A PHENOMENOLOGICAL QUALITATIVE STUDY OF LOW TEACHER RETENTION

AND MORALE

IN A RURAL POVERTY-STRICKEN SCHOOL

by

Susan Michele Campbell

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Special Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand the factors that are related to low morale and retention as described by teachers who work in a rural, poverty-stricken school in Middle Georgia. The problem addressed in this study was high teacher attrition in rural, poverty-stricken schools. The theories guiding this study were Herzberg's motivation-hygiene, two-factor theory, and Maslow's theory of motivation. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 10 teachers who are employed at a rural, low-income school for three or more years. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted individually. The data were analyzed using open coding to identify themes or patterns based on recurring words or phrases from each interview transcript that related to the research questions and thus identified themes in the data that showed similarities and/or differences from the participants. Each theme or pattern was coded by names that described issues as related by the participants. The codes were then compared for consistencies, and the following themes emerged: lack of administrative support, school environment, lack of collaboration with colleagues, accountability, heavy workload, increasing violence among students, and discipline issues.

Keywords: morale, climate, retention, attrition, accountability, self-efficacy, rural

Copyright Page

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God, my Heavenly Father, who has made this journey possible. I also dedicate this to the amazing professors at Liberty University who devoted their time and knowledge; namely, Dr. Nathan Street and Dr. Michelle Barthlow, whose patience and kindness gave me the courage to continue, Dr. Susan Stanley for so graciously serving as my chair, Dr. Meredith Park, for her knowledge along the way, and Dr. Janet Deck, for her kindness in serving on my dissertation committee.

I dedicate this to the memory of the best first grade teacher who taught me so much about teaching, learning, and life in general, Mrs. Jeraldine Cooper.

To my life-long friends Amy, Valori, and Kimmie Anne who serve as constant reminders of what the term "friendship" truly means.

To my 103-year-old grandfather, my "Pop", who has always lived the Christian life as an example, provided me with my Christian foundation, morals, and principles, and lived the world's sweetest love story with my "Mema" for 76 years. Lastly, to the memory of my grandmother, "Mema", whose strength I inherited, and whose Christian walk was one of beauty, class, and grace.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Abbreviations

Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Rural and Low-Income School (RLIS)

Early Intervention Program (EIP)

English Language Arts (ELA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Retaining effective teachers in rural school districts across our country has become a fundamental challenge for district administration. This problem continues to increase, particularly among rural, low-income schools (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Aragon (2016) and Wronowski (2017) found that due to obstacles, such as the lack of rigorous training, certification hurdles, isolation, and lack of collaboration and effective leadership, that predominantly rural schools have consistent staffing and retention issues.

This chapter provides a brief background on teacher retention, turnover, and morale in the United States, and the overall effect that these factors have had on the educational system. The historical and social perspectives provide the foundation of information as related to teacher retention, and the theoretical framework provides information from prior research and theories as they relate to this topic. The problem statement provides insight on the issue of teacher retention and morale in rural schools located in poor socio-economic areas. The significance of the study describes how this research may theoretically and empirically contribute to existing research on this topic of teacher retention and low teacher morale. The research questions correlate to the foundation of this study, and the definitions that were pertinent are included.

Background

McHenry-Sorber and Campbell (2019) determined that teacher retention is significantly impacted by the policies and procedures on a district level. Unfortunately, some leaders do not

exhibit professional standards, and teachers are isolated, experience lack of cohesion among colleagues, and feel overwhelmed. School conditions and/or climate, poor leadership, and lack of support leads to low morale and low teacher retention. Harris (2018) pointed out that the number of prospective teachers continues to decline as the number of elementary degrees being awarded has declined by 30% since 2010. Therefore, it is essential to not only identify the factors surrounding low teacher morale and retention, but to make educational leaders aware of the severity of this continuing problem.

Historical Context

The retention issue for school districts began in the 1980's, as districts across America began to offer an alternative pathway program to promote teacher retention. In Georgia, the Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy, or TAPP, was introduced as an option for individuals who have the basic qualifications to teach but have not completed the state teacher preparation program. This option was one of many programs introduced as an alternative pathway to recruit new teachers into the profession, specifically in rural areas where recruitment can often be difficult (Rooks, 2018). This pathway allowed individuals to enter the teaching profession through non-traditional methods to replace the increasing number of teachers who were either leaving that particular school district, or the profession altogether. According to Carver-Thomas (2016) and Henry and Redding (2019), some of the factors leading to the continuing rise in the number of teachers who left were accountability factors, rise in student enrollment creating larger class size, teacher attrition, lack of graduates entering the profession of education, and isolation. School improvement developments aimed to increase teacher buy-in while developing incentives for teachers to stay at their schools (Nguyen & Hunter, 2018). Henry

and Redding (2019) revealed that teachers who are employed in rural, low-income areas are 150% more likely to leave the teaching profession compared to those in high socio-economic areas.

Social Context

When teachers decide to leave the profession, there are serious repercussions that follow, as there is typically a correlation between low retention and low morale. Frequent turnover within a school or district can negatively impact the economy and impact student achievement. According to Darling-Hammond et. al. (2017), the constant turnover of teachers within a school impacts the achievement of the entire student body, not just the students in the classrooms of new teachers. Simon and Johnson (2015) and Swanson and Mason (2018) found consistent teacher turnover in schools with lack of support. Many teachers working in schools of rural, low-income students have chosen to leave when given the opportunity. There seems to be a gap in the research concerning the exact correlation between student achievement and low teacher retention, however, the existing studies show that when schools implement an organizational framework, focusing on both the teachers' working conditions and the climate of the overall school, teacher retention increased, as did student achievement (Johnson et. al., 2016; Lux, 2018).

According to McConnell (2017), resolving the organizational and occupational challenges may not be easy, but focusing on improving the working conditions in order to retain teachers would be less expensive than recruiting and training new teachers. Not to mention if the working conditions remain unfavorable, the viscous cycle will remain. The focus should be on retaining the teachers that are currently on staff, not spending excessively to hire and train new ones.

Another reason that teachers are discouraged from placement in rural, low socio-economic

areas is because of negative stereotypes. These include terms such as ignorant, unsophisticated,

or poor (Haxel & McCallum, 2016; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Many teachers feel that because

they work in a poor, or rural school, these negative terms are used to describe both the student

body and faculty and staff. While these stereotypes are formed due to lack of education about a

rural community, if teachers are not properly trained or prepared for this type of environment,

retention will continue to decline.

Theoretical Context

The theoretical framework that will be used to explore motivation factors that influence

retention decisions in a rural, low-income school is Herzberg's (1974) motivation-hygiene

theory, as it is comprised of factors that are related to satisfaction or dissatisfaction within a work

environment. Herzberg et. al. (1959) specified that satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not

opposites of one another, but consists of two constructs, motivation and hygiene, and the obverse

of each construct is actually the absence of the construct itself. Specifically, he believed that the

opposite of satisfaction is no satisfaction, and the opposite of dissatisfaction is no dissatisfaction.

Herzberg et. al. defined hygiene factors as those factors within a work environment such as job

security, collaboration with peers, salary, and working conditions. Maslow's (1970) motivational

theory has also been used to determine the factors associated with teacher retention and job

satisfaction. Maslow's theory is based on the idea that the culture within an organization should

reflect the needs of the employees, which produces an improved performance by the employees.

Herzberg (1964) believed there were notable differences in the impact of rewards on an

employee's attitude toward their job. These rewards included both intrinsic, such as self-pride

and personal growth, and extrinsic, such as health benefits, retirement, and tenure. Maslow (1954) believed that job satisfaction depends on the ability of the leaders in terms of meeting the needs of employees. He felt that satisfaction will never be attained if foundational factors are not present. Prior studies on teacher retention, specifically in rural, low-income areas, have investigated hygiene factors that contribute to teachers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction within a school (Buettner et. al. 2016; Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this study was high teacher attrition in rural, poverty-stricken schools. In many states, including Georgia, low teacher retention and low teacher morale have caused a critical shortage of teachers, which is an ongoing crisis. This crisis is evident by many education researchers and journalists calling attention to the growing teacher shortage in the nation's K-12 schools (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Georgia school districts are hiring new teachers with alternate certification at higher rates, and more inexperienced teachers are in classrooms now than years ago (McKillip & Farrie, 2020). While some Georgia teachers are transferring to other districts within the state, many are leaving the profession altogether. Harris (2018) pointed out that solutions must be found at the school level immediately to ensure that these schools have quality educators in place to educate our future.

McConnell (2017) lists site working conditions and overall school climate as the primary contributing factor to low teacher retention. Schools that lack cohesion and effective collaboration with colleagues, often leave teachers with a sense of isolation and abandonment, Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) added that working conditions within the school, school safety

and rising discipline issues, and collaboration with peers have spurred teachers not only nationwide, but worldwide, to leave the profession.

While each variable associated with teacher retention has been studied in isolation, Astor and Benbenishty (2018) pointed out that the field has focused too heavily on academic achievement as it relates to low teacher retention, failing to appreciate the influence of school-level factors and, in particular, the salutary effects of a positive school climate. According to Walker (2019), teachers who quit the profession were more likely to have reported feeling stressed, unsupported, and unsatisfied, in the year prior to resigning. Walker (2019) also pointed out that teachers felt they had no voice in terms of school policies, or even their individual classroom policies or procedures.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive study was to understand the factors that are related to low morale and retention as described by teachers who work in a rural, poverty-stricken school, as described by teachers who are employed in that school.

At this stage in the research, teacher retention will be generally defined as remaining in the same school district, as a classroom teacher, from one school year to the next (Kaden et.al., 2016; Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). Teacher morale will be generally defined as the degree to which the needs of a person are satisfied, and the person's perception of how the job situation brought the state of satisfaction of the worker to fruition (Bentley & Rempel, 1970; Harris, 2018). Researchers (Lux, 2018) have indicated that there are many reasons why teachers choose to leave a school, or possibly the profession. Investigating why teachers leave rural, low socio-economic areas will help aid in recruiting and retaining quality, innovative teachers in those

areas. This research investigated those factors associated with why they leave these areas can also aid in raising teacher morale; thus, assisting in creating a warm environment conducive to learning. Furthermore, this study is intended to increase the literature as it relates to retaining teachers and raising morale in rural, low socio-economic schools.

Significance of the Study

With the US facing major teacher shortages, the challenge for school systems throughout the country is learning how to maintain a high-quality workforce (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2019). According to Heineke (2014) and Ritz (2018), the monetary means for school districts to retain quality teachers is very costly and is especially true for those districts located in rural, poor areas. Sawchuk (2015) and Harris (2018), noted that low teacher retention also created low morale in both teachers and students. High demands and accountability have been placed on teachers throughout the nation, and retention is crucial. Understanding why teachers are leaving predominantly rural, poor areas and how their exiting affects morale is worthy of investigation, and the most accurate and effective way to do this is to acquire input from teachers concerning their experiences in these areas and their overall perception of the profession.

Each year schools around the nation attempt to hire thousands of teachers as a result of the number of teachers leaving the profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Past research has shown that various factors, such as autonomy, leadership styles, and community are related to school climate (Jakee & Keller, 2017). However, there is little research on combining these and other factors related to climate to determine if they affect teacher retention. This study contributed to the existing research concerning low teacher retention but will broaden the

research on those factors that influence teacher retention and morale and their implications for the school district. This study also provides information that stakeholders and districts can use to assist in implementing strategies for recruitment and retention in rural areas, as well as providing new teachers with the skills and expertise needed to successfully work in these areas. Additional studies are needed to identify those factors present in rural, low socio-economic schools that affect retention and morale. This study adds to the literature on teacher retention and morale in these areas as derived from the perceptions of teachers presently working in these areas.

Research Questions

The research for this study will be guided by the following questions:

Central Research Question

What lived experiences, from teachers in rural, low socio-economic schools, leads to teacher retention and teacher morale?

Sub-Question One

What factors lead to teachers remaining in the same school, or switching schools within the district?

Sub-Question Two

How do teachers located in poverty-stricken, rural areas describe their experiences that could be useful for developing approaches to improve teacher retention and morale?

Sub-Question Three

How could the information gathered from both current and former teachers be used to implement successful strategies for recruitment and retention of teachers in these areas?

Definitions

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

2. *Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)* - A goal set by the federal government based upon current student standardized test scores (NCLB, 2002).

3. *Autonomy-* The ability for teachers to make decisions within their classroom or school (Carl, 2014).

4. *Climate-* The quality and character of school life, including the norms, values, and expectations that a school accepts and promotes (Brookover, 1985) dependent upon belonging, autonomy, transition, induction process, and the learning community (Johnson et al., 2014).

5. *Georgia Department of Education (GDOE)* - The Georgia Department of Education oversees public education throughout the state, ensuring that laws and regulations pertaining to education are followed and that monies are properly allocated for education are properly allocated to local school systems. The department also informs parents, teachers, government officials, and the media of education-related news and laws (Georgia.gov, 2021).

6. *Low socio-economic area-* Individuals who live in an area with low household income.

7. *Rural area* - An area where there are fewer than 150 people that is located a far distance from other communities (Kaden et al., 2016).

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

9. *Teacher morale* – The degree to which the needs of a person are satisfied, and the person's perception of how the job situation brought the state of satisfaction of the worker to fruition (Bentley & Rempel, 1970).

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

Summary

The climate of a school, to include student achievement and teacher morale, has become a serious issue in the United States (Darling-Hammond et.al., 2017). Failure to retain teachers negatively affects school climate, student achievement, and employee motivation, and teacher retention has become an issue of growing importance in the United States. Elevated teacher retention has negatively impacted society, particularly in areas of rural, low socio-economic status. While there has been significant research in the area of teacher retention, there is a gap in the literature in terms of teacher retention and morale at rural, low socio-economic schools. The purpose of this study was to determine the factors associated with low teacher retention and low teacher morale in rural, poor areas. Typically, urban schools have been the focus of prior research in terms of teacher retention. However, rural areas desperately need assistance in both recruiting and retaining effective teachers while also maintaining a positive morale and warm climate conducive to learning. Herzberg's (1974) motivation-hygiene theory will guide this study, as it is comprised of factors that are related to satisfaction or dissatisfaction within a work environment. This study will provide insight to not only the leaders and stakeholders of this rural school, but to other rural districts who need guidance in improving teacher retention and morale.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

According to Perryman and Calvert, (2019, p.2), 46% of new teachers in the United

States left their position within the first five years. A poll conducted by the National Education

Association, 55% of educators have indicated they are ready to leave the profession earlier than

planned (Joyner, 2018). This chapter will address the examination of motives pertaining to

teachers who choose to stay in the classroom, and those who choose to either leave their current

position for another one in a different location or quit the profession altogether. The theoretical

framework that guided this study was explored. To understand the phenomenon studied, related

literature was reviewed, and was presented. This literature includes factors related to teacher

attrition and low teacher morale, such as support from administrators, working conditions, the

influence of low teacher morale on teacher retention, salaries, and personal factors and strategies

that enhanced teacher retention and morale. The literature review provided a glimpse into the

problem of low teacher retention as it correlates with low teacher morale and the factors related

to both.

Theoretical Framework

Hackman and Oldman (1975) specified that job satisfaction comes from recognizing and

providing work elements that motivate individuals; thus, leading to retention. This theory is

correlational to the motivational theory. Herzberg et. al. (1959) specified that satisfaction and

dissatisfaction are not opposites of one another, but consists of two constructs, motivation and

hygiene, and the obverse of each construct is actually the absence of the construct itself. More

specifically, he believed that the opposite of satisfaction is no satisfaction, and the opposite of

dissatisfaction is no dissatisfaction. Herzberg's et. al (1974) motivation-hygiene theory is comprised of factors that are related to satisfaction or dissatisfaction within a work environment. Herzberg et. al. (1959) defined hygiene factors as those factors within a work environment, such as job security, collaboration with peers, salary, and working conditions. Herzberg (1964) believed there were notable differences in the impact of rewards on an employee's attitude toward their job. These rewards included both intrinsic, such as self-pride and personal growth, and extrinsic, such as health benefits, retirement, and tenure.

Maslow's (1970) motivational theory has also been used to determine the factors associated with teacher retention and job satisfaction. Maslow's theory is based on the idea that the culture within an organization should reflect the needs of the employees, which produces an improved performance by the employees. Maslow's various levels of motivational needs may motivate teachers to stay or leave specific educational environments, and he believed that a person's need to meet a range of goals is perpetually changing. Maslow believed that rewards and desires are not what motivate people; instead, it is the connection of these rewards and desires to the achievement of personal needs (McLeod, 2007). Maslow (1954) believed that job satisfaction depends on the ability of the leaders in terms of meeting the needs of employees. He felt that satisfaction will never be attained if foundational factors are not present.

Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs is relevant to this study, as it will explore whether teachers' needs were being met in their selected school and describe the effects of teachers' demands on attrition. Herzberg's (1959) study will assist in identifying why teachers are leaving the teaching profession. Researchers will gain a more in-depth understanding of how teachers developed their perceptions of the factors that influenced teacher retention and low teacher

morale by examining symbolic interactionism, which relied on the symbolic meaning that people designed and built upon the process of social interaction.

