated the school division as good, while 71% rated the school division as very good. All former employees stated that they would recommend this school division as a good place to work. One former employee even commented that Jones County “is a great place to work!” and that they were sad about leaving.

**Theme Two.** Several reasons for leaving Jones County were reviewed. Former employees were asked to mark all factors that influenced their leaving the county. Fifty-four percent marked personal reasons for leaving. This main topic was broken further down into categories. Forty-five percent retired with full benefits while 14% retired with reduced benefits. Both commute time or distance and personal or family considerations were marked by 14% of former employees as reasons they left. Nine percent of the former employees surveyed left because of relocation and 4% left to further their education. Twelve percent chose compensation and benefits as their main reason for leaving. This main topic was broken down more into categories. Forty percent of employees left due to salaries. While 20% left for insurance benefits, 20% also left for lack of time off for professional growth, and 20% for lack of incentives and opportunities for growth and advancement. The exit documentation showed that 20% of former employees left for professional reasons, which were broken down into categories. Twenty-five percent of former employees left because of a change of career and 25% went to a
different school division. *Job description and responsibilities* was chosen by 25% of former employees as their reason for leaving. The last 25% of former employees left because they accepted another position in the field of education, such as administration, central office supervisor, or Department of Education employee. The main heading, *learning climate*, was chosen by 7% of former employees as reasons why they left Jones County. Thirty-three percent marked the category of *school culture and climate* while 67% marked *student discipline/behavior* as to why they left. *Policies and regulations* (specific to federal, state, or local educational policies and mandates), *school and community* (specific to lack of support from parents/community), and *teacher preparation* (specific to unprepared to teach in a multicultural setting) were each chosen 2% of the time as reasons for leaving the county. Table 4 shows codes and the frequency of the codes found in the exit documentation specific to the main reasons employees left, along with the breakdown of the subcategories.
Table 4

*Frequency of Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Reasons</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirement with full benefits</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirement with reduced benefits</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commute time or distance</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal or family considerations (health or other)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse/family relocating out of the area</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career break with intent to return (further education)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Reasons</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job description or responsibilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accepted another position in the field of education</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach (K-12) in a different school division in Virginia</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change of Career</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation and Benefits</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Salary</td>
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<td>Insurance Benefits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of time off for professional growth</td>
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<td>Lack of incentives and opportunities for growth and advancement</td>
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<td>Learning Climate</td>
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<td>School culture and climate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student discipline/behavior</td>
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<td>Federal, state or local educational policies and mandates</td>
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<tr>
<td>School and Community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of support from parents/community</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Preparation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not prepared to teach in a multicultural setting</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme Three. Former employees were asked to select up to three incentives that would have encouraged them to remain in their position with Jones County. *None of the above (due to retirement)* was chosen 48% of the time. Fifteen percent of former employees chose a pay increase as an incentive to stay. A different teaching assignment, fewer student discipline problems, opportunities for advancement, and other were each chosen by 7% of the former employees. *Better mentoring/coaching program* and *more time to plan or prepare* were each chosen by 4% of former employees as incentives to stay. Table 5 shows codes and the frequency of the codes from exit documentation, specific to incentives.
Table 5

*Frequency of Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None of the above (due to retirement)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay increase</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different teaching assignment</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fewer student discipline problems</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for advancement</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better mentoring/coaching program</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More time to plan or prepare</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sub-question 3**

Sub-question three for this study was: How would quantitative survey data from currently employed teachers inform the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia? All 66 teachers at Jones Middle School had the opportunity to complete the survey. Forty-one current teachers at Jones Middle School completed the survey. Their insights have informed the problem of teacher retention at JMS. Themes that emerged from the survey data focused on teacher preparation programs, mentoring, administration, incentives, and working conditions.

**Theme One.** The category, *teacher preparation programs*, was a commonality among the survey participants. Sixty-one percent of the current teachers at JMS began their teaching careers with a post-graduate professional license while 39% had a provisional license. Of the current teachers surveyed, 53.6% agreed that the lack of good teachers negatively impacts student learning at JMS, 36.9% disagreed, and 9.8% were neutral on the issue. When asked if current teacher preparation programs properly prepare teachers for teaching in a rural middle
school with high poverty levels, 68.3% disagreed, 19.5% were neutral, and 22.2% agreed. Forty-six percent of current teachers feel that Jones County could improve teacher retention by putting more money towards teacher recruitment, while 29.3% were neutral, and 24.3% disagreed. When asked if teacher residency programs would improve teacher retention, 53.7% agreed, 31.7% were neutral, and 14.6% disagreed.

**Theme Two.** Mentoring was another theme that developed from the survey data. Eighty-three percent of teachers felt that having a mentor was very important for beginning teachers and 17.1% were neutral. When asked if providing co-teaching opportunities would improve teacher retention, 63.4% of teachers agreed, 19.5% were neutral, and 17.1% disagreed.

**Theme Three.** Administration was another theme that appeared in the survey data. Ninety-seven and a half percent of teachers agreed that administrative support was very important for keeping teachers at JMS, while 2.5% disagreed. Ninety-five percent of current teachers at JMS felt that maintaining a positive school culture would improve teacher retention and 5% were neutral. When asked if student discipline issues negatively impact teacher retention, 85.4% agreed, 9.8% were neutral, and 4.8% disagreed.

**Theme Four.** Offering incentives was another theme that emerged from this survey. Seventy-one percent of current teachers felt that smaller class sizes were very important for keeping teachers at JMS, while 22% were neutral, and 7.3% disagreed. When asked if financial incentives were important for hiring and keeping teachers at JMS, 65.9% of teachers agreed, 22% were neutral, and 12.1% disagreed. Ninety-five percent of teachers agreed that teachers who feel happy and secure in their teaching positions would remain at JMS, while 5% were neutral.

