EXPLORING WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS AND RETENTION AMONG

GENERATION Z TEACHERS: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Kimberly Lawhorn

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe Generation Z (Gen Z) teachers' experiences with workplace relationships within K-12 schools in the United States and how they affect retention. The theory guiding this study was Donaldson and Dunfee's theory on integrative social contracts as it relates to relationships in the workplace and retention of teachers born between 1997 and 2012. Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological approach was used to examine 12 Gen Z teachers' shared experiences with workplace relationships. Data were collected through individual interviews, journal entries, and a focus group. Data analysis was conducted to answer the question: "What are Gen Z teachers' shared experiences with workplace relationships at K-12 schools in the United States?" Three themes resulted from the data analysis: (1) relating to the students, (2) interactions with older generations, and (3) workplace challenges. The data uncovered that Gen Z teachers value open shared interests, experiences, and emotional awareness with their students and understand the different teaching styles needed when interacting with older generations. Additionally, indications from the data concluded Gen Z teachers have a need to be taken seriously as the authority in their classrooms as professionals, instead of novices. Further, this study provides insight into how Gen Z teachers tend to recognize challenges originating from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and advocate for mutual respect between all workplace relationships, including the teacher-student relationship, while advocating for a healthy work-life balance.

Keywords: Gen Z, hypernorms, K-12 schools, social contracts, teacher retention, transcendental phenomenology, workplace relationships

Dedication

To my husband, who paved the way and sowed the seed for my education passions to grow. I owe so much of who I am and what I have achieved to you. Your unwavering support, attentive listening, and empowering presence have shaped me in ways I could never have imagined. Thank you, Jesse, for all you do, the kids, for me, and for our future. Your support can always be counted on, you make my world better, I love you until the end of time.

To my children, Cheyenne, Julian, Caleb, KayDee, and Tye, I hope my ambitions toward education and lifelong learning have rubbed off on you. You all make me proud and have given me bragging rights for many reasons. I cherish you beyond words. Thank you for allowing me to keep growing and becoming a better role model for you. I think you are all amazing humans and you will impact this world in big ways. I love you all more than you will ever know.

And finally, I thank God for giving me grace and wisdom throughout this journey and for all the blessings he continues to give me and my family.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

Air Force (AF)

Air Force Instruction (AFI)

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB)

Education & Training Section Chief (E&TS)

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

Integrative Social Contract Theory (ISC)

Quality of Life (QoL)

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Teaching is a profession of great influence both on quality of life and economic prosperity, yet teachers have become one of the most under-resourced populations, in terms of training, professional development, and supportive relationships (Barhate & Dirani, 2021). In the educational landscape of 2023, teachers, including the emerging Gen Z (born between 1997-2012), face significant challenges due to the lack of these resources and support (Barhate & Dirani, 2021). Obstacles from these deficiencies often culminate within the first four years, leaving new K-12 teachers at a crossroads, contemplating whether to pursue or abandon their teaching path early in their profession (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019). In 2022, the U.S. was struck with an all-time high in the shortage of teachers and a 50% decline in the enrollment into education program majors since 2007, confirming that the pipeline of new talent is shrinking (Natanson, 2022; Will, 2022b; Workforce Institute at UKG, 2022). Gen Z teachers are the first digital native educators. They were born into a world of constant access to the internet, smartphones, and social media, which has significantly influenced their relationship values (Barhate & Dirani, 2021). This chapter provides a background of the problem along with both purpose and problem statements, the significance of the study, and relevant definitions.

Background

This section provides a comprehensive historical, social, and theoretical context related to the topic of Gen Z teachers and their relationships in the workplace after their first four years of teaching. Throughout history, teachers have learned and adapted to new demands in K-12 schools and conform to new rules and regulations while providing instruction. These processes have an impact on instructors' interpersonal connections at work. Donaldson and Dunfee's

(1999) integrative social contracts (ISC) theory was utilized as a backdrop to explain the occurrences depicted. This section will focus on the historical, social, and theoretical contexts of Gen Z teacher interactions in the workplace and their experiences with professional relationships.