Teacher retention has continued to decrease since the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Johnson et al. (2014) defined the variables that influenced school climate as a sense of belonging, transition, autonomy, and the learning community that leadership puts in place. Beus et al. (2018) based the motivated socio-cognitive theory of climate on meeting the needs of an individual to achieve success by creating climate perceptions. By doing so, this created a sense of belonging, decreased anxiety, and improved the overall climate. According to Hackman and Oldham (1975), job characteristic theory suggested that the job itself can serve as a motivator when workers feel that their work is challenging and meaningful. Herzberg (1966) believed that when these factors are present, workers' needs for recognition and responsibility are fulfilled, which places them at the higher level of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. There are very few researchers who have investigated teacher retention that have relied on theoretical foundations (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Conley and You (2017) stated that collegial support was the most relevant factor that determined a teacher's intent to remain in their work setting. Billingsley and Bettini (2019) explained that the benefits of experience and certifications were the key factors in high retention rates of teachers. This study investigated and understands the relationship between school climate, low teacher morale, and teacher attrition by using the motivational theory through the motivational socio-cognitive theory of climate.

Related Literature

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2018), teaching was

The largest profession in the United States, with close to three million teachers employed. In the late 1990s, there were nearly five times as many teachers as lawyers and twice as many as nurses (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Sussman &Gifford, 2018). However, that number is dwindling rapidly, as low teacher retention has become a growing problem in the United States. Teaching has become one of the most stressful occupations in the United States, as teacher stress is affecting their health and well-being; thus, causing teacher burnout, lack of engagement, dissatisfaction with job, poor performance, and very high turnover rates. (Greenberg, 2016; Imran et al., 2017). The focus of this study on teacher retention, and low teacher morale, was to investigate those factors that are responsible for teachers either moving to a different school, or leaving the profession altogether. Many of those factors are synonymous with both low teacher morale and low teacher retention.

Based on reports presented by (Ingersoll et al. 2014; Subban & Mahlo 2017), teacher retention and attrition challenges are not new to the field of education. Ingersoll et al. (2014), as well as Subban and Mahlo (2017), configured reports based on data obtained from the Schools and Staffing Survey, and follow-up survey. These surveys were collected by the National Center for Education Statistics with nationally representative samples, and he noted that dating back to 1970, when first administered, both elementary and secondary schools have experienced high rates of attrition especially in rural, poverty-stricken areas. Ingersoll et al. and Larkin et al. (2018) also noted that the overall attrition rates of educators was higher than those of other respected professions such as engineering, architecture, and law. Brown and Wynn (2009) as well as Spooner-Lane (2017) found that the teacher attrition problem has been growing consistently since the 1970s. Boe and Sunderland (2005) as well as Petrovska, Sivevska,

Popseka, and Runcheva (2018) found an increasing trend among teachers that were new to the profession and located in rural areas.

Low teacher retention, in predominantly poverty-stricken, rural areas, can influence students' educational achievement (Schmidt & Park, 2011; Spooner-Lane, 2017). According to Sawchuk (2016) as well as Sussman and Gifford (2018), the hiring and retention plight is very serious for these areas. Highly qualified teachers are less likely to teach in rural areas for reasons such as location, lower compensation, and difficulty obtaining resources (Lazarev et al., 2017). Therefore, due to the lack of these highly qualified teachers, these students suffer academically. According to Sawchuk (2018), even if there was ample funding to recruit effective teachers, retaining them is even more challenging. Often, once teachers obtain several years of teaching experience, they leave for districts in urban or suburban areas that are deemed more attractive. This constant cycle reduces the chances of students receiving a quality education due to the lack of instructional capacity. Students then fall further behind academically, and state mandated test scores reflect this lack of consistent instruction.

According to Young (2018), rural areas are more likely to experience teacher retention and morale issues. Rural schools and communities are located outside of metropolitan areas, and are often agricultural in nature with farming, timber, and mining as the primary sources of income (Redding & Walberg, 2013). According to Bailey (2014) as well as Betlan, Clary, and Jones (2019) the decline in job opportunities often results in hardships that impact the quality of living and academic achievement of rural students. The inequalities among children from poverty-stricken backgrounds are drastic, causing challenges for them and their families (Bailey, 2014; Betlan, Clary & Jones, 2019). A large percentage of teachers in rural schools are novice,

teaching outside of their field, and under-qualified (Azano & Stewart, 2016, Ones et al.,2017).

Most teachers in rural areas are under-prepared and have not received the proper guidance or

training to meet students' needs (Ulferts, 2015; Bower & Carroll, 2017).

In addition to low retention rates, teachers who work in rural, poverty-stricken school

districts often have low morale. According to Bower and Carroll (2017), teacher happiness is

linked to increased student achievement, and is a large predictor of teacher retention. Lavy and

Bocker (2018) stated that teachers who feel they are performing meaningful work will be more

satisfied within their positions, thus resulting in increased retention. Work that is meaningful can

improve motivation by counteracting stressful working conditions (Fouche et al., 2017).

Teachers who have chosen to remain in rural districts list administrative support and training as

two of the biggest contributors to improved retention (Tang, 2018).

Working conditions have an impact on both teacher retention and teacher morale. These

may include lack of collaboration with colleagues, low parental involvement, lack of cohesion

within the building, lack of support from administration, student poverty level, accountability,

expectations, and student discipline issues (Harrell, Thompson, & Brooks, 2018). Fouche et al.

(2017) found that when working conditions are poor, negative attitudes develop due to stress,

which causes low morale and low teacher retention. While some teachers push forward with

increased resiliency, most teachers tend to become overwhelmed and simply give up (Conley &

You, 2017). According to Hughes (2012) as well as Fouche et al. (2017), heavy demands and

stress from lack of administrative support drains teachers both emotionally and physically.

Additional stress occurs when teachers determine the difference from what they expected

their roles and responsibilities to include, and what their roles and responsibilities entailed

(Andrews & Brown, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Major (2012) as well as Newberry and

Allsop (2017) found that teachers in rural areas form disengagement, from emotional exhaustion,

the broad scope of responsibilities in the classroom, and from realizing the actual expectations of

the job versus the actual job itself. The reality versus anticipated expectations could result from

difficulty in implementing the curriculum, inadequate time in understanding the learner in

relation to the curriculum or identifying the needs of each individual learner (Johnson &

Donaldson, 2011; Fouche et al. 2017). For teachers in rural, poverty-stricken areas, this stress

will often diminish their sense of accomplishment, causes job dissatisfaction, and lead to burnout

(Piotrowski et al., 2017), and this stress is normally aggravated and compounded by lack of

administrative support, cohesion, professional development, and collaboration among colleagues.

Major (2012) in addition to Newberry and Alsop (2017) found that lack of administrative support

for rural teachers, in addition to the lack of capacity to make professional decisions, often causes

disengagement and high levels of stress causing withdrawal, burnout and attrition. (McLaurin,

Smith, & Smillie, 2009; Conley & You, 2017) argued that one recurring factor that can moderate

teacher attrition among teachers in rural, poverty-stricken schools, is the teacher's ability to

manage and cope with the associated stress. New teachers in rural areas are more vulnerable to

stress influenced by teaching experience and pre-service training and are not able to develop

coping mechanisms (McLaurin et al., 2009; Conley & You, 2017). McLaurin et al. (2009) as

well as Conley and You (2017) also found that due to lack of experience, these teachers struggle

when attempting to build personal relationships with their students and their parents.

In one of the earliest studies of teacher morale, a questionnaire survey of 1800 teachers

(Chase, 1953; Kelchtermans, 2017) found that if teacher expectations are fulfilled with regards to administration, their morale soars. However, when their expectations are not met, the morale plummets. Overall support was listed as the number one expectation that teachers expect from administration. Some of the others include collaboration, resources to help them succeed, feeling that they have a voice within the school, support for discipline problems, and effective communication.

Stein (2002), in addition to Hilton (2017), stated that there are several factors associated with low morale and poor motivation among educators. Educators are influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. According to Stein (2002), as well as Hilton (2017), some of the intrinsic factors are the teachers 'interaction with students, accomplishment in the field, praise by administration, positively affecting the lives of others, and autonomy. A school climate construct is complex, as it is multi-dimensional. It is the unwritten personality and atmosphere of a school, to include its norms, values, and expectations. Among other factors, empirical evidence has confirmed that school climate is powerful in affecting students' academic achievement (Collins & Parson, 2010; Geiger & Pivovrova, 2018).

According to O'Brennan and Bradshaw (2013) as well as Grissom and Bartanen (2019), prior studies have concluded that a positive school climate benefits both students and teachers, as well as educational support professionals. Job-related stress has been lowered because of a positive school climate, and efficacy and job satisfaction has risen (Malinen & Savolainen, 2016; Cera & Furxhiu, 2017). Najeemah (2012) and Grissom as well as Bartanen (2019), found that there is a positive correlation between transparency of school leadership, teachers' commitment, and school climate dimensions were positively associated with teachers' commitment. Douglas

(2012) and Cera in addition to Furxhiu (2017) determined that collaborative leadership was a variable that influenced teacher commitment. Malinen and Savolainen (2016) conducted a study of 642 teachers from 38 schools in Finland. The purpose was to examine the effects of school climate on job satisfaction and burnout, student discipline on job satisfaction, and school climate on job satisfaction. The analyses found that a positive school climate had a positive effect on job satisfaction, while a negative school climate lead to lower teacher retention rates. The analyses also found that self-efficacy in managing behavior had a positive effect on job satisfaction, and a negative effect on teacher burnout. According to Klassen, Usher & Bong (2010) as well as Subban and Mahlo (2017), previous similar studies have shown that collective efficacy in managing study has predicted job satisfaction.

According to Malinen et al. (2016), perceived school climate, and self-efficacy had a positive effect on teacher job satisfaction. Teachers are only one component in the environment of a school. The climate or culture can greatly affect not only teachers, but students and academic achievement. The administrator is critical in establishing the climate of a school. Tonissen (2015) as well as Korthagen (2017) stressed the importance of the proper placement of administrators, who are trained in the importance of developing a positive school culture, would significantly improve teacher satisfaction and student achievement. School climate can ultimately determine whether schools retain teachers, and there is a correlation between the climate and low teacher morale. School administrators should encourage collaboration and cohesion to improve the overall climate, thus improving teacher morale.

A negative school climate can significantly influence the morale of teachers. A low level

of teacher morale can lead to a decrease in teacher productivity, loss of concern for students, alienation from colleagues, isolation, depression, increased sickness and absenteeism, general fatigue, and burnout. Therefore, there is a strong correlation between a negative school climate and low teacher morale. (Eboka, 2017). Parks (1983) as well as Young (2018) stated that in order to preserve the highest morale, individuals need the basics for life. These needs include being free from financial and economic worries, feeling accomplished about oneself, having the capability to demonstrate their own creations, and having the opportunity to love others and be loved by others. Evans (1997) in addition to Korthagen (2017) found that there were three leading factors of low morale: low status and isolation, low salary and job satisfaction, and deficiency in job satisfaction. Hoy et. al (1987) as well as Hilton (2017) found that, when the school climate is good, and the teacher morale is high, their self-esteem is heightened, and their satisfaction levels in terms of their abilities in the classroom are high. Lumpa (1997) as well as Larkin et al. (2017) found that the success and satisfaction of the students depends upon the teacher's satisfaction with themselves. Thomas (1997) as well as Betlan, Clary and Jones (2019) argued that teacher morale and learner accomplishment were higher when teachers were allowed to have input in policies and procedures. Dinham (1994) in addition to Skaalvak and Skaalvak (2017) attributed the low status of teachers within the community, ineffective administration, heavier than normal workloads, demands from society and stakeholders were all factors of low teacher morale.

McKenzie (2005) in addition to Hilton (2017) found that issues related to policy agendas are present because of teacher concerns about a future in the profession, and whether they are sufficiently rewarded and supported. Dunn (2018) listed additional reasons why morale may be

poor, as accountability for high stakes testing, restrictions on decisions related to curriculum, decreasing pay and benefits, and the use of teacher evaluation systems as a means of control or punishment for their students' performance on standardized tests. Low teacher morale can lead to a decrease in teacher productivity, loss of concern for students, alienation from colleagues, depression, and increased rate of sickness resulting in absenteeism on some workdays, general fatigue, burnout, and low teacher retention. Many of those same factors influenced teacher retention (Ingersoll et al., 2016, 2017; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017), such as support from the district and school administrators (Chetty et al., 2015; Ingersoll, 2017), school climate, teacher demographics or characteristics, working conditions (Grissom et al., 2016; Ingersoll, 2017), isolation, accountability, salary, and teacher preparation (Mihaly et. al, 2015; Ingersoll 2017).

The subject of accountability and its presence within the nation's schools has been a subject of debate and research for many years. Teacher turnover is disruptive to all schools, but this coupled with comprehensive reform have additional challenges in creating a shared mission. Ingersoll et. al (2016; 2017) conducted a study on accountability reform, and its effect on the retention rate of teachers. The authors gathered data with the Schools and Staffing Survey and Teacher Follow up Survey to determine if the correlation existed. Ingersoll, et. al. (2016) as well as Newberry and Allsop, (2017) found strong evidence that supported a correlation between teacher retention and accountability in low-performing schools. Specifically, schools whose students scored low on high stakes standardized tests had higher teacher turnover than those that scored higher, and schools that received sanctions because of their poor performance on these assessments had an even higher turnover rate. They also found that even in the lowest performing schools, and minimizing the negative effects of accountability, teacher turnover

could be prevented by giving teachers greater classroom autonomy. These findings showed that, in order to hold teachers accountable for high stakes testing, and other accountability issues, they must be granted control of their own instruction within the classroom.

There is an advancing problem in schools of allowing administrators to determine professional growth by evaluation and accountability, instead of recognizing academic growth based on each student's individual gains, or teachers' beliefs and strengths. Bosso (2017) conducted a qualitative study involving 24 state teachers of the year. His study explored the phenomena of teacher morale and motivation as it relates to educational change and accountability. He conducted interviews with each participant, and the results were categorized into four areas: affective dimensions of teaching, external perceptions, self-efficacy, and professional validation. The findings revealed that teachers' self-perception, particularly their sense of efficacy, were affected by the challenges brought about by the shifting educational landscape, thus impacting school climate and student performance as well.

According to Ulferts (2016) as well as Korthagen (2017), teacher attrition is more prevalent in rural schools, than in suburban and urban areas, and retaining effective teachers is a struggle because those who begin their career in these areas often exit quickly. While community partnerships and stakeholders who are often involved in educating students can be a huge asset to a teacher, new teachers feel that it can also be a curse. Rural area communities are often very united, which often creates a lack of cohesion due to the barriers between an educator new to the area and families (Redding & Walberg, 2013; Kelchtermans, 2017). Goodpaster et al. (2012) as well as Cera and Furxhiu (2017) pointed out that because rural communities tend to be small, if a

student does not perform well academically, their teacher will often be labeled as ineffective by parents and stakeholders within that community.

There is also a cost associated with retaining good teachers in rural schools, which according to Geiger & Pivovrova (2018), has a negative impact on the financial aspect of the district. Funding spent on recruiting and retaining teachers is costly, and rural school districts do not often have enough in their hiring budget to afford the expenses associated with recruitment. Lack of financial resources, according to Young (2018), has made it very difficult for administrators to retain effective teachers, as these communities are often isolated.

Unfortunately, the cost accrued by a rural system in hiring and retaining effective teachers is not measured solely by monetary value, but also by student academic achievement (Gomba, 2015; Young, 2018). Students are negatively impacted by school districts hiring poorly trained teachers who are also not monitored in the classroom; thus, causing dangerous outcomes such as emotional or mental trauma to the students (Lux, 2018). The issues surrounding recruitment and retention have caused a significant amount of damage to the educational system as a whole (Dos Santos, 2019). According to (Gomba, 2016; Young, 2018), when schools keep ineffective teachers in an attempt to raise the retention rate, they often produce poor quality students. Over time, this viscous cycle of producing ineffective teachers negatively affects the entire human population (Kaden et al., 2016; Lux, 2018). State mandated assessments are not designed to measure a teacher's knowledge of subject matter, but instead they are designed to measure the subject matter that a teacher has taught their students, and how much of that subject matter they retain (Lux, 2018). By hiring unlicensed teachers, which many public-school systems have been forced to do because of the shortage of teachers, students are often deprived of a

quality education which results in diminished achievement and poor assessment scores (Whitford, Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2018). According to Lux (2018), funding for many districts is often directly associated to assessment scores and is reduced if scores are low because policymakers do not want to continue to fund a failing system. In order for districts to close the achievement gap for rural, poverty-stricken districts, and their more affluent counterparts depends on the knowledge of subject matter, skills, and effective delivery of instruction of the teachers within that district. According to Mette and Nieuwenhuizen (2016) as well as Young (2018), professional development is the key to helping these teachers develop the skills needed to close this gap.