**Theme Five.** Another theme that developed from this survey was concerning working
conditions. Seventy-one percent of teachers felt that parental support was very important for retaining teachers at JMS, while 19.5% were neutral, and 9.8% disagreed. When asked if having a low number of class preparations was important for retaining teachers, 68.3% agreed, 26.8% were neutral, and 4.9% disagreed. Forty-nine percent of teachers disagreed that high poverty levels and rurality had a negative impact on teacher retention at JMS, while 22% were neutral, and 29.3% agreed. When asked if the age of the facilities negatively impacted teacher retention at JMS, 46.4% disagreed, 34.1% were neutral, and 19.5% agreed. Sixty-eight percent of teachers agreed that a smaller student-teacher ratio would improve teacher retention, 24.4% were neutral, and 7.3% disagreed. The demands of the Department of Education were seen to negatively impact teacher retention by 75.6%, but 12.2% of teachers disagreed and 12.2% were neutral. Eighty-five percent of teachers at JMS agreed that student discipline issues negatively impact teacher retention, but 9.8% were neutral, and 4.8% disagreed. When asked if the amount of available resources at JMS positively impacted teacher retention 80.5% agreed, 17.1% were neutral, and 2.4% disagreed. Having access to professional development opportunities was seen by 58.6% of teachers as positively impacting teacher retention, while 31.7% were neutral, and 9.8% disagreed. Increased workload was seen as negatively affecting teacher retention by 80.5% of teachers, while 12.2% were neutral, and 7.3% disagreed. Table 6 shows the frequency codes from the survey.
Table 6

*Frequency of Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrative support</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping teachers happy</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining positive school culture</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining job security</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High discipline issues are a negative impact</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive amount of resources available</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative impact of increased workload</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative impact of the demands of the Department of Education</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Support</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller Class sizes</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low number of class preps</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller student teacher ratio</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved financial incentives offered</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide co-teaching opportunities</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor preparation from teacher education programs</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve residency programs</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of good teachers negatively impact student achievement</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty and rurality are not a negative impact</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve monetary recruiting efforts</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

First, it is important to note that some of the responses collected may not reflect the participant’s truthful feelings. Unfortunately, even with guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity some people are still hesitant to tell the complete and entire truth. Also, as time passes, understanding of the situation and feelings about the situation may change. This study
has found, like the literature (Sutcher et al., 2019), that licensure status plays a part in teacher retention. The theories from Dewey, Freire, and Skinner have all been applied to the results of this study. Literature has been applied to the results of this study and discussed concerning mentoring, administration, and recruitment efforts.

**Provisional Licensure**

Due to difficulties in finding licensed teachers, the research has shown that many teachers are being hired on a provisional license (Sutcher et al., 2019). Twenty-five of the survey participants (61%) began their careers with a post-graduate professional license, while 16 (39%) had a provisional license. Three of the interview participants began their careers as educators with a provisional license while two had a post-graduate professional license. From the interviews it was found that provisional licensure usually allows the teacher to begin their career without performing student teaching or an internship because their first year teaching was sufficient to meet that licensure requirement. It was mentioned by three of the interview participants that not doing student teaching led to difficulties in their first years in the classroom, along with feelings of being unprepared for the profession. These three participants all left JMS for careers unrelated to education. From this information, it was determined that provisional licensure was good for getting teachers in the classroom and filling the vacancies, but it was not good for retaining quality teachers.

**Dewey’s Theory of Valuation**

Dewey based his theory on incorporating the environment into teaching and creating value of the situation (Kruger & Reinhart, 2017). Teacher preparation programs were seen by over half of current teachers at JMS as inadequate for preparing teachers for a rural environment with high levels of poverty. The three female interview participants also felt that they were
unprepared for teaching in that type of environment. Teacher preparation programs need to begin to focus on specific school demographics and properly prepare teachers for the type of environments they might encounter in reality in the occupation. According to the findings of this study, by encouraging internships or residency programs in Jones County, potential teachers will experience a true teaching environment and be better prepared for their career in education. Classes focusing on rural areas and high poverty levels will also assist in preparing them for the realities of the career while also teaching the value of these schools. Knowing that JMS is a rural school district with high poverty levels, it would be to their advantage to market themselves as a valuable place to teach using the Theory of Valuation (Dewey, 1939). By making JMS valuable, potential teachers will also develop an understanding of the importance of JMS and the students, regardless of their rurality and high poverty levels. This will improve job satisfaction and teacher retention. Almost 50% of survey participants felt that rurality and poverty levels did not negatively impact teacher retention at JMS. These teachers have found the value of teaching students who get outside and develop life skills based on living in a rural environment. Sharing these positive aspects when recruiting teachers to JMS will increase the value of working there.

**Freire’s Critical Education Pedagogy**

Freire developed a theory based on critical education pedagogy (Veugelers, 2017). It encouraged teachers and students to equally participate in their education (Matthews, 2014). Almost 75% of teachers at JMS feel that parental involvement is important to assisting in a student’s education and retaining teachers. All interview participants noted how important it was to have parental involvement, but rarely did this happen. One interview participant noted that because of the poverty level, parents were more likely to be hands off when it came to education. She mentioned that parents wanted the teachers to take care of that part of their child’s life
without much support from home. Unfortunately, 85% of survey participants felt that discipline issues negatively impacted teacher retention. If administrators assisted with student discipline issues, teachers were more satisfied and more likely to remain in the profession (Burkhauser, 2017). Teacher preparation programs could help potential teachers understand how to handle the issues in rural environments with high poverty levels (Azano & Stewart, 2016). According to the data findings, JMS could also help support novice teachers by encouraging them to attend professional developments specific to teaching in rural areas with high poverty levels. These would provide them with a support system of other teachers and provide ideas to encourage students to become involved in their education, regardless of their home situation.