The administration within a school plays a major role, according to Holmes, Parker, & Gibson (2019), in whether teachers choose to continue working at the same or a different location. Holmes et al, (2019) also found that leadership can significantly influence whether teachers remain in a location or transfer in the profession by simply creating an environment that is warm and inviting, as well as conducive to learning. Holmes et al. (2019) determined that positive culture and a sense of community within a district are key factors in improving teacher retention. Teacher resiliency, according to Arnup & Bowles (2016), could be significantly improved if administrators are able to create a positive school climate. Price & Weatherby (2017), found that teachers should be able to build upon and share their wealth of knowledge. Grissom & Bartanen (2019) determined that teacher retention is improved if teachers are allowed to feel respected and needed within their positions. According to Funke (2017), high student achievement depends heavily on administrators fostering a positive work environment, by supporting teachers' personal and professional achievements and a positive staff morale. Aloe,

Amo, and Shanahan (2014) as well as Newberry and Alsop (2017) found that teachers choose

not only to leave their current position but leave the profession altogether because of lack of

support from administration and lack of collaboration and cohesion with colleagues. Brown &

Wynn (2009) as well as Ingersoll (2017) indicated that national and local research has proven

that in addition to influencing a teacher's decision to remain either at the same school, or within

the profession, administrators can heavily influence the overall morale of the school to include

the student body. Principals can improve retention and morale by providing support in areas that

include instructional, technical, emotional, and environmental (Hughest, Matt, & O'Reilly, 2016;

Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Hughest et al. (2016) as well as Grissom and Bartanen (2019) also

found that by providing guidance and support, offering instructional resources, and encouraging

collaboration with colleagues, school leaders can determine and reinforce the school's culture

and climate. According to Brown & Wynn (2009) as well as Hilton (2017), administrators can

shape building-level factors that often affect a novice teacher's sense of efficacy and overall

attitude towards the profession, which in turn adds longevity to their career. Torres (2016) as

well as Conley and You (2017) found that many administrators have chosen to provide

additional support services to teachers, as well as placing veteran teachers into key positions that

will provide mentorship roles. Teachers often feel there is a lack of professional development

that is offered, in addition to overall support from support staff, which prevents them from being

successful in their career (Conley & You, 2017). High levels of stress leads to burnout and lack

of self-efficacy, however, by providing teachers with consistent and supportive leadership,

collaborative support, and professional development, job retention will improve (Tsang & Liu,

2016). Dierendonck (2011) and Young (2018) also found that leaders whose main objective is

serving their followers and ensuring both emotional support and physical well-being have proven

to be the most effective in building professional relationships by not only encouraging

collaboration, but also in leading by example.

Motivation can be the product of many factors, including a commitment to the profession

and students within the classroom. There are many factors that contribute to motivation, and

overall attitude is one of those according to (Ofoegbu, 2004; Subban & Mahlo, 2017). Attitude

involves a person responding either favorably or unfavorably to an external factor, in this case

the teaching profession (Soibchanba & Panday, 2016; Harris, 2018). Zaidi (2015) as well as

Kenadi (2017) found that attitudes develop gradually and are based on personal experiences, a

cognitive component of personal beliefs, and a behavioral component of beliefs towards the

profession. Kenadi (2017) also found that behaviors towards other people, and how they perform

teaching tasks, are influenced by attitudes, heavily influencing overall morale. Characteristics of

an effective teacher include the ability to weather the storms within the teaching profession and

display a positive attitude while fulfilling the duties and responsibilities that come with the

profession (Soibchanba & Panday, 2016; Newberry & Allsop, 2017). Teachers have the ability to

influence students in a positive way by using motivation as a tool to create a positive attitude

towards teaching (Veldman et al. 2016; Benoliel and Bart, 2017). However, teachers can use the

personal experiences within the profession to contribute to the formation of a negative attitude,

which is associated with low teacher morale, or leaving the profession altogether (Thibodeaux et

al., 2015; Kasper, 2017). Kenadi (2017) found that negative attitudes are often the result of

experiencing low morale over an extended period of time, which can lead to behaviors that

reduce the effectiveness of academic instruction. Teachers in rural, low socio-economic areas

often experience negative emotions such as anger towards students, colleagues, or administration; thus, forming a negative attitude towards the profession (Koenen et al.,2019). Whipp & Geronime (2017) found that attitudes towards students, colleagues, administration, and the profession itself are dynamic and may change over time with experience. Teachers in rural, poverty-level areas can only persist in the profession if they remain positive, as attitude is directly correlated to a sense of self-efficacy and satisfaction within the classroom. Aldridge & Fraser (2016) as well as Kasper (2017) determined that a positive attitude towards the daily classroom tasks, and collaboration and cohesion among colleagues, is associated with improved retention rates among teachers in rural areas. Zaidi (2015) as well as Dos Santos (2019) found that experienced teachers in underprivileged areas possess the qualities to interact effectively with students and colleagues more than new, inexperienced teachers.

Professional development opportunities can improve teacher quality and improve retention in rural areas by preparing teachers to teach in rural environments (Gaikhorst et al., 2015). Carver-Thomas (2019) found that professional development and effective collaboration with colleagues can positively influence beginning teachers in rural areas to stay in the profession. Curriculum development and classroom management skills were found to be essential for beginning teachers to choose to remain in a rural, poverty-stricken area, as opposed to changing schools or leaving the profession altogether (Touchstone, 2015; Lux, 2018). Professional development can assist all teachers in reestablishing their connection to the profession and improving retention while strengthening their efficacy (Burke et al., 2015; Swanson & Mason, 2018). Additional factors that contribute to low teacher morale and lack of motivation are

teachers feeling ignored in terms of participating in the pedagogical process, or student discipline and/or control within the classroom (Ofoegbu, 2004; Lux, 2018).

Increased teacher workload has also impacted teacher retention in a negative way (Manuel et al., 2018). Geiger & Pivovarova (2018) discovered that increased teacher workload such as accountability for standards and planning and multiple class preparations can often lead to burnout. Many teachers work more than 40 hours per week, and fatigue coupled with the constant pressure from administration to fulfill the necessary paperwork while instructing effectively leads to poor retention after the first few years simply because teachers cannot fulfill the work expectations (Torres, 2016; Ritz, 2018). Multiple levels of job commitment can lead to emotional exhaustion among new teachers in rural areas (Cancio et al., 2018). Professional development, administrative support, and collaboration with colleagues can increase feelings of significance towards teaching; thus, fostering feelings of enthusiasm, inspiration, and pride (Stander & Stander, 2016; Ritz, 2018). If planning collaboratively can reduce the workload for teachers in rural areas, the stress will also be reduced and will improve teacher retention. While most teachers are in the profession for all of the right reasons, including academic success for their students, they often forgo their lunchtime, bathroom breaks, and planning periods to ensure that their students achieve academically (Woodbury, 2017). According to Pedota (2015) as well as Harrell et al. (2018), teachers can often ensure success for their students, by having confidence in their teaching abilities, as higher teacher retention often correlates with higher achieving students. State mandated test scores do not always reflect a teacher's ability to provide effective instruction, and they can express student success within the classroom all year long rather than during testing. Small victories, according to Pedota (2015) as well as Whitford et al., (2018),

create an environment of support and improves the relationships between teachers and students which leads to higher teacher retention. Thus, teacher quality is a significant factor in student achievement by preparing them for success not only at the present grade, but for the future to include a college or university setting (Zhang & Campbell, 2015; Whitford et al., 2018).

Unfortunately, however, poverty-level students in rural schools face many challenges that make it extremely difficult for students to receive an adequate education or succeed in future grades as Azano & Stewart (2016) as well as Lux (2018) pointed out that rural schools consist mainly of novice, under-qualified teachers who choose not to stay. Goodpaster et al. (2012) as well as Sutcher et al., (2019) found that most teachers at rural schools are inexperienced and less likely to have a graduate degree, in addition to those who have not received proper guidance and support to meet the needs of their students (Ulferts, 2015; Lux, 2018). Lack of experience makes these teachers less effective than veteran teachers and they are often stressed and struggling to ensure they meet the academic, emotional, and social needs of their students (Ulferts, 2015; Lux, 2018). Ulferts and Lux also found that classes are overcrowded and filled with teachers who are often underprepared, do not comprehend the complex aspects of the curriculum, and are in desperate need for professional development.

To better understand the challenges that teachers in rural districts face when retaining highly qualified teachers, one must first look at the student population data. It is important to identify the background of a student within the rural classroom, and the challenges that they have had to overcome at home. According to Alnesser and Westgard (2017), a lack of proper development in a child can have a significant impact on their overall academic performance. This lack of development has been linked to the poverty level in which a child is raised.

Mattingly et al., (2011) as well as Grissom and Bartanen (2019), discovered a significant correlation between rural schools and a higher poverty level; one that seems to be generational. Therefore, it is conclusive that teachers at the early childhood level, within rural school districts, are more likely to confront the challenge of early childhood gaps within their student population as poverty levels contribute to poor early childhood development. According to Hubbard and Van Tassel-Baska (2016), rural students do not have the same access to hands-on educational experiences such as theaters or museums. This significantly decreases the number of prior experiences and opportunities that rural students bring into the classroom.

While rural districts make up approximately one-fourth of our nation's public-school districts, according to Gagnon & Mattingly (2016), they are the most difficult to staff. According to McHenry-Sorber, et.al. (2019), teachers who are within a reasonable distance from areas that offer a better salary, and more appealing benefits, it has become increasingly more difficult to persuade them to stay in a rural, poverty-stricken area. According to Bailey (2014) as well as Sutcher et al. (2019), the inequalities among children from low-income backgrounds and their counterparts are drastic and challenges for rural children and their families are great. Some of the obstacles that these students and their families face are harsh economic, social, and educational conditions. These hardships put students at an academic disadvantage because of the unequal access to an adequate education. Students who attend rural schools are at a disadvantage because of a lack of resources such as technology, poor instructional practices, and little remediation for academic success (Redding & Walberg, 2013; Sutcher et al. 2019).

Dunn (2020) conducted a study to determine how contextual factors of a neoliberal school affect the morale of its teachers, and how the morale relates to their reports of pedagogy.

The sample involved 30 veteran teachers who were identified as strong leaders, according to both neoliberal or non-neoliberal indicators, and who represented a diversity of other identity markers, such as veteran teachers who left urban schools within the first five years. Two surveys were administered to the participants, and the qualitative data of grounded theory methodology from eight focal participants. The process involved theoretical sampling, constant comparisons, and theoretical sensitivity. The results indicated that a variety of contextual factors affected morale. These factors included isolation, severe discipline issues among students, lack of recognition, lack of mentoring, and ineffective leadership. Being labeled an exceptional educator is not sufficient for avoiding disempowerment. The results also indicated that low morale significantly influenced their view of their own pedagogy. This became a vicious cycle of low morale, disempowerment, and ineffective pedagogy. The participants were discouraged and inhibited by restrictive educational policies. Therefore, the researcher maintained that these policies, at all levels, decrease teachers' morale.

Identifying the means to improve students' learning outcomes remains the subject of continuous academic inquiry, and a key objective of educational agencies. A student's academic achievement is a direct reflection of effective instruction. As a result of this interest, immense research is now centered on the construct of school climate, teacher morale, and the effects on student achievement.

Using multiple informants is considered "best practice" when measuring educational and psychological constructs (Cornell et. al. 2015; Kasper, 2019). Research has contributed to social-psychological and educational research concerning school climate and morale, with highlighted importance on the effects of these factors on students' academic success. Cornell et. al. (2015) as

well as Kasper (2019) also established findings that student and staff perceptions of school climate and morale impact student achievement, thus, while a positive school climate is marked by enhanced teacher performance, higher teacher morale, and improved academic achievement. However, low teacher morale and negative school climate is directly related to a profound decrease in the academic achievement of students. School districts and, specifically, superintendents and administrators, feel relentless pressure to raise student achievement (Kaplan & Owings, 2013; Benoliel & Barth, 2017). However, many reform endeavors fail. Educators cannot grasp the complexity of change, nor do they consider the school climate or morale. Attempts to improve morale, climate, and achievement have focused largely on imposing new rules and policies, rather than improving the culture, which would stimulate and support educators to make beneficial changes from within the walls. A continuous stream of superficial reforms has convinced teachers that the educational agency is failing its employees and students. Thus, leaving teachers defensive and suffering from burnout, with little faith in educational reforms. (Kaplan & Owings, 2013; Benoliel & Barth, 2017).

A study (Berkowitz et al., 2016) on school climate extended the constructs of teacher expectations (Gruenert & Valentine, 1997; Durksen and Klassen, 2018), which are safety, relationships, physical environment, shared vision and participation, and focused school climate around the six constructs on the School Culture Survey. In terms of teacher morale, the study utilized the Purdue Teacher Opinionnaire, which centered around the constructs of teacher status, community support of education, curriculum issues, teacher workload, salary, cohesion among colleagues, overall job satisfaction, and relationship with administrator. In terms of student achievement, and its relation to teacher morale, the educational policy, current growth models of

assessments, and high stakes testing were examined. In order to analyze student achievement, or the level of mastery achieved by students, the study utilized end-of-course exam scores for English and Biology. Based on the results of the Pearson's r correlation (Young, 2018) a positive correlation existed between the variables of teacher morale and student achievement. Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners realized that student success depended on the quality of instruction that students received (Young, 2018). Strong et al. (2008) as well as Whitford et al., (2018) asserted that teacher attrition impacted a teacher's career and increased costs to the school district, which in turn negatively affected student learning.

Teacher morale is seldom researched in public education (Senechal, et al., 2016); therefore, it is difficult to tell how high-stakes policies affect it. The high-stakes educational policy is comprised of guidelines that provide systematic organization to a school district. Zoch (2017) stated that this multi-faceted social practice consists of many layers of bureaucracy. The National Commission on Excellence in Education reported that standards-based reform caused school accountability measures. This included high stakes standardized testing. These standards were put in place to hold the students, teachers, administrators, and stakeholders accountable for meeting certain benchmarks of academic achievement. These policies continue to be influenced by the passing of ideologies contained in NCLB (Sturges, 2015; Zoch, 2017). Zoch (2017) stated that standards-based reform efforts continue to follow that path by implementing standards-based reform to enhance academic performance in public schools within the United States. Zoch also noted that research has examined how testing requirements linked to accountability affect the instructional practices of teachers, and this serves as a punishment for school districts when attempting to improve student achievement.

Another area that has been associated with teacher turnover rates is principal effectiveness. Grissom (2016) researched the effects of principal effectiveness on turnover rates and found that more effective principals were associated with higher retention rates. According to Grissom & Bartanen, (2019), the attrition rates of low-performing teachers, when measured by classroom observation, increased substantially under higher-rated administrators. Mihaley et al. (2015) as well as Lux (2018) found that novice teachers who were mentored and underwent induction were far less likely to leave the teaching profession than those without the same support. Tehseen and Hadi (2015) as well as Cera and Furxhiu (2017) argued that school leaders who offered professional development opportunities were less likely to lose teachers than those who did not offer teachers the opportunity to grow professionally. Effective leaders are those who develop cohesion with their employees through collaboration and communication and have developed positive environments of professionalism and respect (West et al., 2017). Principals must own the responsibility of having tremendous power over the morale and overall environment of the teachers and school, as this is essential in building and maintaining a rapport with employees. According to Brion (2015) as well as West et al. (2017), leadership styles can influence the morale of the employees tremendously, and their attitude, policies, and procedures, in addition to philosophical approach to problems, are all major factors in teacher morale.

Overall working conditions have also influenced the teacher retention rate within a school. Futernick (2007) as well as Durksen and Klassen (2018) described positive working conditions as the provision of an effective team, effective leadership, environment conducive to learning, external support, parental, stakeholder and community involvement, small classes, and a well-rounded curriculum.

Ingersoll (2001; 2017) conducted a national survey of working conditions for teachers and how those conditions affect morale, teacher turnover, and attrition rates. He found the level of administrative support, extent of teacher input into school policies, salary, and strife, or lack of collaboration, as significant determinants of teacher retention. Synthesizing existing literature, Johnson et al. (2012) as well as Ingersoll explained working conditions in schools as (a) organizational structures that influenced teacher workload; (b) physical facilities such as equipment and buildings; (c) political attributes that defined the authority of teachers; (d) social components that influenced teachers' status, responsibility, and encounters with colleagues and students; (e) cultural dimensions that defined values, norms, and traditions; (f) educational policies associated with accountability and curriculum that enhanced or limited what teachers could teach; and (g) psychological concerns that diminished or enhanced teachers. According to Working (2003) in addition to Ryan et al. (2017), teachers value a school environment conducive to learning in which they do not experience isolation but work collaboratively with leaders and colleagues to ensure academic achievement. Arinette (2018) stated that a teacher's perception of their environment and overall school conditions strongly impacted their plan to continue working within that school or change locations. Jackson (2012) as well as Ryan et al. found a positive correlation between a teacher's working environment and teacher attrition. His study revealed that a lack of materials and supplies led teachers to be unprepared, which contributed to poor working conditions. Severe discipline issues also contribute to poor working conditions for teachers. According to Djonko-Moore (2016), teachers were more likely to leave a school with higher student disciplinary problems than those whose discipline was handled effectively by administration. Boyd (2009) as well as Ryan et al. found that working conditions made up the

most important factor that influenced a teacher's decision to either stay or leave the profession. When working conditions are not conducive to teaching and learning, teachers cannot effectively do their job. This is consistent with Herzberg's (1954) theory of motivation, which stated that employees must be motivated and satisfied to effectively perform their duties.

Teacher effectiveness is vital in improving the academic achievement of students (Whitford et al., 2017). Hughes (2012) as well as Arinette (2018) found that teacher attrition stems from professional development and training, which are required to boost reforms within a district. However, these programs reduce the funding allocations for the school, causing schools to lack the resources needed to implement teacher preparation programs. According to Goldhaber (2015) as well as Harris (2018), these preparation programs help teachers improve their effectiveness as a means of reducing economic inequality. Teachers who enter the profession via non-traditional methods, such as the TAPP (Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy), according to Rice (2010) in addition to Lux, increase teacher attrition, as these programs are a short-term solution to quickly fill openings within districts. Therefore, teachers who enter the teaching profession via this route do not feel prepared and are often overwhelmed and dissatisfied.

Ticknor et al. (2017) argued that a teacher who received opportunities to advance in their career were more likely to stay at their school, than those who were denied advancement. Many teachers plan to become instructional coaches, school-level administrators, or district-level administrators (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Ticknor et al., 2017). However, when denied a chance to move into an administrative position, many teachers leave the profession entirely to pursue another career with the potential for advancement. Many districts with high retention rates have

provided teachers career pathways for growth and leadership where they could apply their professional knowledge and expertise.

Teaching has become an increasingly demanding profession, as teachers have an enormous amount of pressure to meet the escalating needs of schools, students, districts, standards, and best practices (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Administrative praise and acknowledgement of achievements and efforts enhance teacher morale and made them feel valued. In larger districts, teachers rarely interact with administrators unless a behavior problem is involved. The motivation of teachers depends on administrators developing strategies for recognizing their efforts. Praise and recognition for their performance, such as a personalized email or card, can make teachers feel treasured and appreciated (Ticknor et al., 2017).

Contemporary teachers are challenged with attempting to maintain hope, as they address anxiety, isolation, and low morale. There are many aspects to teaching, including mandated responsibilities, as well as the moral and ethical responsibility of ensuring that each child's academic, emotional, and social needs are met. In addition to providing an environment conducive to teaching and learning, teachers also must maintain order and discipline, encourage and model creativity, assist in learning basic life skills and self-care, provide support to those who suffer from the effects of living in poverty, promote students who become lifelong learners and model citizens, and improve achievement scores on mandated standardized tests. Educators are expected to collaborate effectively with colleagues and adhere to leadership standards. Unfortunately, some leaders do not exhibit professional standards, and teachers are isolated, experience lack of cohesion among colleagues, and feel overwhelmed. School conditions and/or

climate, poor leadership, and lack of support leads to low morale and low teacher retention. Therefore, many begin to display withdrawal behaviors, such as absenteeism, tardiness, and resignation as they simply disengage. Effectively meeting the expectations, in addition to poor resources and unrealistic goals, has become very challenging for teachers, leaders, and districts.

Teacher workloads now include mastery of program implementation, learning evolving curricula, improving standardized test scores, teaching, effectively communicating with a diverse population, and overall accountability and reform. School reform policies include advocacy for privatization of education with administrations assuming control of all decision-making from the educator. Teachers desire to express opinions, ideas, or concerns in terms of high stakes testing, curriculum choice, or discipline policies. Often, goals and objectives are provided by administrators with no clear plan, thus forcing teachers to interpret to the best of their abilities. The added pressure of oft-confusing policies causes panic, anxiety, and overall stress, which can contribute to low teacher morale.

Administrators who are visible, supportive, and who communicate effectively, may improve the overall climate, thus, contributing to a climate conducive to learning. However, those teachers whose work environment was non-supportive, and uninviting, felt that it contributed significantly to the state of their morale. In order to foster an environment that facilitates student achievement while maintaining a healthy climate, teachers rely on the guidance of an efficient, effective leader who elicits their input in the overall educational program.

Teachers who work in a positive environment where students can come to comfortably learn specific goals and objectives are often more positive, outgoing, organized, and

compassionate, investing effort and energy into their jobs. This, in turn, can promote healthy relationships with students. Research has shown that students who maintain good relationships with their teachers in a healthy learning environment often score higher on standardized tests, and overall academic achievement, as they expend more effort into learning. Teachers have the greatest impact on student achievement; however, teachers are only one component (Tonissen, 2015; Ingersoll, 2017). Creemers and Kyriakides (2010) as well as Wronowski (2017) reported that school culture has been shown to be a major component of school, teacher, and student success. Additionally, Willis & Varner (2010) as well as Sutcher et al. (2019) stated that low levels of satisfaction and morale can lead to decreased teacher burnout, which is associated with a loss of concern for and detachment from the people with whom one works, decreased quality of teaching, depression, greater use of sick leave, efforts to leave the profession, and a cynical and dehumanized perception of students. The students perceived their teachers were not emotionally involved in their education; therefore, their efforts to persist academically, emotionally, and socially were diminished.

When researching any topic, it is vital to recognize where the gaps in research appear. Mason & Matas (2015) in addition to Kelchtermans (2018) acknowledged that there are significant gaps in the research that focuses specifically on teacher retention and low teacher morale among teachers in rural, poverty-stricken areas. Mason & Matas as well as Darling-Hammond et al., as many previous researchers have already done, identified a very broad list of reasons why teachers are choosing to leave the field of education. In addition to clarifying any misconceptions, when researching any topic, it is vital to recognize where the gaps in research appear. Both Mason and Matas as well as Kelchtermans also acknowledged that there were

significant gaps in the research focusing specifically on teacher retention. However, there is an indisputable need for research that focuses more on teacher retention strategies, and strategies for improving teacher morale. In reference to Maslow's theory, more research is crucial to determine how to meet the needs of teachers in rural, poverty-stricken areas in order to keep them in the classrooms. Mason and Matas as well as Darling-Hammond et al. identified key factors in retaining teachers in rural areas that range from the basic level of human needs to the most advanced level of self-efficacy. Administrators simply cannot expect stellar teacher performance, or dedication to the profession, if the teacher feels any sense of dissatisfaction (Okeke & Mtyuda, 2017). While there have been many excellent inquiries into the issue of teacher retention and low teacher morale, there was a significant gap in research as to how these factors relate to teachers in rural, poverty-stricken areas. While some studies depict low teacher morale as correlated to low teacher retention, additional research is needed to determine if low teacher morale influences a teacher to change their profession. There are many teachers who resign from the school and/or district, and some choose to leave the profession entirely. For new teachers, lack of support and isolation were considered the primary reasons that they chose to leave. However, additional studies and/or research would be beneficial to determine the exact correlation, if any.

Teacher attrition has a significant effect on school budgets, student achievement, school conditions, including teacher morale, school reforms, school districts, and stakeholders and community. It is important for students, families, educators, and policymakers to understand why there was a disconnect between rural poverty-stricken schools, and the retention and morale of teachers, and what strategies can be implemented to resolve the ever-growing problem (Darling-

Hammond et al., 2020). This research design will assist in understanding teachers' perceptions of factors that impacted teachers' retention and low teacher morale in a rural, poverty-stricken school as outlined with the research questions presented in this study. Previous research fixated on many of the structural and cultural barriers of low teacher retention; however, more research is needed to understand how these issues compound when intersected with rural, poverty-stricken areas.

Another significant gap, as stated by Hodges et al., (2013) in addition to Lux (2018), is that rural schools are held to the same expectations as their suburban, urban, metropolitan counterparts, yet there is little research being conducted on the specific rural education issues. Beltman et al., (2015) as well as Durksen and Klassen (2018) found that the resiliency of teachers in poverty-level, rural areas is more fragile than teachers working in urban or suburban areas which leads to low teacher retention and low teacher morale. Thus, additional research is needed in the area of situations and challenges that are specific to rural schools. Some of these common areas specific to rural schools are limited economic opportunities, and limited options for extensive social interactions (Monk, 2007; Ritz, 2018). These areas often lead to retention issues as teachers in rural areas are in constant competition with metropolitan, suburban, and urban areas that can offer more money, additional professional development, and opportunities for career advancement (Gagnon et al., 2016; Lux, 2018). When teachers find themselves within a reasonable distance from an area that can offer more money, sufficient professional development, and more attractive benefits, it becomes increasingly harder to retain them (McHenry-Sorber &Campbell, 2019). When comparing rural schools to their metropolitan, suburban, and urban counterparts, rural schools are impacted much more severely by the

inability to retain quality, effective teachers, especially in the critical areas of math and science (Goodpaster et al., 2012; McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019). These factors also place suburban school students at an advantage over students in rural areas when considering teacher content knowledge which is the most consistent factor for student success.

Supplemental research is also needed to understand what influences teacher morale and retention in rural, low-income areas, and why this demographic area was disproportionately unprepared structurally and academically for teachers in these areas (Patton, 2016; Lux (2018). There is a clear disconnect between teachers in rural areas, which is leading to a shortage of effective teachers in many rural areas. In choosing a qualitative approach, this study will allow the voices and opinions of the participants to contribute to the research surrounding this educational phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The significance of this research study will be empirical, theoretical, and practical. By identifying the barriers that influenced the perception of teachers, all stakeholders who have experienced this phenomenon will benefit (Gonzalez, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study will benefit the field of research concerning teacher retention by targeting a specific population whom most of the present literature has overlooked.

Chapter two presented a review of the literature and established the need for this research study. First, the theoretical framework was discussed including Herzberg's (1959) motivation hygiene or two-factor theory and Maslow's (1970) motivational theory. The literature review presented current morale issues that public school teachers currently face. The literature review also presented many factors that contribute to low teacher retention; however, additional research is needed to investigate the factors related to low teacher morale and its correlation to low teacher retention.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive study was to understand the factors that are related to low morale and retention as described by teachers who work in a rural, poverty-stricken school, as described by teachers who are employed there.

One of the biggest hurdles that school districts across the country are facing is teacher turnover. This study utilized the qualitative phenomenological approach to understand low teacher morale and low teacher retention in a rural, poverty-stricken school district in Georgia. The researcher collected and analyzed the views of the participants through the discourse of events, feelings, and experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study explored the factors related to teacher retention; specifically, teacher morale. The data can be used as a valuable tool for administrators and school leaders in terms of understanding the depth of teachers' experiences in terms of retention, based on their experiences teaching in this rural district in Georgia. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), phenomenological research attempts to set aside biases and direct the interest of the study to the individuals' lived experiences. This approach illuminates the specifics of the phenomenon (Lester, 1999; Silverman, 2017) and utilizes the participants' own perspectives and understandings of the phenomenon (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Silverman).

The framework that aligned with this study follows the social constructivist viewpoint, which Creswell and Poth (2018), describe as a worldview where the participants describe their experiences, and there is no single reality, but rather multiple realities that will surface. In this case, teachers described their experiences in a rural, poverty-stricken school in Georgia.

Purposeful sampling was used on the targeted population, which consisted of teachers from one school in the rural district. Creswell (2013, 2017) recommended that a phenomenological study sample size of 10 is sufficient for this study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted individually. The data was analyzed using open coding to identify themes or patterns based on recurring words or phrases from each interview transcript that relate to the research questions and thus themes were identified in the data that showed similarities and/or differences from the participants. Each theme or pattern was coded by names that described issues as related by the participants. The codes were compared for consistencies. The results of this study may be used by all stakeholders to include Local Education Agencies (LEA's), all school administrators, board members, teachers, and parents to work collaboratively to improve teacher retention by improving the morale and conditions within the school.

The framework that aligns with this study followed the social constructivist viewpoint, which Creswell & Poth (2018), describe as a worldview where the participants describe their experiences, and there is no single reality, but rather multiple realities that will surface. In this case, teachers described their experiences in a rural, poverty-stricken school in Georgia. Purposeful sampling was used on the targeted population, which consisted of teachers from one school in the rural district. Creswell (2013, 2017) recommended that a phenomenological study sample size of 10 is sufficient for this study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted individually. The qualitative data was analyzed by transcribing each interview, and memoing while transcribing to determine themes or patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Creswell and Poth, this process allows the researcher to detect similarities within the data. To detect these similarities, open coding was used to identify themes or patterns

based on recurring words or phrases from each interview transcript that relate to the research questions and thus identify themes in the data that show similarities and/or differences from the participants. Each theme or pattern was coded by names that described issues as related by the participants. The codes were compared for consistencies. The research will assist school administrators in planning and implementing initiatives that raise teacher retention by understanding teachers' perceptions of factors that impact teacher retention, who work in rural, low-income areas.

Research Design

One of the largest hurdles that school districts across the country are facing is low teacher retention. This study utilized the qualitative phenomenological approach to understand factors that contribute to low teacher morale and low teacher retention in a rural, poverty-stricken school district in Georgia. I collected and analyzed the views of the participants through the discourse of events, feelings, and experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This explored the factors related to teacher retention; specifically, teacher morale. The data will serve as a valuable tool for administrators and school leaders in terms of understanding the depth of teachers' experiences in terms of retention, based on their experiences teaching in this rural district in Georgia. The qualitative research design was selected to understand the meaning that teachers attach to personal experiences. According to Creswell (2017), qualitative research is suitable when the researcher's objective is to understand the meaning that individuals attach to a social problem. This design is compatible with the constructivist paradigm, which according to Flick (2009) as well as Silverman (2017), is based on the ontological assumption that individuals construct their understanding of reality based on experiences. Silverman noted that this method is also suitable for investigating topics that are often difficult to identify or measure.

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), phenomenological research attempts to set aside biases and direct the interest of the study to the individuals' lived experiences. This approach illuminates the specifics of the phenomenon, according to Lester (1999) as well as Vagel (2018) and utilizes the participants' own perspectives and understandings of the phenomenon (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Silverman, 2017). Moustakas (1994) used the concepts of transcendental phenomenology of philosopher Edmund Husserl to pioneer the phenomenological research design. The data from a phenomenological study can then be synthesized to determine the meaning attached to the phenomenon and the essence of the phenomenon. This research design can also, in the context of the topic of investigation, reveal information concerning the effects of experience on decision-making (Vagel, 2018).

The most current research on teacher retention and morale supports the use of transcendental phenomenology (Lesh et. al., 2017). To answer the research questions associated with this study, and fill the gap in the research, transcendental phenomenology provided the most efficient way to understand the actual experiences of teachers in poverty-stricken, rural areas. According to Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology requires the triangulation of multiple sources of data, which provides evidence that supports the research questions. He (Moustakas, 2017) also recommended that the researcher document beliefs and views in a journal throughout the course of the study, as doing so is an integral and vital part of this research study, as it ensures the findings do not reflect the beliefs and views of the researcher.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What factors lead to low teacher retention and low teacher morale in rural, low socio-

economic schools?

Sub-Question One

What factors lead to teachers remaining in the same school, or switching schools within the district?

Sub-Question Two

How do teachers located in poverty-stricken, rural areas describe their experiences that could be useful for developing approaches to improve teacher retention and morale?

Sub-Question Three

How could the information gathered from both current and former teachers be used to implement successful strategies for recruitment and retention of teachers in these areas?

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Setting and Participants

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Setting

The school district chosen for this study is in Farmer's County, Georgia, which is a rural, low-income area, consisting of one high school, and one PK-8 school. Farmer's County is in the central portion of Georgia, and the population is 12,433 (US Census Bureau, 2022). One hundred percent of the students in the Farmer's County School District receive free lunch. The administrative structure for Farmer's County School District at the board of education consists of the superintendent, assistant superintendent, school board with eight members, human resources director, and special education director. At the high school, there is one principal and three assistant principals for grades 9-12. At the K-8 level there is one principal, and two assistant principals. The researcher chose this location because she worked in this district for four years as a self-contained, special education teacher. However, the researcher also has an additional 20

years of experience in other rural, poverty-stricken areas in Georgia, where the retention rate and morale in these areas was also low.

The population for this study consisted of a random sample from a total of 223 teachers within the district. The qualifications for the study required the district to be identified as a RLIS (Rural and Low-Income School), and receive federal funding based on this criterion. The district is considered an RLIS as identified by the Georgia Department of Education (Census.gov, 2020). RLIS is a program that provides rural districts with financial assistance for initiatives aimed at improving student achievement (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022). The organizational structure consists of one lead principal for the K-8 school, an assistant principal for the elementary side which consists of K-5 students, one assistant principal for grades 6-8, and the special education director for the district.

Participants

Kuper et al. (2008) as well as Oliffe, et al., (2021) stated that qualitative research blends participants' experiences with the construction of meaning related to the research questions, and all participants chosen for this study will have experienced the phenomenon necessary to address the research questions. The participants chosen had at least three years of experience in a school located in a rural, low socio-economic area with low teacher retention. The sample consisted of 10 teachers out of 223 total, from one school district located in a rural, low socio-economic area in Georgia. The district consists of PK-8 combined school, and one high school. Each participant has a master's degree or above and has at least five years of teaching experience. Ten participants were randomly selected from the PK-8 grade levels.