**Skinner’s Theory of Human Behavior**

B.F. Skinner developed the Theory of Human Behavior (Peterson, 2004). It encouraged adjusting a person’s behavior based off of incentives (Smith, 2019). These incentives included both financial and nonmonetary incentives. Over 70% of survey participants felt that smaller class sizes would improve teacher retention at JMS. Findings from this study found that offering high salaries, small class sizes, fewer class preps, and a decreased student-teacher ratio would allow JMS to adjust a novice teacher’s perspective of working in a rural school with high poverty. Almost all participants agreed that teachers would remain at JMS if they were happy and felt secure in their positions. A teacher’s behavior would change from leaving to staying if these aspects could be ensured. None of the interview participants were offered any incentives to work at JMS, nor were they offered anything to stay. This study found that while almost half of the teachers filling out the exit documentation retired, the others would have stayed had they been offered incentives. These incentives included a pay increase, a different teaching assignment, a better mentoring program, more planning time, fewer student discipline problems,
and opportunities for advancement. According to the data from this study, if JMS could find ways to provide these nonmonetary incentives to their teachers, they could improve retention.

**Teacher Preparation Programs**

Teacher preparation programs have been looked at extensively now that teacher retention has become an issue for many schools across the nation (Hilton, 2017). The three interview participants who began their careers on a provisional license felt that they were not prepared to teach. According to the research collected from this study, the teacher preparation programs are failing new teachers by awarding them a provisional licensure without requiring student teaching or an internship. Of the participants who filled out the exit documentation, none of them felt that they were underprepared to teach in Jones County Public Schools. Sixty eight percent of survey participants feel that the current teacher preparation programs do not properly prepare novice teachers for their career in a rural school system with high poverty levels. These findings tie directly back to standardized teaching programs producing teachers who cannot teach in nonstandard environments (Sobel, 2005). Teacher preparation programs will have to begin to focus on the unique aspects of rural school systems. Alternative routes to educating novice teachers would need to be implemented at JMS in order to improve teacher retention there, including residency programs (Williamson & Hodder, 2015). The findings from this study supported incorporating residency programs at JMS so they would be able to train novice teachers for environments specific to their school system. JMS would need to collaborate with colleges and universities that have teacher preparation programs in order to get student teachers in their buildings and train teachers for rural environments with high poverty levels. Central office staff and school administrators would need to ensure successful and positive field experiences for these novice teachers. They would then be able to develop positive feelings
towards education and teaching in these types of school systems. These recruitment methods would lead to improved teacher retention.

**Mentoring**

Mentoring has been found to be important and supportive to novice teachers (Morettini, 2016). Survey participants agreed that mentoring positively impacted teacher retention. One participant of the exit documentation and four interview participants felt that having a mentor would have made a big impact on their happiness while in Jones County or at Jones Middle School. Mentors were seen to provide emotional support and teaching instruction that help novice teachers. The findings from this study, however, have shown that even veteran teachers who are new to JMS or Jones County would have liked to have a mentor. They felt lost without someone to help guide them in basic school procedures and teaching support. Co-teaching is another support system that this study found had a positive impact on teacher retention (Ricci et al., 2019). According to one interview participant, it was especially important for reducing stress levels in an inclusion classroom. JMS provided common planning time for subject and grade level teachers. This helped to support novice or transferred teachers in how to handle student behaviors, school policies and practices, and curriculum development.

**Administration**

Administration has been found to play a significant role in teacher retention (Stander & Stander, 2016), and this study found that to be true for Jones County as well. The survey data found that the administration was important for maintaining a positive school culture, assisting with student behavior issues, keeping teachers happy, and providing them with job security. One interview participant left a prior school due to lack of administrative support and one left JMS due to lack of administrative support. Overall, 80% of the findings from the interviews of this
study were positive in regards to administrative support. Teacher retention directly related to job satisfaction and making teachers feel valued is important (Suriano et al., 2018). Findings from this study supported developing positive teacher-administrative relationships at JMS. One interview participant enjoyed teaching, but left JMS because of a bad relationship with the school administration. Over 97% percent of survey participants agreed that administrative support was very important to keeping teachers at JMS. The findings have noted that student discipline issues were not always properly taken care of by the school administration, and this negatively impacted teacher retention.

**Incentives**

Rural education systems were typically found to be unable to compete with other school systems financially (Rude & Miller, 2018). Results from this study have found that JMS was the same. Exit documentation noted that salaries were a reason some teachers left Jones County. Survey data found that salaries were important for keeping teachers at JMS, but due to budgetary constraints, JMS was not competitive when it comes to teacher salaries. Interview participants noted that JMS had some small incentives, such as fewer class preps and the basic school schedule. These findings supported research that meaningful work leads to career happiness and could counteract the stress of the profession and low salary. Small class sizes and decreased student-teacher ratio were something that could improve teacher retention, but according to one interview participant these conditions were not the case in her classroom. She spoke of every desk being full and even needing chairs along the sides of the classroom. This was especially difficult for her with the inclusion class. According to the findings, to improve teacher retention, the administration needed to support small class sizes and a decreased student teacher ratio. JMS could also improve teacher retention by focusing more on recruiting efforts and seeking salary
increases.