Out of a total number of 223 teachers within the district, 136 are at the PK-8 combined, and 87 are at the high school, 83 have 0-10 years of experience, 86 have 11-20 years of experience, and 54 have 21+ years of experience. There are 26 male teachers, and 97 female teachers. They range in age from 20 to 60+ years, with 58 between the ages of 20-29, 37 between the ages of 30-39, 41 between the ages of 40-49, 43 between the ages of 50-59, and 44 at 60 or above. There is one teacher of Asian descent, 114 are African American not of the Hispanic descent, 10 are Hispanic, 3 are Native American, and 58 are Caucasian. Ninety-two teachers hold a bachelor's degree, 67 hold a master's degree, 48 have an educational specialist degree, and 16 have a doctoral level degree. The sample consisted of 10 teachers out of 223from one school district located in a rural, low socio-economic area in Georgia. The district consists of PK-8 combined school, and one high school.

Researcher Positionality

As a veteran educator, I have personally witnessed and experienced low teacher morale. I have witnessed teacher retention decrease drastically in more than one district, as compared to the prior year, by watching many colleagues choose to go to another school within that district, or another county. I have also observed some colleagues leave the profession altogether. Therefore, I have developed a passion for understanding the correlation between low teacher morale and low teacher retention in hopes of contributing to a solution for this worsening problem in the field of education. I have become very interested in obtaining the perspectives of other teachers at rural, poverty-stricken schools, regarding the factors that influence teacher retention and low teacher morale. I have an identifiable connection with this environment, which

provides me with a better understanding of the role of the participants than someone lacking the experience in a rural, poverty-stricken school.

Interpretive Framework

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research begins with assumptions, and the use of theoretical frameworks which informs the study. Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology that focuses on understanding lived experiences from the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers view their philosophical frameworks through an interpretive lens, and my influence from these frameworks and assumptions will be openly shared and described. Social constructivism will be the guiding lens of my philosophical framework as it seeks to understand people in their home and work environments. With social constructivism, the researcher's goal is to interpret findings that are also shaped by the researcher's experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Philosophical Assumptions

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), there are four philosophical assumptions that are applied to research being conducted. The four assumptions are ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodical beliefs. In this section, I addressed my philosophical assumptions that may influence the research study, as understanding my particular beliefs will promote an understanding of the motivation for conducting the study.

The interview questions were prepared prior to each interview session. The axiological assumption was used since the researcher is part of the district being studied. The researcher began the study with acknowledgement of any preconceived notions or biases, and these biases

will be openly discussed and reported in the study. The researcher used the ontological

assumption to acknowledge that each participant has different views on factors that impact

teacher retention, however, those with similar views will be identified. The epistemological

assumption was used by giving meaning to each of the communicative experiences of the

participants and connecting them to the research.

Ontological Assumption

Guba and Lincoln (1989) identified ontological assumptions as those that responded to

the questions "What is there that can be known?" or "What is the nature of reality?" (p. 83). The

ontological assumption means that the world explored is a world populated by humans that have

their own thoughts and interpretations. Each participant had their own views on factors that

impact teacher retention, and while many had similar views or share similar experiences, I did

not feel that all would (Creswell, 2013). However, a common meaning emerged through those

similar views, and I identified those commonalities into themes which I used to create a textural

description of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Epistemological Assumption

Teachers who leave the profession is a communicative experience and can be connected

to the use of research techniques and qualitative design. This meaning could be given by the

participants, or other researchers who have studied this type of experience. The epistemological

assumption of this study was the meaning given to such experience. Epistemology justifies how

we understand what we know. The epistemological assumption underlying this study was that

knowledge is constructed through dialogue, interactions, and the social expectations of others

(Gaudet & Robert, 2018). Consequently, the participants and researcher co-constructed

knowledge through their interactions, which served as a source of knowledge concerning the topic under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Axiological Assumption

Capturing the axiological philosophical assumption in this study required that the research was appealing to the readers, formulated on the basis of scientific research, and formatted in the most fitting composition that scientific structure consists of. I understood the experiences of teachers that work in a rural, poverty-stricken school with low teacher retention and morale, and reported their perceptions and views (Patton, 2015). I understood the research problem through the perspectives of the participants and will use the results to assist administrators and stakeholders in understanding why teachers are leaving, thus providing strategies to assist in the retention of teachers.

Methical Assumption

The methical assumption used emerging design as the study progressed, which involved revising the interview questions based on the responses given during the interview process. Based on the literature, interview questions were developed, and interviews were conducted. As the interviews progressed, there was no need to revise the questions.

Researcher's Role

As a researcher, I upheld ethical standards while conducting the study. My role was to collect data, examine that data, effectively conceptualize the information contained in the data, and disseminate it in a helpful way. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used a qualitative method to understand the experiences of individuals and reported the findings by providing a realistic picture to help the reader experience the feelings of the participants (Creswell, 2013). I used

open-ended questions to allow the participants to express their own experiences without researcher bias. Lincoln and Guba (1989) recommend keeping a reflexive journal so that the reader visibly sees the constructed nature of the research outcome by allowing the researcher to log entries recording methodological decisions and reasons for those decisions. I maintained a steady response rate and continued participation throughout the study. I implemented reflexivity to increase the trustworthiness and transparency of the study by identifying my values and beliefs. Reflexibility helped to ensure that the research practices were ethical by addressing concerns from participants.

Procedures

Prior to beginning the research, a request was submitted to Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval to conduct the study. Approval was given from school administrators, from the target school district, to conduct the study. Once approval was granted from both the IRB and school administrators, the researcher then moved forward with the study. According to Yin (2009), interviews are one of the most important features of data collection. I contacted the administrator of the K-8 school in rural Georgia via email to solicit her support for me to conduct the study. I then requested a face-to-face meeting to review my plans in detail.

Prior to each interview, the purpose of the study was explained thoroughly, and the confidentiality of participant responses was ensured. Participants were told that they had the right to discontinue the interview at any time for any reason. Ten teachers from grades PK-8 were interviewed in a face-to-face, semi-structured setting using open-ended questioning. All interviews were recorded in a reflective journal to ensure that the transcription was accurate. All

questions were developed from prior studies and literature. All interview questions pertained to the following sub-questions:

Sub-Question One

How would current teachers in a rural school, located in a low socio-economic area, solve the issues related to low teacher retention and low teacher morale?

Sub-Question Two

What factors lead to teachers remaining in the same school, or switching schools within the district?

Sub-Question Three

How could the information gathered from both current and former teachers be used to implement successful strategies for recruitment and retention of teachers in these areas?

Qualitative data was analyzed by transcribing the interviews verbatim. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), memoing, while transcribing the interviews, helps in determining the themes. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize the importance of this process as it allows the researcher to discover the similarities within the information. To detect these similarities, open coding was used to identify themes or patterns based on recurring words or phrases from each interview transcript that relate to the research questions and thus identified themes in the data that showed similarities and/or differences from the participants. Each theme or pattern was coded by names that described issues as related by the participants. The codes were compared for consistencies. The researcher will assist school administrators in planning and implementing initiatives that raise teacher retention by understanding teachers' perceptions of factors that impact teacher retention, who work in rural, low-income areas.

Permissions

Prior to beginning the research, a request was submitted to Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval to conduct the study (See Appendix A). Approval was granted from the school administrators of the target school site to conduct the study. Once approval was granted from both the IRB and school administrators, the researcher moved forward with the study.

Recruitment Plan

I sent out a recruitment letter via email to ask current teachers to participate in the study. Emails of potential participants were provided by the principal of the school. I then sent consent forms via email to all potential participants eligible for the study (Creswell, 2013). All participants gave their consent (See Appendix B) to participate by signing the consent form. Once I received the completed consent forms, purposeful sampling ensured that selected teachers had at least three years of experience in a rural, poverty-stricken school. Ten teachers from the K-8 school, with at least five years of experience were recruited for this study. Convenient sampling was utilized for the purpose of recruitment. Their pseudonyms and other information about the participants were presented in Table 2. The 10 potential participants were identified and contacted about scheduling an interview, and were sent the location, date, and time of the interview.

Data Collection Plan

Yin (2014) lists six sources of evidence that may be used to support and conduct research: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts. Of these, the researcher used documents, interviews and physical artifacts.

Data collected was analyzed using methods of triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This involved interviewing teachers to collect qualitative data by focusing on guided questions and collecting physical documentation, such as detailed field notes, reflective journal notes, and administrative documents and records. The teachers were selected from a rural, poverty-stricken, public school in Georgia. Yin (2014) stated that one data source does not have an advantage over another, and each source enhances the others. Creswell (2009) affirmed the identification of strengths and weaknesses of data collection sources to support the study.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

The individual interviews consisted of open-ended questions with a semi-structured approach. This allowed for the same initial questions of each participant, but also allowed for follow-up questions in response to the interviewee's response. Magnusson and Marecek (2015) found that the open-ended approach is intended to collect rich data about the experiences of each participant. Interviewing is a common data collection technique in phenomenological research, as the participants can discuss their individual experiences in detail (Vagel, 2018).

Yin (2009) described an interview as one of the most important features of data collection. I contacted the administration via email to receive permission to conduct the study. I met with the administrator to discuss the details in depth. Per the Institutional Review Board (IRB) policies, I obtained consent forms from each participant. After obtaining permission from Liberty University to conduct the study, I selected the participants and interviewed each one. The interviews lasted approximately 40-45 minutes. The participants provided dialogue from responses to open-ended interview questions. The purpose of the study, and confidentiality of responses was explained. Participants were told they could discontinue the interview at any time,

for any reason. Questions focused on teachers' perceptions of morale within the school, and if

they felt there was a correlation between the morale, and teacher retention. The researcher

requested that her committee members review the questions before moving forward. The

sessions were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The objective of the interview

questions was to obtain accounts of personal experiences. All files will subsequently be

permanently deleted. Each participant reviewed the transcript of their interview, and no changes

were made to add, clarity, or correct information. These member checking procedures were for

accuracy, credibility, and validity of the recorded interview as stated by Creswell (2012). Field

notes were taken by the researcher during the interview process.

Following is a list of the questions that were used in the interviews (See Appendix C):

Individual Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your teaching experiences at this school. (CRQ)

2. What are the positive aspects of working at your school? (SQ1)

3. What are the negative aspects of working at your school? (SQ1)

4. Describe the morale of teachers at your school. (SQ1)

5. Concerning teacher morale, what are the key factors that contribute to it? (CRQ)

6. What factors could increase teacher retention and morale at your school? (SQ3)

7. What is the overall relationship between administrators and teachers? (SQ2)

8. Explain how you feel that teacher morale is directly correlated with teacher retention at your

   school? (SQ2)

9. What are some of your experiences that you believe have caused teachers to leave your

   school or the profession altogether? (CRQ)

10. Based on your experience, what else would you like to add to this study on teacher retention and morale? (SQ3)

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

After each interview, a transcription of the recording was created. I listened to the recording, compared it to the written transcription, and submitted the transcription to the interviewee for member checking. transcribing the digital recordings of the interviews and focus groups verbatim. The researcher then used open coding to identify themes based on recurring words or phrases by reading the transcripts and all documents that related to the research questions and themes in the data that reflect similarities and differences among the perceptions of the research participants (Bowen, 2009; Glaser, 2011). The researcher then coded each theme after reviewing the information. Themes were consistent in terms of retention and morale, and the most salient themes became the central themes of the study. This process allowed for the researcher to identify patterns, themes, and possible discrepancies in the data, which led to the formation of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2018).

Observation Data Collection Approach

Observations were conducted during site visits, which included data from observing faculty and staff in the hallways and cafeteria, as well as any interactions between teachers and administrators. Field notes were taken to document details such as morale, environment, and interactions between teachers and colleagues or administrators, and between adults and students in the classroom, hallways and cafeteria. The observations and/or interviews were compared to determine the accuracy of the participants' responses. The multiple types of data allowed for triangulation by utilizing the data to determine themes as described by Yin (2009) as patterns across collected data sets as they relate to the research questions. This study depended on the

belief that direct observation is an appropriate way to measure the perceptions of the participants that influenced retention and morale, based on their personal experiences (Surovell, 2017). I captured the experiences and interactions of this and understand the issues that impact teacher retention and morale.

Document Analysis Data Collection Approach

I used four types of documents and records to assist with gaining information about the Farmer's County K-8 attrition rate. These included annual staffing reports, professional development plans, a copy of the teacher's handbook, and copies of school climate surveys. In addition, the documents included school district demographics, and information from the Georgia Department of Education website.

The staffing reports provided data regarding teachers who left Farmer's County K-8, and those who chose to stay, as well as data on teachers' employment to include hiring (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Professional develop plans included reports of the credentials of each classroom teacher, goals implemented from the projected needs of the school, training goals or training outcomes which may reflect collaboration, and goals to enrich competence or expertise. The documents also included professional performance reviews which were used to evaluate teaching but also goals to improve teachers' professional needs, such as mentoring programs or programs to enhance collaboration. The teacher's handbook provided information regarding teacher responsibilities and expectations, and the policies and procedures that govern teachers' work. The school climate report for Farmer's County K-8 reflected various aspects of the school's educational environment which was used to identify weaknesses and strengths within the school.

Document Analysis Data Analysis Plan

The researcher used the documentation obtained to determine how many new teachers have been hired in the last five years at the middle school. This data included information regarding teachers who entered the profession through non-alternative methods such as the Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy. The annual staffing reports provided data regarding teachers who left the school district, and teachers who chose to remain. These reports also provided essential hiring data and the projected district needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The professional development documents provided professional performance reviews with which to evaluate the improvement of teaching and learning. This data was used to determine the needs of the students' developmental and educational needs, as well as the needs of the teachers in terms of professional needs. The teacher handbook was used as a resource for all faculty and staff to describe the various policies and expectations. The climate report was used to evaluate the aspects of the school's educational environment to identify the strengths and weaknesses within the school from the perspectives of the teachers who work there.

Other documentation included school demographics, and all information pertaining to standardized testing from the Georgia Department of Education website. Census records and statistical data assisted in providing background information for the demographics.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness, according to Richardson (2014), is the extent to which the results from qualitative studies can be generalized to other settings. Yin (2009) discussed four design tests for establishing quality and trustworthy findings in qualitative studies which include credibility, trustworthiness, data dependability, and confirmability. He also suggested (2011) presenting

multiple sources of evidence as a basis for credibility and trustworthiness. In this study, trustworthiness was evident from the detailed descriptions of all stages to include the planning, interviews, data collection, and observations.

Credibility

The use of open-ended, semi-structured interview questions will confirm the credibility of the study. The researcher established credibility through member checking by sharing the transcripts of each participant's interviews with him/her in order for them to correct errors or provide additional information. Each interview was audio recorded for accuracy, and as Yin (2009) suggested, the interview notes were preserved for review and data analysis. The questions were guided by best practices in qualitative research and guided by the problem, the purpose, the research questions, and the literature concerning low teacher retention and low teacher morale in a rural, poverty-stricken school in Georgia. Trustworthiness of the validity and understanding of this study was represented by factual reporting and responses. The verification of data via triangulation and member-checking was achieved by gathering documentation from each participant.

Transferability

Researchers establish transferability by providing readers with the evidence that their research findings apply to other populations and contexts (Patton, 2015). I used detailed descriptions as a technique to establish this by providing an accurate account of my experiences during the collection of data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stressed the importance of transferability in qualitative research to facilitate the application of learned lessons. By achieving

transferability, I connected to the social and cultural contexts by discussing where the interviews

will occur, as well as other documentation related to the data collection such as obtaining teacher

handbook, surveys, and professional development plans, According to Lincoln and Guba (2016),

transferability can also be established through thick, rich description that includes information

about the context of the participants, which will enable others to determine if the findings apply

to their context. The researcher provided such descriptions of the context and provided rationale

for decisions in the study that contributed to transferability.

Dependability

Dependability is essential to trustworthiness as it measures the consistency and

repeatability of findings. I used an inquiry audit to ensure dependability for this study, which

involves a qualified person examining the processes and results. I also maintained an audit trail

by keeping accurate records of all documents and interviews, and any other data used, in an

orderly manner (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability

Confirmability represents the degree to which the findings of a study would be consistent

with another interpretation of findings in another study, (Richardson, 2014) whereas

dependability is referred to as the replication of a study. In order to meet the confirmability and

dependability conditions for this study, the data to include notes, recordings, emails, transcripts,

and observation data were made available for auditing purposes if needed. The researcher

ensured confirmability by adopting a reflexive attitude when collecting data and analyzing it.

This reflexivity was done by ensuring that the researcher's opinions and/or views did not

influence the research process. This process was conducted by using journals that ensured my interest and values were in line with the actual research process as suggested by Nguyen et al, (2021).

Ethical Considerations

Prior to beginning the research, a request was submitted to Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval to conduct the study. Approval was sought from school administrators of the school site to conduct the study. Once approval was granted from both the IRB and school administrators, the researcher moved forward with the study. I created an informed consent for the participants to sign, acknowledging their rights are protected, responses are confidential, and they may withdraw from participation at any time. I requested approval from the principal via email and in person to conduct my study in the building and requested a written statement with this information. I offered all participants copies of transcripts and findings of this study. The participants were informed that there was no penalty for not volunteering, and that they may withdraw from the study at any time by informing the researcher of their intent to do so.

Following the completion of the study, data collected from participants was stored in a password-protected file, on the researcher's password-protected personal computer. The data was saved on a password protected back-up jump drive. When not being utilized, the jump drive is stored in a locked filing cabinet. The data will be retained for five years after the completion of this study. After five years, the data will be permanently deleted.

Summary

Chapter three presents the methodology of the proposed study, including the forms of data, the procedures, and the methods that I used to collect and analyze data. I have also discussed trustworthiness and ethical considerations. Low teacher retention and morale was researched through a confidential and reliable approach so that it conveys a better understanding of the issue. A group of 10 participants provided evidence and conception of the issue of low teacher retention and low teacher morale. Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling procedure and invited via school email. They signed consent forms to participate. Data analysis and collection approaches helped in revealing the issues that surround low teacher retention and will be done in an ethical manner. Current teachers discussed their perceptions of the factors that influence teacher retention and teacher morale. I transcribed all information to use for coding. All information remained confidential and credible, as well as organized. Design selection and the research questions were relevant to the research. The findings helped identify those factors that influence teacher retention and teacher morale and will assist in helping administrators develop strategies and techniques to retain effective teachers.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to describe to describe the lived experiences of teachers with a master's degree, and five years of experience, who work in a rural, poverty-stricken school in Middle Georgia (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The goal of this study was to understand the experiences of these teachers with respect to the factors that are related to low morale and retention in a rural, low-income school. A phenomenological design allowed me to focus on teachers who experience a shared phenomenon of teaching in a low-income, rural school, and explore what they have in common as they experience that phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This phenomenological study was guided by the following central research question: What lived experiences, from teachers in rural, low socio-economic schools, leads to teacher retention and teacher morale? This chapter includes a narrative description of 10 purposefully criterion selected participants, the findings of the study, outlier data, thematic development, participant responses to the research questions, and concludes with an overall chapter summary. Phenomenology was an appropriate research design for this study because it focuses on the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013).

Participants

The 10 participants in this study were drawn from one Pre-K-8 school in the same district and selected through purposeful criterion sampling. All participants were full-time public-school teachers, with a minimum of a master's degree and five years of experience. They taught face-to-face instruction, with some on grade level teams consisting of three teams. A recruitment email was sent out to teachers in grades Pre-K-8, beginning with a three-question

survey to determine if the criteria was met. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality

of the school and the participants involved in this phenomenological study. Table 1 below

describes the participant demographics by overall numbers in elementary and middle, years of

experience, gender, age, race, and level of education. Table 2 describes the participants

individually.

Table 1	*Participant Demographics*
Number of Teachers in Sample: 10	
Grade Level	
PK-5	09
Middle	01
Teaching Experience	
0-10 years	06
11-20 years	01
21 or more years	03
Gender	
Male	0
Female	10
Age	
20-29 years	01
30-39 years	05
40-49 years	02
50-59 years	02
60+ years	0
Race or Ethnicity	
Asian	0
African American	04
Hispanic	0

Native American	01
Caucasian	05

Level of Education

Bachelor's Degree	10
Master's Degree	10
Educational Specialist Degree	06
Doctoral Degree	0

Table 2   *Participant Demographics*

Teacher	Years Experience	Highest Degree	Content Area	Grade Level
Michelle	8	Educational Specialist	Math/Science	5th
Kristy	7	Master's	All Content Areas	1st
Pam	26	Educational Specialist	All Content Areas	K
Ginger	18	Master's	All Content Areas	Pre-K
Sarina	9	Educational Specialist	ELA (English Language Arts)	4th
Eva	9	Educational Specialist	Math Lab	K-2
Lori	8	Master's	ELA	7th
Jennifer	30	Educational Specialist	ELA/Social Science	5th
Cindy	6	Master's	ELA/Social Science	5th
Sheila	28	Educational Specialist	All Content Areas	K

Note: *Pseudonyms

Michelle

Michelle is a 31-year-old fifth grade math and science teacher at Farmer's County Elementary School, she has eight years of experience. She started out in a much larger county as a fifth-grade teacher, where she taught all content areas. Michelle has an educational specialist degree and is certified in the state of Georgia for all content areas in elementary education. When asked if she enjoyed her current position, she replied, "I love math, and the larger county placed more emphasis on preparation for standardized testing. However, I am much happier in the smaller county and am very happy with the subjects that I teach."

Kristy

Kristy is a 39-year-old first grade teacher at Farmer's County Elementary School. She has seven years of experience and has always taught first grade. She started out as an Early Intervention Program (EIP) teacher in the same county, for her first five years and worked with small groups of students in each first-grade class who were at risk of not maintaining their academic grade level based on performance on state or national standards in either ELA (English Language Arts) or Math. She wanted her own classroom, so she requested to be placed in a first-grade classroom. Kristy has a master's degree and is certified in Georgia for all content areas in elementary education. When asked if she enjoyed her current position, Kristy responded, "I love first grade because they transform so much from kindergarten in just one year, and they are eager to read."

Pam

Pam is a 49-year-old kindergarten teacher at Farmer's County Elementary School. She has 26 years of experience, and all of those have been in kindergarten. She has been in the same county for her entire career. She has an educational specialist degree and is certified in Georgia

for all content areas in elementary education. When asked if she was happy in choosing the same grade level in the same county, she responded, "I absolutely cannot imagine teaching anything else but kindergarten. Kindergarten teachers are in a league of their own, and I will finish my career in the same grade and probably in the same county. I don't foresee that changing, and actually, I was also in the same exact classroom until we built the new school."

Ginger

Ginger is a 47-year-old Pre-K teacher with 18 years of experience. She started her career in kindergarten for five years in a much larger county. She then taught first grade for two years in that same county, before moving to Farmer's County Elementary School where she also taught first grade ELA/Social Science for 11 years. When asked, Ginger moved to Pre-K this past summer in order to help strengthen this program due to the lack of veteran teachers. She has a master's degree and is certified in Georgia for all content areas in elementary education. When asked what her favorite grade level was thus far, she responded, "I absolutely loved first grade. That was the perfect age in terms of their eagerness to learn and to read."

Sarina

Sarina is a 30-year-old fourth grade ELA/Social Science teacher at Farmer's County Elementary School. She has nine years of experience in the same county and has taught the same subjects at the same grade level. She has an educational specialist degree and is certified in Georgia for all content areas in elementary education. When asked if she liked her grade and content areas, she responded, "ELA is my forte. Teachers either love to teach ELA, or they hate it. Even though I am young, I am very phonics based and believe that it works when teaching children to read."

Eva

Eva is a 29-year-old math lab teacher that services all K-2 students at Farmer's County Elementary School. She has six years of experience and has always worked as the math lab teacher. She assists math students with clarifying, correcting and challenging their understanding of math. She serves as a reinforcement to lessons taught in the classroom and collaborates with all teachers in grades K-2 to plan accordingly. She has an educational specialist degree and is certified in Georgia for all content areas in elementary education. When asked if math was her favorite subject she responded, "I love elementary math, but I do not like upper-level math at all. So, I am not necessarily a 'math person' per say, but I do like teaching it at the elementary level."

Lori

Lori is a 30-year-old middle grades ELA teacher. She has eight years of experience, and all of those have been in Farmer's County Middle School. She has a master's degree and is certified in Georgia for all content areas in elementary education and middle grades ELA and social science. When asked if she was happy in her current position, she responded, "While I am certified to teach both elementary and middle grades, I do not see myself ever moving to the elementary level. People often joke about how difficult it must be working with students who are hormonal and often quirky at this age, but I love my current position and honestly cannot imagine changing."

Jennifer

Jennifer is a 52-year-old fifth grade ELA and social science teacher at Farmer's County Elementary school. She has 30 years of experience, with 15 of those in a different, much larger

county, where she taught kindergarten for one year and first grade for 14 years. When she relocated to Farmer's County, she began in third grade teaching ELA and social science. She remained in third grade for 10 years, and five years ago she began teaching fifth grade. She has an educational specialist degree and is certified in Georgia for all content areas in elementary education. She also holds a gifted endorsement. When asked if she was happy in her current position, she responded, "Look, when administration approached me to move from third grade to fifth grade I went kicking, screaming, and protesting the entire way! However, I have really grown to love this age and this grade level the most."

Cindy

Cindy is a 33-year-old ELA and social science teacher at Farmer's County Elementary School. She has six years of experience, all of which have been in Farmer's County. She has a master's degree and is certified in Georgia for all content areas in elementary education. She also holds a reading endorsement certificate. When asked if she was happy in her current position, she responded, "I am very pleased with my career choice thus far, and I am happy with my current position. I wasn't at first, because we were divided into two teams of three at the fifth-grade level, but now we are a five-man team, which has been much better in my opinion."

Sheila

Sheila is a 52-year-old kindergarten teacher at Farmer's County Elementary School. She has 28 years of experience; 21 of those in her current position. She started her career in a much larger county where she taught for eight years before moving to Farmer's County. There, she taught kindergarten, first, second, third, and fifth grades. She has an educational specialist degree and is certified in Georgia for all content areas in elementary education. She is also certified for

middle grades ELA and social science. When asked which grade level she prefers, she responded, "Kindergarten is such a special age to me, and I feel most comfortable with this age group than any other."

Results

According to Moustakas (1994), an essential component of understanding the essence of the participants' experience is organizing the triangulation of the data. The researcher used memoing to organize experiences of the participants that were related to low teacher retention and morale in a rural, low-income school district to prevent personal bias that could possibly influence the data collecting and reporting process. The interviews were recorded using an audio recorder with a built-in transcriber. The transcriptions were given to each participant for member checking. This process allowed for accuracy in the interpretation of each participant's experience with the phenomenon of teaching in a low-income, rural school district. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews using guided questions, and physical documentation to include reflective journal notes and administrative documents and records such as teacher handbook, professional performance reviews, census data, and results of standardized testing.

Within this analysis, several themes emerged from the dataset that aligned with the research questions. The themes that emerged from the dataset included: (a) administrative support (or lack of), (b) school environment and collaboration with colleagues, (c) accountability, heavy workload and stress, and (d) increasing violence and discipline issues among students. Table 3 displays themes and sub-themes.

Table 3

Themes, Sub-themes, and Total Responses

Themes	Sub-themes	Responses
Administrative Support	*Consistency*	**9**
	Valuing the Educator	**7**
	Lack of Mentorship and Communication	**10**
School Environment and Collaboration with Colleagues	*Working with At-Risk Students in a Poor, Rural area*	**10**
	Lack of Cohesion and Ineffective Collaboration	**7**
Accountability and Heavy Workload	*High-Stakes Testing and Heavier Workload*	**10**
	District-Wide Disorganization	**7**
Increasing Violence and Discipline Issues Among Students	*Lack of Administrative and*	**10**
	Parental Support for Discipline Issues	**8**

Administrative Support

The first theme to emerge from the interview process was the overall lack of leadership by administration. The administration is considered the principals at the K-8, the district-level employees such as the instructional coaches and special education directors, and the highest administration being defined as the Assistant Superintendent and the Superintendent. Sheila pointed out that she often feels that there is little respect from administration in terms of how

hard she and her colleagues work to ensure that their students achieve academic goals. Eva stated

that if a teacher does not have the support from the administration, or if there is a lack of support,

it makes her job far more difficult. Lori indicated that there are far too many concessions made to

accommodate complaining parents, and she stated that the administrators have changed dates of

events to accommodate parents who complained. Overall, however, the majority of the ten

educators agreed that while there are definite issues related to the overall current administration,

they feel that overall, they are fair towards their faculty and staff. One participant, Lori, stated,

> "Not only are the teachers leaving in droves, but there is also a large turnover rate among
>
> administrators. Our principals leave after about three years like clockwork. Some of
>
> them only last two years. So, the problem isn't just with teacher retention, it is also with
>
> administrative retention. This has contributed significantly to the low morale at our
>
> school."

Consistency

The researcher included the participants who spoke of inconsistencies between what they

are told by administration, and what actions transpire. Sarina stated that the inconsistencies have

posed a major problem in terms of morale at the K-8 school. She stated, "If you are an

administrator, and you tell your teachers that you are going to do something, whether big or

small, then do it!" Jennifer pointed out that there is little consistency among administration

concerning teachers and equity. She stated,

> "Some teachers are treated more favorable than others because the administration will do
>
> whatever necessary to keep teachers in the building. Even though our retention rate is
>
> very low, they will treat some teachers with more respect than others because they are in

fear that the teacher may decide to leave." All ten of the participants agreed that lack of

consistency in terms of student discipline has contributed to both low teacher morale and

low teacher retention."

Ginger added,

> "The discipline policy is a disaster, because honestly there isn't one. We have confiscated
>
> weapons from students, and shockingly, one instance involved a fourth grader with a
>
> gun. This is totally unacceptable, but the students know that there are simply no
>
> consequences in terms of bad behavior."

Kristy stated that the administrators give students way too many chances with zero

consequences, and many of our students will tell you that there is nothing that can be done to

them when they break the rules. She also stated that if there was a county-wide discipline plan in

place, with reasonable consequences, many of these students would be in attendance for

standardized testing instead of at home for out-of-school suspension. She added, "One teacher

may discipline one way, the next teacher may not discipline at all. This makes it very difficult to

avoid complete chaos or promote an environment conducive to learning."

Lack of Mentorship and Communication

All 10 of the participants agreed that there is a lack of communication within the building

between the administrators and between the administrators and the faculty and staff. Pam stated

that she feels that a lack of communication has contributed to the low retention rate. Pam added,

> "The administration has no clear consensus concerning discipline issues, therefore the
>
> communication with teachers regarding discipline issues or conflicts that occur in the
>
> classroom is virtually non-existent. The administrators tend to pacify the parents, and

often focus on the parent or student's version of events rather than the professionals in

the classroom. Cindy pointed out that the lack of communication is very frustrating to the

teachers, and the new teachers lack mentorship and support."

Cindy stated,

"These new teachers who enter the district think as all new teachers do, that they are

prepared for any situation. They have not been prepared to work with at-risk students in a

poverty-stricken, rural area. After reality hits, and they realize that the communication is

ineffective and help isn't coming, they are left feeling isolated and abandoned. Therefore,

many new teachers immediately seek employment elsewhere."

There is a consensus among all of the participants that the communication issue also leads to a

lack of equity among teachers. Sheila stated,

"Often teachers aren't notified of a pending due date for documentation or testing until

the due date is upon us. Those teachers who seem to be the favorites are given dates

ahead of time and allowed free reign, while others are constantly nitpicked while doing

their jobs. This causes constant conflict among faculty and staff members."

Sarina added that when the administrators leave to accept another position elsewhere, it makes

the teachers wonder if they should leave as well. When Ginger was asked what she believed

were some of the main reasons that the district was facing low retention issues and low morale

throughout the district, she stated, "There should be a focus on building relationships, mentoring,

communication, and discipline policies among the staff. However, this simply isn't the case."

Finally, Kristy added, "There is a severe lack of communication across the board. Period."

Valuing the Educators

Seven of the participants felt that the administration, to include the district-level administrators, did not value their voice or their opinions as professional educators. Several references were made concerning county-wide decisions that were made, to include the school calendar or curriculum choices, but teachers were not consulted or considered to provide input. This lack of cohesion led teachers to feel that their opinions were not held in high regard, even though the decisions would directly affect each one of them. Pam stated,

"We as teachers are always the last to know about decisions or choices that directly affect us in many ways." Most of the participants also feel that the district rarely recognizes any achievement by the teachers whether it is adding a degree or certificate, raising standardized test scores, or helping a non-reader learn to read."

Ginger stated, "Considering our very low retention rate, the district should recognize those of us who have stayed for many years. We have no voice, no consistency and no recognition." When asked if recognition played a part in the retention rate, Ginger added,

"Yes, I believe that it does, and another reason that teachers do not stay it because there is little room for professional advancement within this district. Often those who are the most qualified for an administrative position are over-looked in lieu of someone who is akin to an administrator. Nepotism is an issue here. I have no problem with someone just as qualified as I am getting the promotion over me. However, for someone less qualified to get it simply because they are kin to a board member or administrator is not okay."

Cindy stated that teachers who feel they are valued may be more likely to take the pay cut and work in a different district that can offer a higher supplement, effective discipline policy, higher morale, and recognition. Kristy added,

"Bottom line we want respect, and we deserve respect. We want our voices heard and we

deserve to have our voices heard. After all, we are the ones working diligently to improve

student achievement while dealing with severe discipline issues, lack of cohesion, and

low morale. Therefore, we should at least be recognized as professionals who are giving

our all because of our genuine love for our students and this occupation."

School Environment and Collaboration with Colleagues

School climate includes relationships, teaching and learning, and the environment, and

these dimensions affect how students, teachers, and administrators feel about being in the school.