**Working Conditions**

Many working conditions were a part of the findings of this study. Exit documentation showed that all participants would recommend Jones County as a good place to work. The findings from this study were overall positive in regards to the working conditions at JMS. Interview participants also spoke positively of working conditions at JMS. Class sizes and poor parental support were found to be a concern for interview participants, but these were perceived as more of a difficulty of the profession than negative working conditions in Jones Middle School. Survey participants also found the working conditions at JMS to be an overall positive aspect of the job. The high levels of commitment supported by the research study were also found to be true of teachers at JMS. Teachers felt that professional development was important and the classroom resources provided by the school necessary. An increased workload was found to negatively impact teacher retention. These include giving up planning times, either for covering other classes or helping students, assisting students during lunch times, or remaining after school. Poor student behavior also negatively impacted working conditions and teacher retention. According to the findings of this study, if JMS can assist teachers in these aspects of student achievement, they will be able to improve teacher retention.

**Summary**

Five former teachers from JMS, consisting of three females and two males, were interviewed to get an understanding of why they chose to leave JMS. A survey was administered and 41 current teachers participated and provided information about teacher retention at JMS. Exit documentation of 25 former teachers of Jones County was reviewed to determine reasons that teachers left Jones County. Results were discussed for each sub-question. For sub-question
1. How would former teachers in an interview solve the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia?, four themes emerged. Teacher preparation programs, school administration, mentoring, and working conditions emerged as common themes among the interview participants. For sub-question 2, How would exit documentation completed by former teachers inform the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia?, three themes emerged. Retirement, reasons for leaving, and incentives emerged as common themes among the exit documentation participants. For sub-question 3, How would quantitative survey data from currently employed teachers inform the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia?, five themes emerged. Teacher preparation programs, mentoring, administration, incentives, and working conditions were all themes that emerged from teachers who completed the survey. The findings from this study were discussed relating to the literature and research.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this study was to determine how to improve teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. The problem guiding this study was: How can the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia be improved? The proposed solution to the central question is discussed. Resources needed to resolve the problem for this study are explained. The funds needed to fix the problem of this study are described. The roles and responsibilities of the school system have been explained. Both positive and negative implications from this study are discussed. An evaluation plan, along with limitations and delimitations, is presented.

Restatement of the Problem

The problem guiding this study was to determine how to improve the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. As stated in Chapter One of this dissertation, isolation, lack of funding, and smaller student populations (Avery, 2013) have affected this specific rural middle school. Several aspects related to teacher retention in rural areas were looked at during this study, such as mentoring, teacher preparation programs, working conditions, administration, and incentives. A multimethod approach was used to collect data pertaining to teacher retention at JMS. Qualitative data was collected from five interview participants who were former teachers at Jones Middle School. Exit documentation from former teachers of Jones County was reviewed to determine why they chose to leave. Quantitative data was collected through a survey of current teachers at JMS. Collectively, these aspects provided information as to why teacher retention is problematic for Jones Middle school.
Proposed Solution to the Central Question

As discussed in Chapter Four, one theme that emerged based on the data was specific to teacher preparation programs and teacher recruitment. As mentioned in Chapter Two, teacher trainees who are educated using standardized and conventional teaching methods are not going to be properly prepared for working in educational environments that are not standardized or conventional (Sobel, 2005). Therefore, one way to improve teacher retention in a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia is to focus on teacher preparation programs close to the county. Using Freire’s Critical Education Pedagogy (Gadotti & Torres, 2009) and collaborating with colleges and universities in close proximity to Jones County, the school system will be able to educate teacher trainees specific to the school and the rural area. Based on Skinner’s Theory of Human Behavior (Ulferts, 2015), allowing student teachers to work in the county with currently employed teachers can properly prepare teacher trainees for working with students who live in rural areas with high poverty levels. Changing the way Jones County recruits employees is also based on Skinner’s theory (Durksen & Klassen, 2018). The partnerships developed with colleges and universities are based on Dewey’s Theory of Valuation (Ulferts, 2015). Educating teacher trainees to value rural areas and appreciate students who live in poverty can encourage them to return to these types of school environments (Kruger & Reinhart, 2017). These actions can also be the beginning of the process of teacher recruitment while also expressing the positive aspects of working in this type of school environment (Ulferts, 2015). Freire’s Critical Education Pedagogy can also be incorporated in these methods by not teaching all teacher trainees the same information. Educating novice teachers based on the school systems they may choose to be in can help to improve teacher retention in those areas (Sobel, 2005). The goal of this solution is to improve teacher retention by incorporating residency programs and student
While hiring teachers on a provisional licensure can help to fill teaching positions, this may actually have a negative impact on teacher retention (Yaffe, 2016). These inexperienced and unprepared employees cannot be successful in Jones County if they are not properly supported (Rooks, 2018). Another theme that emerged from each of the data collection methods is related to mentoring. Teachers will learn how to properly teach by actually doing it (Williamson & Hodder, 2015), but they may also develop bad habits if left without proper support. This may lead to unnecessary frustrations in an already stressful profession (Roch & Sai, 2017). Jones County will need to ensure every teacher hired in the county receives a mentor. This will include both new teachers and transfer teachers. A mentor can incorporate aspects of Dewey’s Theory of Valuation (Lamine, 2018) by educating new employees of the value of the students and school environment. Looking at the collected data, not all new teachers were given mentors if they were considered veteran teachers. Like Freire’s critical education pedagogy (Celeste Kee & Carr-Chellman, 2019), learning how to teach students in ways different from what is expected is important to a student’s achievement success. When teachers transfer from another grade level, subject, or school, receiving a mentor in the same grade level, subject, or school can make teachers feel supported and provide them with collaboration opportunities. Collaboration and support from mentor teachers will help to make novice teachers feel vitally important (Spooner-Lane, 2017). Like it was discussed in Chapter Two, mentoring will allow these teachers the support needed to develop appropriate teaching skills and learn how to manage a classroom effectively (Jaspers et al., 2018). The goal of this solution is to ensure all newly hired teachers in Jones County receive a mentor, which will assist in improving teacher retention.
Having an effective administration is another theme that emerged from the data analysis in Chapter Four. Developing strong relationships and maintaining positive school culture can assist in keeping teachers happy in their school (Urick, 2016). Job satisfaction is based on these strong relationships and happiness in the profession (Arnup & Bowles, 2016). Administrators should have a goal of regularly observing newly hired teachers and providing quality constructive feedback (Rigby et al., 2017). These observations can develop trust between teachers and administrators and help to make teachers feel valued. New teachers will continue their teaching habits, whether good or bad. Good teaching habits should be recognized and encouraged while bad teaching habits need to be addressed and changed. Skinner’s Theory of Human Behavior can be incorporated in this goal through finding problematic behaviors of teachers and changing them through the proper reinforcements (Ozcelik, 2017). Administrators who are able to be supportive of their teachers can make all the difference in teacher retention (Urick, 2016). One thing that specifically emerged in Chapter Four was that administrators need to be very involved with student behaviors within the classroom. Teachers and administrators must work together to ensure classrooms run smoothly and students are able to learn (Funke, 2017). Strong administrator involvement with teachers and their classroom instruction is the main goal of this solution (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017).

**Resources Needed**

Development of a strong relationship with nearby colleges and universities will be a required resource to obtain student teachers and improve recruitment opportunities. The Director of Human Resources will need to make these connections. One barrier may be that students in the education programs may not wish to perform their student teaching in Jones County. The colleges and universities may also not want to work with Jones County due to distance.
To obtain proper mentors for novice teachers, veteran teachers must be willing to become a mentor. This will require professional development and training. Newly hired teachers who are not new to the profession will need to be paired up with a veteran teacher within the school. They may not be trained as a mentor, but are willing to provide support to the newly hired teacher. One barrier is that veteran teachers may not be willing to become a mentor or support teacher. Having to be out of their own classroom may discourage veteran teachers from being willing to help novice and newly hired teachers.

Administrators will need to ensure they set aside specific times to observe the teachers within their building. At times, administrators are overwhelmed with office duties and will push teacher observations to the back burner. This is one barrier that needs to be addressed and teacher observations will need to be placed at the top of the administrative list. Teachers will need to be supported in their classrooms, which will in turn develop strong relationships between teachers and administrators and maintain a positive school culture.

**Funds Needed**

Funding should not be an issue in developing a community network relationship with colleges and universities. Since most of the time teacher preparation programs require student teaching, these relationships can naturally benefit Jones County without any cost. Mentor teachers will need to be compensated for their role. Since they are required to attend professional development, this is a cost the school must handle. Unfortunately, Jones County is under budgetary constraints and cannot afford to largely compensate mentors. Minimal compensation can be found, however, through grants or other state supported means. There should be no cost for administrators to effectively and successfully observe teachers and provide feedback beyond the professional development training they will need to attend.
Roles and Responsibilities

The Director of Human Resources would need to make strong professional relationships with college and universities. This will assist in obtaining student teachers regularly and supporting recruitment efforts. Veteran teachers who are assigned to work with student teachers will need to be trained in how to effectively support their student teacher. This will be done through collaboration between the Director of Human Resources and the college and university personnel. Veteran teachers will need to be trained or retrained each school year.

Veteran teachers who are willing to become mentors will need to be trained on how to work with adults. They will need to attend professional development trainings on effective mentoring strategies. Teachers who are willing to be support teachers within the building and assist new teachers with basic building procedures and curriculum will need to attend school-based trainings. Expectations will need to be set and results discussed. These veteran teachers will need to be trained or retrained each school year.

Administrators will need to be properly trained in how to effectively observe teachers. Newly hired teachers will require more observations throughout the school year, but veteran teachers will need to be observed yearly as well. Time will need to be carved out each day for observations to happen. Meetings will need to occur between the teacher and administrator for feedback and discussions. Training every few years in effective observation practices will be necessary for administrators.

Timeline

A timeline (Appendix G) is provided to assist in improving teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. Connections with colleges and universities in close proximity to Jones County will need to be made by the Director of Human Resources by the end
of the 2019-2020 school year. These need to be ready to go for the upcoming school year. Veteran teachers will need to be selected before the commencement of the 2019-2020 school year. These teachers will need to be willing to take on a student teacher. They will need proper training over the summer in how to be an effective lead teacher. Implementation of student teacher programs will need to be in place beginning the following school year in August and September. Evaluation of this program will be done in December 2020. Improvements will be made in January 2021 and implementation of the student teacher program will continue in the following years with continual improvements and adjustments. Veteran teachers will need to be solicited to join the mentoring team at Jones County. This will need to be done before the end of the 2019-2020 school year. Anticipated new hires will determine how many mentor teachers will be needed. The teachers who are willing to become mentors will need to attend proper mentor training and professional development through the summer of 2020. How to follow the current mentor program in Jones County will also be discussed during these summer meetings. Pairing up mentor teachers with mentee teachers will need to occur as soon as the newly hired teachers begin. All teachers will receive a mentor even if they have transferred from another school system. During the fall and spring semesters, two evaluation meetings will occur between mentor teachers and central office staff. Weekly meetings will occur during the 2020-2021 school year between mentor teachers and mentee teachers based on the current mentor program. Administration at JMS will need to have extensive training in effective teacher observations. They will need to attend professional development during the summer of 2020. This will allow them to begin proper observations and evaluations of teachers during the 2020-2021 school year. All teachers will need to be observed within the first three months of school. Follow-up observations will be done the next three months with teachers who are determined to need more
assistance. All teachers will be observed within the first three months of the spring semester. Follow-up observations will need to be done with those determined to need more assistance the last three months of school. The director of curriculum and instruction will need to assist in ensuring these observations are happening with positive and effective results.