A healthy school climate provides the foundation for a high-quality learning environment,

increases student achievement, and is a main component in student learning. However, if the

climate is negative and morale is low, it provides for an unhealthy environment for faculty, staff,

and students alike, often causing depression and emotional changes for all. Jennifer stated, "Our

school climate used to be much better than it is now. Teachers here have become loners per say

in that they no longer collaborate with colleagues but plan alone instead." When asked if the

present school climate has negatively affected cohesion and collaboration with colleagues and

administrators, each participant stated that it did. Michelle pointed out that the low morale has

caused division not just at the grade level, but within the entire K-8 school, and there is minimal

planning with colleagues now as a direct result of the school climate.

Working in a Low-Income Rural Area

The challenges associated with teaching in a poor, rural area can be very stressful for

teachers as many of the students live in less than favorable conditions, lack basic necessities at

home, and suffer academically, emotionally, and socially. Lori pointed out that when teaching in

a poor rural area, the teacher often must meet the physical and emotional needs of the students before focusing on academic needs. Lori stated,

> "These kids come to school hungry, and often the breakfast provided isn't enough, so we normally keep snacks in our rooms, along with extra clothes and other items that they need. Many live in homes with violence or domestic abuse, so we also must provide counseling per say before we can even begin to focus on academic needs."

Cindy stated that one of her biggest challenges each day is to leave work at work, and not spend all of her personal time worrying about the welfare and safety of her students. She stated, "It is so hard to separate my personal life from my professional life because we become so involved with these kids that is so hard not to go home and worry about their safety or whether they are going to eat tonight." When asked if the participants felt that working in a low-income rural area affected the retention and morale of the faculty and staff, every participant answered that it did, and in a negative manner.

Lack of Cohesion and Collaboration Among Colleagues and Administrators

Jennifer stated, "While collaboration within each grade level has improved a little, it is still far from where it should be in terms of improving the overall school climate." Every participant agreed that the morale had suffered and even the collaboration among team members was declining. Eva stated, "My first year here, our team at the grade level was very strong. Over the last five years, we have had four teachers leave the team, and four new ones join it. The collaboration now is virtually non-existent." The majority of the participants stated that the policies that are in place, such as the current retention policy, are not being enforced due to the lack of collaboration both with administrators and among colleagues. Pam added, "There are

very few staff meetings for us to voice our concerns or ideas, because there is simply no cohesion as a school and very little collaboration." Another participant, Kristy, defined it as a lack of unity or cohesion. Several of the participants stated that cohesion or unity is essential to a positive school climate or morale. Eva stated,

> "If the students see that the teachers won't plan together, or collaborate at all, they know that it is due to a lack of cohesion among the adults and administration. I have actually had students who asked me why the adults in the building rarely speak. It's very sad when the students recognize the deeper issues because ultimately these issues affect them as well."

Accountability and Heavy Workload

Michelle offered insight into the added stress that accompanies working in a poverty-level, rural area. She stated,

> "We have many deadlines to meet for the administration in terms of state-mandated testing, lesson plans, portfolios, and more. In addition to this, we must meet the physical, emotional, and academic needs of our students who rely on us to do so because many of their needs are simply not met at home. Many of the new teachers left because they simply could not hold up under the heavy, heavy weight of our workload and the stress that comes with it."

Accountability for high stakes testing, according to the participants, also adds additional stress.

High-Stakes Standardized Testing and Heavier Workload

When asked if accountability, as it continues to gain prominence and importance in education, has played a role in the current morale and retention within their school, all 10 participants answered yes. Pam stated,

"Our plates are already so full, but when you add standardized testing into the mix, it simply adds another layer of stress. Accountability is a double-edged sword. On one hand, if scores are increased, obviously the administrators are thrilled and the district as a whole looks better in terms of the data. On the other hand, the amount of stress added to teachers to improve these scores, especially in a poverty-level, rural school, is at times almost too much to bear. I have seen new teachers enter this building excited about their students and their choice of occupation. Sadly, I have seen some of the same ones walk right back through that door because of the workload and amount of stress caused from many of these issues we have spoken about. It has become so consistent that those of us who have been here for a while don't even blink."

Kristy pointed out that the same administrators who have issues with communication are the ones who focus immensely on standardized test scores and the workload that comes with the accountability factor.

District-Wide Disorganization

The majority of participants feel that the district as a whole is disorganized and at times chaotic. Sarina pointed out that the administrators are almost as transient as the teachers, causing instability and chaos. She stated,

"Our chain of command changes so often, we find ourselves making decisions on our own, or sometimes at a grade level, instead of wasting the time deciding which

administrator to approach. Our curriculum has changed multiple times, and there is no

consistency at all across grade levels in terms of a county-wide curriculum or discipline

policy."

Ginger added,

"At some grade levels, each teacher uses a different curriculum. While all lesson plans

are expected to be standards-based, teachers have the freedom to use one curriculum, or

choose parts of several different curriculums to use."

Sheila stated,

"One first grade class may be phonetically sound and ready to move forward in terms of

reading. Another class from the same grade level may have used many different

curriculums, and the students are simply confused. The curriculum director is not hands-

on, and the administrators had rather use several different outdated curriculums, than

vote on one curriculum to implement district wide."

Increasing Violence and Discipline Issues Among Students

There has been a steady increase in acts of violence and behavior issues in the public-

school systems across the country. When asked if discipline related issues have played a part in

the decline of the morale and retention within their district, all 10 participants answered yes.

Ginger pointed out that she uses a lot of positive reinforcement in her classroom, as the district

doesn't have a defined discipline policy in place.

Jennifer added,

"We waste a lot of instructional time because we are constantly having to focus on

discipline issues, and they aren't occurring just at the upper grade level, they are

occurring at every grade level. I personally feel that it is because our students know there

are few consequences for breaking rules, and they also know that each teacher basically

has her own way of handling discipline."

Lack of Administrative and Parental Support for Discipline Issues

Eva stated that the administration will often side with parents in terms of discipline

related consequences simply because they "don't want to deal with the drama associated with

some of these parents who act almost worse than their children." Kristy added,

"When I call the same parent repeatedly concerning their child's behavior, they simply

won't answer, and they won't respond. We have little parental involvement here as it is,

therefore, if they know that someone is calling concerning a discipline issue they will not

respond. The absence of a school or county wide discipline plan has certainly been

detrimental, and it has also been a contributing factor in several teachers choosing to

leave. If a teacher is new, or has no classroom management techniques in place, some of

these students will literally take full advantage of that just to see how far they can push

the issue."

Jennifer pointed out that even some of the most violent acts, such as bringing a weapon to

school or fighting, have resulted in 3 days of out-of-school suspension. Therefore, the students

and parents alike know that the administrators will often enforce a minimal punishment.

Lack of Consistency with Discipline Policy Among Colleagues

All 10 participants stated that there is no consistency among colleagues, some at the same

grade level, in terms of discipline policy such as rewards and consequences. Sarina pointed out

that some teachers are stricter than others, therefore, what one student may be punished for in one classroom, he or she may not be punished for in another. Eva added,

> "We should have consistency with our reward system and discipline policy. If a student misbehaves in a class before entering my room, I am certainly not going to reward bad behavior whether it occurs in my classroom or a colleague's room. I would expect the same courtesy, but that doesn't always happen."

Jennifer added,

> "Some teachers have no discipline policy at all, and students begin expecting that they can act how they want to in all classrooms. Those of us who abide by a strict set of rules in our classrooms must then regain control before attempting to teach. I am very creative, and my students have a lot of fun learning in my classroom, but at the same time, I am also very strict about my discipline policy so that they can actually learn instead of wasting that time controlling discipline issues. I think an effective teacher must find a balance."

The participants agreed that with a consistent, effective discipline plan in place, the students could not challenge the consequences, and neither could the parents. If the parents know that an administrator will side with them over a teacher, whether it is about a discipline issue or an academic issue, they will certainly challenge any decision made solely by the teacher. The participants stated that they have all felt belittled and undermined by an administrator when dealing with a parent. Many felt that their credibility was damaged because of the lack of support.

Document Review

The final portion of the data analysis was the document review. The researcher obtained information from online sources that provided statistics of the school from both a demographic and academic standpoint. As of 2022, Farmer's County K-8 had 793 students with a ratio of 16:7 students per teacher (SchoolDigger.com, 2022). The national average is 16:1, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), and these statistics demonstrate that teachers at Farmer's County K-8 are responsible for fewer students than the rest of the country. All students receive free or reduced lunch.

Additionally, Farmer's County K-8 has a county-wide school improvement plan for which it follows. The teacher retention plan consists of two areas: (1) professional learning, and (2) teacher retention implementation. The school's teacher retention plan reports that the school offers professional development opportunities for teachers that include: (a) model classrooms, (b) tiered professional learning, (c) coaching and mentor peer coaching, (d) professional learning communities, (e) individual learning plans that are data-driven, (e) peer observations. The goal is for administrators and teachers to work collaboratively to determine the best professional development plan and opportunities that will increase teacher effectiveness. The plan specifically states that new teachers will be provided with appropriate support such as mentors with no less than five years of teaching experience. The plan also calls for Teacher Support Specialists to be assigned to each new teacher for the first two years of employment. They are to collaborate at least once a month. The teacher handbook outlines this plan and specifies that these meetings are mandatory and will continue until the new teachers have met all professional development opportunities as specified by the superintendent of schools.

Research Question Responses

Four research questions were developed to guide the purpose of this study in describing teachers' lived experiences in a rural, poverty-stricken school, and how these experiences correleate to teacher retention and teacher morale. The themes that surfaced in the data analysis section informed the response to each of the research questions that will be discussed in this section. The themes that emerged were (a) administrative support, (b) school environment and collaboration with colleagues, (c) accountability and heavy workload, and (d) increasing violence and discipline issues among students.

Central Research Question

What lived experiences, from teachers in rural, low socio-economic schools, lead to teacher retention and teacher morale? The participants described their lived experiences and discussed their perceptions of how working in a rural, poverty-stricken school affects teacher retention and morale. The four primary themes that answered this question were (a) administrative support, (b) school environment and collaboration with colleagues, (c) accountability and heavy workload, and (d) increasing violence and discipline issues among students. The themes emerged from teachers' experiences in a poverty-level school, which aligned with their classroom experiences and their perceptions of those experiences with teacher morale and retention.

Jennifer stated,

"There are so many stressors today on educators. However, there are additional stressors when working in a poverty-level school in a rural area. Without a strong, supportive administration, the morale can quickly decline, and our school has become a revolving

door for both new teachers and new administrators. This makes it very difficult for us to remain effective in educating our students."

Throughout the identification of the three sub-research questions, the participants were able to discuss the importance of administrative support, the environment and climate of the school, the importance of collaboration and cohesion with colleagues, support from parents and other stakeholders, accountability, and discipline issues.

The participants reported that in their case, effective communication is not evident, therefore there is little collaboration among colleagues. Although the participants perceived that working as a teacher tends to promote high workloads, teaching in a poverty-level, rural areas promote additional stress.

The participants also reported that even though a teacher retention policy is in place for this district, the overall retention rate is very low among both teachers and building-level administrators.

Sub-Question One

What factors lead to teachers remaining in the same school, or switching schools within the district? The participants reported that ineffective communication and collaboration, little support from parents and administrators in terms of discipline issues, working in a poverty-level, rural area, accountability for high-stakes testing, and overall school climate and low morale contributed to their low retention rate. Jennifer stated,

"I feel that communication is truly the key. If we had open, effective communication with Administrators and colleagues, and collaborated regularly in terms of academic goals and plans, our retention rate would not be where it is. However, when principals are leaving

as much as the teachers are, it is very difficult to look ahead to future goals or improved

climate. There is a lot of disorganization both among teachers and administrators alike,

which leaves us basically making decisions on our own or with our colleagues at the

grade level concerning discipline, academics, and curriculum. There is simply no

consistency."

Sarina added, "There is simply no consistency or guidance, and I am so grateful for my

grade level team, because we take the bull by the horns per say, and one day at a time."

Sub-Question Two

How do teachers located in poverty-stricken, rural areas describe their experiences that

could be useful for developing approaches to improve teacher retention and morale? The

participants indicated that they are hopeful that this research will provide the administrators with

the information needed to make drastic changes in terms of communication and support in order

to retain teachers and boost morale. Kristy stated,

"Honestly, I don't think the superintendent or board members understand the implications

of our low retention rate or low morale. We have the strong, effective teachers to assist

these students in achieving their academic goals. We simply need those in charge to put

plans in place to regain organization, control discipline issues, and collaborate regularly."

The participants indicated that it takes strong teachers to work in poverty-level, rural

areas, and the administration should be listening to those teachers who have withstood the

stressful conditions and chose to stay. Pam added,

"If the administration would simply listen to our ideas or input, we could help guide the

new administrators in developing an overall plan to improve in all areas. Those of us who have

chosen to stay are really good at what we do, and while we don't hold the titles that

administrators do, our input could be valuable and very insightful."

Sub-Question Three

How could the information gathered from both current and former teachers be used to

implement successful strategies for recruitment and retention of teachers in these areas? The

participants feel that the input from those teachers who have chosen to stay, in addition to those

who chose to leave, could be used to develop a county-wide plan to improve the overall retention

problem and morale. Michelle stated,

> "The input from both the current and past teachers would be the most valuable tool an
>
> administrator could possess. Policies and procedures could be formed from this
>
> information to improve in all areas. However, when the administrators are as transient as
>
> the teachers, it makes it very difficult because we are constantly going back to square
>
> one. The superintendent should appoint a team specifically for the retention and morale
>
> issues. If he has to bring a group in that specializes in this area, then so be it. Obviously,
>
> the retention plan that is in place is not working. The new teachers aren't staying long
>
> enough to attend any professional development sessions, and the Teacher Support
>
> Specialist is non-existent. I do remain hopeful, however, that things will get better."

Overall, the participants verbalized that they stay because of their students and they are

hopeful that the retention and morale will improve. Lori stated, "I love my students, and despite

the often-stressful conditions, I am very optimistic that drastic changes will occur soon. I am

grateful that I have several colleagues that I am close to, and we serve as each other's support

system."

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand the factors related to low morale and retention in a poverty-level, rural area. In this chapter, I provided the findings based upon the analysis that I completed on the data collected. This chapter began by highlighting the demographic backgrounds of the participants, followed by the results of the study. I discussed the themes that emerged from the dataset and answered the research questions. Ten participants participated in the semi-structured interviews. In terms of factors that influence retention and morale in a rural, poverty-stricken school, four themes emerged as well as 11 sub-themes. The themes that emerged were (a) administrative support, (b) school environment and collaboration with colleagues, (c) accountability and heavy workload, and (d) increasing violence and discipline issues among students.

Concerning the document review, I found that Farmer's County K-8 has a smaller teacher-student ratio than the rest of the country. Additionally, while the school does have an identified teacher retention plan that promotes required professional learning experiences as well as mandated teacher support and required sessions with a Teacher Support Specialist, as outlined in the teacher handbook, the majority of the participants stated that this plan is not being implemented. Their reasoning was based on the fact that in addition to a low retention rate, their administrative retention rate is low as well. Thus, there is no consistency with administrators following through with the enforcement of the retention plan.

The outlined themes appear in alignment with the semi-structured interviews, which were uncovered during data analysis. Chapter 5 will conclude the study by providing a discussion on

the results, the implications within the field of education, the limitations that were experienced

within the study, and any recommendations for future studies on this topic.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand the factors that are related to low morale and retention as described by teachers who work in a rural, poverty-stricken school in Middle Georgia. Within this chapter, I will provide a conclusion to the study by presenting a summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings, and the implications considering the relevant literature and theory. I will conclude the chapter by discussing both the methodological and practical implications, the limitations and delimitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

This study was guided by a central research question and three sub-research questions. The central research question asked what lived experiences from teachers in a rural, low socio-economic school leads to teacher retention and low morale. The findings revealed that administrative support, school environment, collaboration with colleagues, accountability, heavy workload, and increasing violence and discipline issues as all influences of teacher retention and morale.

The first sub-research question asked what factors lead to teachers remaining in the same school, or switching schools within the district? Findings showed that the participants perceived lack of administrative and parental support for discipline issues, lack of consistency with discipline, lack of mentorship, working with at-risk students in a poor, rural area, heavier workload, and accountability for high stakes testing as the most crucial factors that contribute to teachers leaving.

The second sub-research question relating to teachers' experiences in poverty-stricken, rural areas could be useful for developing approaches to improve teacher retention and morale. The participants were hopeful that their experiences in a poverty-stricken, rural school could be used in assisting administrators, after viewing the research, in developing new policies and procedures that deal with lack of communication, discipline, workload, support, accountability, collaboration, and lack of administrative support in order to increase the retention and morale.

The third sub-research question focused on using the information gathered from both current and former teachers to implement successful strategies for recruitment and retention of teachers in these areas. The participants reported that consistency, communication and collaboration are vital in taking the information from the research and using it to retain teachers and improve morale. The majority of the participants were concerned that the transiency of administrators at the building level as well as the lack of collaboration, has prevented consistency in enforcing any policies related to retention.