**Solution Implications**

Positive and negative implications can be found for the solutions provided concerning teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. If proper connections are made between the director of human resources and colleges and universities in close proximity to Jones County, then the school system will benefit. Student teachers, who are trained in the area, may choose to stay in the area and therefore would be easier to recruit into the school system. This recruiting method will not require any funds, which Jones County is lacking in. The director of human resources will play a large role in these connections. The success of implementing the student teacher program will fall mainly on the shoulders of the director of human resources. The director will have to make sure to encourage veteran teachers to participate and provide them with the support to be successful. The colleges and universities will also have to support the relationship between Jones County school system and their student teachers. Implementation of this program will need to happen quickly, since the teacher retention issue is currently very problematic. Unfortunately, teacher retention will not be improved by this solution immediately. It will take approximately two years before the school system will reap the benefits from this solution. It is also important to note that the colleges and universities must be willing to partner with Jones County School system or this solution will not work.

Providing mentoring will benefit newly hired teachers tremendously. Even those
teachers who are experienced, but are new to the county, will benefit from having a mentor. Positive implications from this solution are that newly hired teachers will feel supported and more likely to remain at JMS. Unfortunately, if mentor teachers are not properly trained, they may instead push newly hired teachers out the door. Professional development will need to be provided to mentor teachers, which may cost money, but is very important to the effectiveness of the program. Following the school system’s mentoring program can also assist in the effectiveness of the mentoring program. Ensuring each newly hired teacher gets a mentor will take time from central office staff, but is important for improving teacher retention. Administrators can also assist in ensuring their newly hired teachers get a mentor.

Teacher observations are very important to ensuring students are getting what they need in the classroom. Administrators will need to attend professional development to make sure they are able to make proper observations of teachers and provide effective feedback. These professional development opportunities may cost money. The administrators will also find making time for these observations difficult, but they must be done. Central office staff will need to monitor these observation schedules and help to make sure they are happening. If teachers are unwilling to make improvements, they will need to be on official improvement plans. These may have a negative impact on teacher retention to begin with. However, keeping the most effective teachers will improve student achievement and will improve teacher retention in the long run.

**Evaluation Plan**

Evaluations of the suggested plan must be conducted to determine their effectiveness. By the end of the 2020-2021 school year, connections between the director of human resources and colleges and universities will need to be evaluated for their strength. Evaluations of this solution
will be both goal-based and outcomes-based. The goal of this solution is to encourage student teachers to return to Jones County as a permanent teacher. If student teachers return to the county to teach, the goal has been met. The outcome of this solution is to consistently improve recruitment of teachers through the student teacher program. This can be done by having conversations with both parties and determining how to better continue the program. This partnership can also be evaluated based on the number of student teachers that were provided and the effectiveness of the lead teachers. If these same student teachers graduate and choose to return to Jones County school system, the program has effectively improved teacher recruitment and hopefully teacher retention. Limitations of this solution will be that no matter how hard Jones County tries, the decision to return there and teach is ultimately up to each individual.

Inviting people to student teach in Jones County encourages people to come into the county, but returning and staying is their own choice. Future research concerning current recruitment practices will need to be conducted. Types of recruitment options currently used will need to be evaluated. Those methods that are used by other counties, which are deemed successful in recruiting teachers, will also need to be reviewed.

The Director of Human Resources can evaluate the mentoring program. This will also be conducted using an outcomes-based evaluation. If teachers who have a mentor remain in the school system, then the program is effectively working. Each school year both mentors and mentees will need to complete a survey about the mentoring program. Adjustments can be made to make the program more effective. Limitations of this solution are also based on the fact that humans have free will. They may choose to leave Jones County for a reason unrelated to the school system itself. Family issues and other outside factors may play a role in teachers leaving the county. Future research pertaining to mentor pairing will need to be conducted. Methods of
pairing mentor teachers with mentee teachers will need to be evaluated. Also, research on differences between mentor teachers and buddy teachers who are in the same building will need to be studied.

The effectiveness of administrative observations can be evaluated using formative evaluations. The observations of teachers will provide the groundwork for finding and retaining effective teachers. Administration will be responsible for these formative evaluations of the teachers. Central office staff will be responsible for ensuring these formative evaluations are conducted. Follow-up evaluations will also be the responsibility of the administrators. Limitations of this solution is that time may cause administrators to be unable to conduct these evaluations effectively. Student behavior, teacher absences, and other expectations of administrators may get in the way of administrators being able to conduct these evaluations. Future research will need to be conducted on the success of teachers who are on improvement plans. Studies of teachers who remain in the profession after being on an improvement plan will be important information pertaining to teacher retention.

Summary

This study was conducted to determine how to improve teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. Data was collected by interviews with former teachers from Jones Middle School, surveys administered to current teachers at JMS, and exit documentation filled out by former employees of Jones County. The data was analyzed and themes developed. Solutions were provided to improve teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. Resources and funding needed were laid out for implementing these solutions. The roles and responsibilities for individuals affected were described for each solution. A timeline of implementation was provided. The most important things discovered in this study pertain to
teacher preparation programs. After relationships are established between Jones County and the colleges and universities, developing student teacher programs will assist Jones County in recruitment efforts. Ensuring mentoring programs are effective is another important factor for improving teacher retention. Lastly, observations by administrators are necessary for supporting current teachers and ensuring they receive what they need to be effective teachers. An evaluation of each of these solutions is necessary to ensure their effectiveness and continuance.
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doi:10.1080/09718923.2015.11893444


doi:10.1080/00228958.2018.1481659


APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 9, 2020

Meagan Goad
IRB Exemption 4091.010920: How Can the Problem of Teacher Retention at a Rural Middle School in Southwestern Virginia be Improved?

Dear Meagan Goad,

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 at least one of 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]

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971
Appendix B: Superintendent Permissions

Meagan Goad, Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

October 30, 2019

Dear Meagan Goad:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled How can the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia be improved? I have decided to grant you permission to contact our faculty/staff and invite them to participate in your study and receive and utilize the employee exit documentation for your research study.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

☐ The requested data WILL BE STRIPPED of all identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.

☒ The requested data WILL NOT BE STRIPPED of identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.

☒ / We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

[Name]
Assistant Superintendent
Appendix C: Principal Permissions

Meagan Goad
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

October 30, 2019

Dear Meagan Goad:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled How can the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia be improved?, I have decided to grant you permission to contact our faculty/staff and invite them to participate in your study.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

☐ The requested data WILL BE STRIPPED of all identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.

☒ The requested data WILL NOT BE STRIPPED of identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.

☒ I/We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

[Name Redacted]

Principal
[Name Redacted]
Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

How can the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia be improved?

Meagan Goad
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on teacher retention. The purpose of this study is to focus on how to improve teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia. You were selected as a possible participant because of your current or former employment at Carroll County Middle School. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Meagan Goad, a doctoral candidate in the School of education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is determining how the problem of teacher retention at a rural middle school in Southwestern Virginia can be improved.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. If you are a current teacher, you will be asked to complete an online survey, using google forms, concerning your status as a teacher at Carroll County Middle School. If you choose to participate, the survey will be emailed directly to you. This data will be electronically recorded in google docs.
2. If you are a former teacher, you will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview. You will be asked about the time you spent teaching at Carroll County Middle School. The interview will be audio recorded for future transcription.

**Risks:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

**Benefits:** Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include determining ways to improve teacher retention in rural contexts, which may lead to improved student achievement.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**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. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.
• Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
• 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.
• Interviews will be audio-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.

Conflicts of Interest Disclosure: The researcher serves as a teacher at Carroll County Middle School. To limit potential conflicts the study will be anonymous, so the researcher will not know who participated. The personnel director will ensure that all exit documentation data is stripped of identifiers before the researcher receives it. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate in this study.

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, Carroll County Middle School, or Carroll County Public School District. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the survey without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study:

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please exit the survey and close your internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study. If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Meagan Goad. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at ___________________________ or ___________________________. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty chair, Dr. Michael Patrick, at_______________________________.

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 Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information 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.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of Participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Signature of Investigator</td>
<td>Date</td>
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Appendix E: Interview Questions

1. How long did you teach at JMS? When you began teaching, what type of license did you have? Did you come to JMS after teaching in a prior school or district?
   - This question provides background information for each participant. It establishes a baseline of teaching experience which directly links to previously conducted studies stating that 40-50% of teachers leave the profession within their first five years (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). It also ties in to the well-known concept that over a million teachers enter, leave, or transition between schools each year (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018).

2. What subjects and grade levels did you teach at JMS?
   - This question helps to establish a better understanding of working conditions specifically to teacher preparation load (Manuel, Carter, & Dutton, 2018). Prior studies have discovered that teacher retention can be directly related to their workload, including course preparation (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). When teachers have multiple class preparations, they tend to become overworked (Torres, 2016). High levels of job commitment and working extra-long hours can lead to emotional exhaustion with increased levels of stress (Cancio, Larsen, Mathur, Estes, Johns, & Chang, 2018).

3. Tell me about your teacher preparation program. Did you take any courses on teaching in a rural school area? If so, how many? Did you take any courses on working with students who live in poverty? If so, how many? How did it prepare you for teaching at a school like JMS which is a rural environment with a high poverty level? Do you feel these courses adequately prepared you to teach in an environment like JMS?
This question addresses the problem of teacher preparation programs. It has been noted that rural areas are often not adequately represented in teacher preparation programs (Rensburg, Noble, & McIlveen, 2015). By discovering how teacher preparation programs prepare graduates for school environments similar to JMS, adjustments can be made to better reflect rural school environments (Zhang & Zeller, 2016) and incorporate more place-based education practices (Azano & Stewart, 2016) which may include a focus on educating students who live in poverty (Ovenden-Hope et al, 2018).

4. What incentives were you offered to teach at JMS and how would this have made a difference in your choosing to remain here? This could be money, class preparation, class make-up, etc.

Many incentives are found to be based on salaries, but some studies have found incentives to include housing, preferential transfers, and travel allowances (Bjarnason & Thorarinsdottir, 2018, p 788). Some studies have found that teachers who receive financial bonuses in rural locations remain in the area (Springer, Swain, & Rodriguez, 2016). Teachers who have less stress and feel they are performing meaningful work are shown to be happier in their profession and often in rural locations external factors contribute to this happiness (Tang, 2018). The simplicity of rural living may be considered an incentive for rural school districts. A smaller student-teacher ratio is another incentive that rural areas can offer teachers which had been found to improve job satisfaction (Ruff, 2016).
5. Were you part of a cohort? How did this impact your choice to leave JMS? Were you given a mentor? How did this impact your choice to leave JMS?