The participants expressed that having consistent policies and procedures to address all issues and concerns is lacking. Therefore, the retention rate has decreased, as did the morale. Lastly, the participants claimed that lack of overall support has created isolation, causing teachers to have to make decisions concerning academics, discipline, parental relations, and other factors either alone or with team members at the grade level causing inconsistency and chaos.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study related to factors that affect teacher retention and morale were consistent with those found in the literature review. Research by Ingersoll (2001) showed that

high job satisfaction resulted in higher teacher retention. Teachers' experiences with administrators who provided minimal support in terms of policies and procedures, and whose retention rate was also low, saw retention rates decline and morale suffer. Teachers experienced decreased self-efficacy when consistency, communication and collaboration were not present. All research participants experienced specific issues that directed their perceptions of administration leadership and support. These issues included discipline, workload, accountability, collaboration and communication, mentoring, and support. When analyzed together, administration support, collaboration, cohesion, organization, teacher morale, and teacher retention promote basic needs satisfaction and intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation for teachers. This encourages higher retention and job satisfaction, as well as climate and morale.

Administrative Support

Maslow (1954) believed that job satisfaction depends on the ability of the leaders in terms of meeting the needs of employees. He felt that satisfaction will never be attained if foundational factors are not present. The participants for this study all agreed that administrative support is one of the factors that contribute to teacher morale and retention. As teachers spoke about their administrative support, they indicated a need for an atmosphere where clear expectations and boundaries are established and the role of the teachers is respected and valued. Perie and Baker (1997) reported that when teachers perceive a lack of administrative support for their work, they lack motivation to do their best in the classroom; and when teachers work in unsatisfactory working conditions, they are more likely to change schools or to leave the profession altogether.

The participants expressed frustration concerning the low retention rate of the last several administrators, and its negative effect on the climate as they implied that the lack of consistency and leadership has caused a significant decline in the retention rate of teachers. The participants expressed the importance of a strong administration in terms of how it affects not just some aspects of the work environment, but all. The need for a strong administrator in a poverty-level, rural area is pertinent to the overflow of collaboration and cohesion between individual teachers and grade-level teams. The lack of consistency was to blame, according to the participants, on how discipline issues are handled within the school. They expressed the importance of the administrator supporting the teacher in terms of parental involvement and communication. The participants felt an overwhelming sense of hopelessness when desiring a strong administrator to effectively communicate policies and procedures, and in following through with the enforcement of these policies and procedures. Attrition remains highest in schools with lack of administrative support and lack of teacher autonomy (Ingersoll, 2007). All participants felt strongly that the absence of a strong leader has contributed immensely to the low retention rate and low teacher morale. The participants indicated a strong desire for administrators to read the research findings and use the findings to create a warm environment conducive to learning where teachers choose to remain and work collaboratively and effectively. The findings in this study were consistent with other studies on teacher morale and retention, indicating that administrative support may encourage teacher longevity in a school (Liu & Meyer, 2005).

Communication

Blocker and Richardson (1963) reported lack of administrative leadership and poor faculty communications causes lower teacher morale.

Participants in this study conveyed that a lack of communication both with administration, and with colleagues, left them with a feeling of the inability to perform their duties effectively. Their desire for consistency within the building caused tension among their peers, and chaos. The participants desire a strong administrator to implement a discipline policy and mandate that it be implemented throughout the entire district. They felt that because some of the discipline issues have resulted in acts of violence against a faculty or staff member, there should be clear and concise communication in reflecting the consequences when rules are not followed, and clear and concise communication with parents in supporting the teachers when incidents occur. Schools with strong organizational cultures typically employ positive and charismatic principals who provide clear objectives, but more importantly are effective communicators (Stearns, 2014).

Lack of communication was blamed for most of the inconsistencies within the building. The participants also stated that there is little to no communication with stakeholders, and they often feel trapped in the current chain of command, as they are reprimanded if they want to take a complaint higher than the building administrator. The participants also desire a program that will help with parental involvement, as overall communication with parents is virtually non-existent. Herzberg (1964) believed there were notable differences in the impact of rewards on an employee's attitude toward their job. These rewards included both intrinsic, such as self-pride and personal growth, and extrinsic such as recognition and praise. Due to the lack of communication, most of the participants felt unrecognized and unappreciated by their administrators.

Climate

Maslow's (1970) motivational theory is based on the idea that the culture within an organization should reflect the needs of the employees, which produces an improved performance by the employees. Stearns (2014) stated that the organizational culture of schools has been found to be a stronger and more consistent predictor of teacher job satisfaction than many measures of independent teacher characteristics. The participants in this study felt that the overall school climate and morale had declined because of the lack of strong administration, collaboration, cohesion, and organization.

When a wholesome school climate exists and teacher morale is high, "teachers feel good about each other, at the same time, feel a sense of accomplishment from their jobs" (Blackburn, 2015). All the participants described the current climate as one of depression among colleagues, isolation, and helplessness. They described the climate as one that also negatively impacts the students in addition to the faculty and staff. The students observe the interactions between colleagues and administrators, and the negativity has overflowed to the students. McConnell (2017) lists site working conditions and overall school climate as the primary contributing factor to low teacher retention.

There was an overwhelming consensus among the participants that the school climate was a predictor of academic achievement and that it played a large role in the decline of teacher retention. They indicated a need for not just an improvement in the climate itself, but the implementation of motivators such as retreats, teacher recognition, collaboration exercises and professional development for stronger, more effective communication. One of the most essential models to improve a school happens by improving teacher motivation, which may be changed by feelings about the school, or the culture provided by the school (Rowland, 2008).

Many of the participants stated that their grade-level team members played a huge role in their decision to stay as long as they have, in addition to their overwhelming love for their students and desire to help them succeed.

Implications for Policy

The implications for policy should include a concise and clear plan to implement the retention policy as defined in the teacher handbook, and administrators and district leaders should enforce such policy as it describes the inclusion of a Teacher Support Specialist for all new teachers. There should also be a clear discipline policy that rewards students who follow the rules, but also one that supports the teachers when students break the rules and consequences should be enforced. All stakeholders should be responsible for ensuring effective communication takes place both at the school level and the district level so that all policies in place are enforced accurately and fairly. Parents should be given the district policies and procedures and encouraged to discuss them with their children in an effort to promote cohesion and collaboration and how to build a stronger sense of community within the district.

Implications for Practice

There are multiple implications for practice for those working in public schools, especially those in poverty-level, rural areas. First, administrators responsible for supporting teachers should consider the importance of a teacher's sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness and how those factors directly correlate to climate and influence morale. The district-level administrators should consider not only the retention of the teachers, but the retention of the building-level administrators, as their exit has a direct impact on stability and organizational structure of the school. School level administrators should consider morale-building activities

that include not only teachers, but all faculty and staff or other stakeholders who want to be involved in the operations of the school. The study may be beneficial to stakeholders in encouraging support of teachers and administrators in building a stronger school community. as those factors directly impact morale. Leadership and teachers need to be cognizant of the many factors that influence of the many factors that influence the overall climate of a school and the morale, whether positive or negative, and use the study to make changes to eliminate any morale collapse.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The results of this study were in alignment with the theories that guided the study, which were Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Herzberg's (1959) Motivation Theory. Teachers want love and appreciation, as well as respect and praise. By recognizing the hierarchy of needs, administrators can better understand the needs of their faculty and staff, allowing for a warm environment that facilitates not only academic achievement, but meets the social and emotional needs of all. In terms of Herzberg's theory, all faculty and staff need motivational factors to promote cohesion, collaboration, and a strong work ethic. Intrinsic rewards such as feeling valued or supported are important in validating a person's reason for doing what they do. Professional development, administrative support, and consistency are also vital to improving the overall climate or morale, as well as preventing low teacher retention. District and school leaders should examine current policies and modify or create new ones to promote teacher retention.

This research has led to empirical evidence that teachers perceive administrative support and communication as vital to the success of the school. Other factors that are pertinent are collaboration and cohesion, as well as consistency and organization. Administrators should

consider one-on-one discussions with teachers to gain a better understanding of the factors that relate to retention and morale. By doing so, they can develop professional development opportunities, team-building activities, and other motivational incentives that will promote a better climate and a higher retention rate. Teachers would appreciate the effort to communicate more effectively and feel as if their voices were heard. New teachers should be provided with effective mentors, to eliminate the feeling of isolation and abandonment.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations to this study include a limited number of respondents due to the small, rural setting. This study was administered to teachers with five years of experience, three of which werein a poverty-stricken, rural area. Therefore, the number of respondents was small, as the turnover rate in this school is very high. Updating demographic information of participants by eliminating the requirement of three years of experience in a poverty-level, rural area may increase participation. Offering an incentive to participants who already feel unappreciated may also increase participation. Other limitations may include time constraints, personal bias of both the research participants and researcher, or personal reflections of the participants during the interview process.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study highlights the need for additional research into teacher morale and its direct correlation to teacher retention. While there is ample research on low teacher retention, there is very little research on low teacher morale, or the correlation between low teacher morale and low teacher retention. Further research to investigate those factors associated with why they leave these areas can also aid in raising teacher morale; thus, assisting in creating a warm environment

conducive to learning. Furthermore, this study is intended to increase the literature as it relates to retaining teachers and raising morale in rural, low socio-economic schools. It is also intended to aid administrators in developing a successful district-wide plan to not only retain teachers who are already working in the district, but to recruit new teachers. It was the goal of the researcher to allow the participants' voices to be heard, and to provide administrators with enough data so that they have a clear understanding of the factors that the participants listed as to why the retention rate continues to decrease, and why the overall morale and climate of the school is so important as it pertains to that retention rate. It should be noted that there is also a need to educate potential new teachers on the stressors of teaching in a high-poverty, rural area.

Conclusion

Farmer's County K-8 has a decreasing retention rate, and the morale is plummeting due to many factors as defined by the participants of this study. The participants were willing to contribute to this study in hopes of aiding the administration in a complete district-wide overhaul designed to improve the environment and climate, retain the teachers, and provide a warn, nurturing, consistent environment so that the students can achieve academic, emotional, and social success. While the participants were honest in their attempts to shed some light on the problems within this district, they all displayed a strong work ethic, and a devotion to this occupation because of the overwhelming love they have for their students and their desire to aid in their success. The literature review section outlines the existing literature as it pertains to teacher retention and morale. Many of the factors discussed in this section pertain to this study, as they are in line with the existing factors that cause teachers to leave a school or district. This

was a qualitative phenomenological study that included the review of documents and semi-structured interviews with ten participants. As the interviews progressed, major themes emerged as determining factors of retention and morale. The factors as described by the participants included lack of administrative support, the absence of a discipline policy to address the increasing discipline issues, a lack of collaboration and cohesion among both colleagues and administrators, an overwhelming workload, accountability for high stakes testing, lack of parental support or communication, and an overall feeling of isolation and abandonment. The district has an existing retention policy in place that is currently not being enforced due to the transiency of several building-level administrators. All of the participants relayed a desperation for consistency, unity, cohesion and organizational structure. The findings supported prior research in the area of teacher retention in that it revealed that lack of administrative support and structure was the number one reason among the participants for the low retention rate and low morale within this school. The participants lacked encouragement and recognition, and desired effective communication with not just building administrators, but with colleagues, parents and other stakeholders. This study adds to the available research on teacher retention, and aids in providing additional research in the area of teacher retention as it relates to morale. The study shows that there is a direct correlation between teacher morale and retention.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 16, 2022

Susan Campbell
Susan Stanley

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-535 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL QUALITATIVE STUDY OF LOW TEACHER RETENTION AND MORALE IN A RURAL POVERTY-STRICKEN SCHOOL

Dear Susan Campbell, Susan Stanley,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) 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 the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). 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:
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).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

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

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL QUALITATIVE STUDY OF LOW TEACHER RETENTION AND MORALE IN A RURAL POVERTY-STRICKEN SCHOOL

Principal Investigator: Susan Michele Campbell, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must have five years of experience as a classroom teacher with three of those in a rural, low-income area, and hold a master's degree or above. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study will be to understand the factors that are related to low morale and retention as described by teachers who work in a rural, poverty-stricken school in Middle Georgia.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
1. Participate in an in-person, audio-recorded interview that will take no more than 30 minutes.
2. Review your transcripts of the interview questions for any possible errors, or to provide additional information if warranted. This will take approximately 15-20 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Benefits to society include contributing to research on why teachers choose to stay in rural, poverty-stricken schools, and why some choose to leave. This research can aid administrators and other stakeholders in finding a solution to the ever-growing problems of low teacher retention and low teacher morale.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Disclaimer: I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports 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.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-protected computer. After five years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for five years until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts, and then deleted.

What Compensation Will I Receive?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from 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.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Susan Michele Campbell. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ████████████████████████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Susan Stanley at ████████████████.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

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 IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix C

Individual Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your teaching experiences at this school. (CRQ)

2. What are the positive aspects of working at your school? (SQ1)

3. What are the negative aspects of working at your school? (SQ1)

4. Describe the morale of teachers at your school. (SQ1)

5. Concerning teacher morale, what are the key factors that contribute to it? (CRQ)

6. What factors could increase teacher retention and morale at your school? (SQ3)

7. What is the overall relationship between administrators and teachers? (SQ2)

8. Explain how you feel that teacher morale is directly correlated with teacher retention at your school? (SQ2)

9. What are some of your experiences that you believe have caused teachers to leave your school or the profession altogether? (CRQ)

10. Based on your experience, what else would you like to add to this study on teacher retention and morale? (SQ3)

Appendix D

Recruitment Letter

Dear Potential Participant:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Special Education. The purpose of my research is to determine answers to the following questions:

- What lived experiences, from teachers in rural, low socio-economic schools, leads to teacher retention and teacher morale?
- What factors lead to teachers remaining in the same school, or switching schools within the district?
- How do teachers located in poverty-stricken, rural areas describe their experiences that could be useful for developing approaches to improve teacher retention and morale?
- How could the information gathered from both current and former teachers be used to implement successful strategies for recruitment and retention of teachers in these areas?

3. Participants must hold a minimum of a master's degree and have five years of teaching experience; with three of those in a rural, poverty-level area. Participants, if willing, will be asked to answer open-ended interview questions related to his/her experience. The interview will be conducted in a face-to-face, semi-structured setting.
4. Participants will then be asked to participate in member checking, which is a process where the participant reviews his/her transcripts of the interview questions for any possible errors, or to provide additional information if warranted. This will take approximately 15-20 minutes. Interviews will take approximately 30 minutes total.

To participate, please contact me by replying to this email and attach the following to your reply:

1. Answer the survey questions that are attached by placing a check in the appropriate box next to each question.
2. Type your name on the consent form and email it back to me.

Upon receipt of the screening questions and consent forms, I will then schedule interviews with each eligible participant.

Sincerely,

Susan Michele Campbell
Doctoral Candidate, School of Education
Liberty University

Appendix E

Survey Questions

Survey Questions:

Susan Michele Campbell

1. Do you have at least 5 years of teaching experience? Yes ☐ No ☐

2. Have you worked in a rural, low socio-economic area for at least three of those years?

    Yes ☐   No ☐

3. Do you hold a master's degree or above? Yes ☐ No ☐

Appendix F

Documents Received Checklist

Collection Sheet for Archival Data

Susan Michele Campbell

Taylor County School District

23 Mulberry Street

Butler, GA 31006

Document Requested	Date Requested	Date Received	Signature of person who provided document(s)
Annual Staffing Reports (last 3 years)			
Professional Development Plans (last 3 years)			
Teacher's Handbook			
Staffing Surveys (last 3 years)			

Appendix G

Permission Request Email

November 12, 2022

████████████████

Superintendent of Schools
Taylor County Board of Education
23 Mulberry Street
Butler, GA 31006

███████████████

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Philosophies of Special Education. The title of my research project is A PHENOMENOLOGICAL QUALITATIVE STUDY OF LOW TEACHER RETENTION AND MORALE IN A RURAL POVERTY-STRICKEN SCHOOL and the purpose of my research is to better understand the factors that are related to low morale and retention as described by teachers who work in a rural, poverty-stricken school in Middle Georgia. In my experience with Taylor County, many teachers chose to stay for many years. Therefore, this is not to indicate that Taylor County schools have either low retention OR morale, but instead to gain insight into the factors within a school or a district that prompts teachers to choose to remain at the same school and/or district for many years, or if the case, why they may choose to leave a rural, low socio-economic school.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research in the Taylor County school district to include elementary and middle only. I would also like to utilize any documentation related to a random sample of teachers who have taught for at least five years, and who hold a master's degree or above at the elementary or middle school level. In addition, I am requesting access to utilize any staff surveys completed within the last three years, teacher handbook, and county-wide professional development plans that you may have developed within the last three years.

Participants will be asked to complete the attached survey and interviews will be scheduled for a day/time/location of your convenience. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please reply to this email and attach or copy and paste the permission letter that is attached to this email, signed.

Sincerely,

Susan Michele Campbell
Doctoral Student, School of Education
Liberty University
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