- While JMS tends to provide mentors for each new hire, some new employees may fall through the cracks. Establishing whether these participants were provided with a cohort or mentor when they were beginning their employment at JSM is important to this research study. Studies have shown that having a cohort or mentor during the first few years of teaching can help new hires adjust better to the profession and remain happy in their occupation (Rooks, 2018). Mentoring has been found to be very important to supporting new teachers (Spooner-Lane, 2017) and may improve retention by developing strong relationships (Petrovska, Sivevska, Popseka, & Runcheva, 2018).

6. Explain the impact that the school administration played in your choosing to leave JMS?

- This question explores the impact of the administration at JMS and how it affected teacher retention. Studies have shown that administration play a large role in whether teachers choose to remain in the profession or leave (Funke, 2017). A positive relationship with the school administration can positively impact teacher retention (Urick, 2016). The way new policies are impressed upon teachers by their administration can impact retention (Sims, Waniganayake, & Hadley, 2018). If administration empowers teachers, they are more likely to have improved job satisfaction and remain in their position (Burkhauser, 2017).

7. Describe the working conditions at JMS, such as student behavior, number of different preps, parental support, and available resources.
Since working conditions have been found to play a large role in teacher retention, these need to be examined to determine ways to improve teacher retention at JMS. Access to professional development opportunities has been found to improve teacher retention (Coldwell, 2017). Decreasing workload by reducing class sizes and number of course preps may also improve teacher retention (Manuel, Carter, & Dutton, 2018). Higher poverty levels tend to lead to poor working conditions (Burkhauser, 2017) and since JMS is in a disadvantaged area, working conditions need to be good in order to improve teacher retention. Studies have shown that positive student behaviors can improve teacher retention (Kapa & Gimbert, 2018) so by providing new teachers with support in classroom management teacher retention may be improved.

8. What were the main reasons for your choosing to leave JMS?

- This question is a good finishing questions that allows all participants to express any topic or concept remaining that was not directly covered by the interview questions. It also provides insight as to where these professionals ended up. This question may contribute to determining why teachers leave JMS.
APPENDIX F: Survey Questions

Web Survey

1. What is your current age?
   - 20-25
   - 26-30
   - 31-35
   - 36-40
   - 41-45
   - 46-50
   - 51-55
   - 56-60
   - >60

2. How many years have you been teaching?
   - 0-5 Years
   - 6-10 Years
   - 11-15 Years
   - 16-20 Years
   - 21-25 Years
   - 26-30 Years
   - >31 Years

3. Gender:
   - Male
4. What was the status of your teaching license when you began teaching?
   - Provisional License
   - Postgraduate Professional License

5. Having a mentor is very important for beginning teachers.
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

6. Administrative support is very important for keeping teachers at JMS.
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

7. Parental support is very important for keeping teachers at JMS.
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

8. Smaller class sizes are very important for keeping teachers at JMS?
9. Having a low number of class preps is very important for retaining teachers at JMS.

   o Strongly Agree
   o Somewhat Agree
   o Neutral
   o Somewhat Disagree
   o Strongly Disagree

10. Current teacher preparation programs properly prepare teachers for teaching at a rural middle school with high poverty level.

    o Strongly Agree
    o Somewhat Agree
    o Neutral
    o Somewhat Disagree
    o Strongly Disagree

11. Financial incentives are very important for hiring and keeping teachers at JMS.

    o Strongly Agree
    o Somewhat Agree
    o Neutral
    o Somewhat Disagree
12. Lack of good teachers negatively impacts student learning at JMS.
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

13. If Jones County could put more money towards recruiting teachers, teacher retention would improve.
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

14. High poverty level and rurality have a negative impact on teacher retention at JMS.
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

15. Including quality teacher residency programs at JMS will improve teacher retention.
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
16. Providing new teachers with opportunities to co-teach will improve teacher retention.
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

17. Maintaining a positive school culture will improve teacher retention.
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

18. The age of the facilities at JMS has a negative impact on teacher retention.
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

19. Teachers who feel happy and secure in their positions will remain in their positions at JMS.
20. A smaller student-teacher ratio will improve teacher retention at JMS.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Neutral
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree


- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Neutral
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

22. Student discipline issues negatively impact teacher retention.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Neutral
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
23. The amount of resources available to teachers positively impacts teacher retention.
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

25. Increased workload has a negative impact on teacher retention at JMS.
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree
APPENDIX G: Participant Consent Form

Timeline of Implementation of student teacher program

- Spring 2020 – Director of Human Resources initiate connections with colleges and universities in close proximity to Jones County.
- Spring 2020 – Veteran teachers are selected to participate in student teaching program.
- Summer 2020 – Veteran teachers who are willing to participate in student teaching initiative will be trained in proper methods of being a lead teacher.
- August/September 2020 – Full implementation of student teaching initiative.
- December 2020 – Evaluation of student teaching program.
- January 2021 – Continue with student teaching program while making continuous improvements.

Timeline of Implementation of Mentoring Program

- Spring 2020 – Solicit mentor teachers
- Summer 2020 – Professional development for teachers who will be mentor teachers
- Fall 2020 – Pairing of mentor teachers with newly hired teachers
- Fall 2020 – Two evaluation meetings with mentor teachers and central office staff.
- Spring 2021 – Two evaluation meeting with mentor teachers and central office staff.
- School year 2020-2021 – Mentor teachers will meet weekly with mentee teachers following the designated mentor program.

Timeline of Implementation of Administrative Evaluations

- Summer 2020 – Administrative professional development of appropriate and effective teacher evaluations.
- Fall 2020 – Full implementation of administrative observations
• August-October 2020 – Every teacher working at JMS will be observed one time.
• October-December 2020 – Follow up observations for teachers who need them.
• January-March 2021 – All teachers observed for a second time.
• March-May 2021 – Follow up observations for teachers who need them.