Historical Context

The historical context of studying Gen Z teachers' workplace relationships stems from the recognition of the changing demographics in the teaching profession (Gomez, 2022; Handrito et al., 2021; Jafri et al., 2021; Parker & Igielnik, 2020). The entrance of Gen Z to the teaching career has occurred against the scenery of significant changes and challenges in the education landscape (Congleton, 2020). Gen Z grew up in a world deeply influenced by technology and witnessed the impact of economic events such as the 2008 global financial crisis (Sturdy et al., 2020). This economic uncertainty, coupled with high student loan debt and increased job competition, has led some members of Gen Z to seek stable career paths like teaching (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). The economic context has played a role in shaping Gen Z's interest in entering the teaching profession as they navigate the realities of a rapidly changing job market (Kirkpatrick, 2021). Teaching offers job security and stability, which are attractive qualities in an uncertain economic climate (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). The desire for a fulfilling career that makes a positive impact on others has contributed to Gen Z's interest in teaching as well (Sturdy et al., 2020).

Experiences of Gen Z within the education system have influenced their perception of teaching as a viable career choice. Throughout their schooling, Gen Z has witnessed the implementation of standardized testing, a heightened focus on STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), and an emphasis on practical skills for the modern

workforce (Jafri et al., 2021; Kirkpatrick, 2021; Sturdy et al., 2020). These experiences give Gen Z a unique perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of the education system. As a result, some individuals from Gen Z are drawn to teaching so they can fulfill their need to make a difference and bring about positive change. Their exposure to education on technological innovations also has positioned them to explore new teaching methodologies and incorporate digital tools into the classroom (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Mahmoud et al., 2021).

Gen Z's social consciousness and activism has played a role in shaping their career interests (Mahmoud et al., 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2018). They are known for their active involvement in social justice movements on equity, LGBTQ plus rights, and gun control (Mahmoud et al., 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2018; Weyers et al., 2023). This strong sense of social responsibility motivates some members of Gen Z to pursue teaching to address social issues within the education system and influence students (Mahmoud et al., 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2018). They are driven by a desire to foster inclusivity, promote equity, and create a more culturally responsive and empowering learning environment (Gomez, 2022; Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Weyers et al., 2023). Gen Z teachers bring their passion for social justice into the classroom and play a role in shaping a more progressive and student-centered approach to education.

As previous generations of teachers approach retirement, there is a growing need to recruit and retain new teachers to meet the demands of the K-12 educational systems (Congleton, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 2021). The unique characteristics and expectations of Gen Z teachers, influenced by technological advancements and evolving societal values, has necessitated a closer examination of their workplace relationships and the factors influencing their decision to remain in the profession (Baker et al., 2021; Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Sturdy et al., 2020). Historically,

early career teachers have been more susceptible to leaving the profession due to various challenges they encountered during their first few years in the career (Haleem et al., 2020; Jafri et al., 2021).

Social Context

By the year 2023, Gen Z teachers, will be in their early twenties and will have entered their first years of the teaching workforce (Barber, 2020). They will bring their values and beliefs with them. They are known for their interest in social justice, community engagement, and making a positive impact on the world (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Douglas, 2000; Mahmoud et al., 2021). These values align well with the teaching profession, which is often seen to make a meaningful difference in the lives of young people (Gomez, 2022). Gen Z grew up in a highly connected and socially conscious world (Barber, 2020). Their thoughts, beliefs, and values have been influenced by social and cultural factors, which in turn has impacted their workplace relationships and retention intentions (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Douglas, 2000; Mahmoud et al., 2021). Understanding the social context in which Gen Z teachers navigate their early careers has provided valuable insights into how societal changes have shaped their experiences and decisions (Gomez, 2022).

There has been a shift in societal norms and expectations regarding work-life balance, diversity and inclusion, and the use of technology (Kochan, 2021; Paul Grayson, 2021). Gen Z teachers often prioritize a healthy work-life balance, seeking careers that align with their personal beliefs and values, allowing for flexibility and self-care (Mahmoud et al., 2021; Paul Grayson, 2021). They also value diversity and inclusivity both in the workplace and within their curriculum and are more likely to seek out supportive and inclusive work environments if dissatisfied (Gomez, 2022). Additionally, the extensive use of technology in their daily lives has

shaped their expectations for digital integration and innovative teaching practices (Barhate &
Dirani, 2021; Stillman & Stillman, 2017).

High attrition rates among new teachers not only disrupt educational continuity, but also
results in the loss of valuable talent and expertise (Steiner & Woo, 2021; Weyers et al., 2023).
Favorable community conditions for teachers include enhanced support and mentorship
programs, professional development opportunities, and overall job satisfaction (Gomez, 2022;
Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Weyers et al., 2023; Will, 2022a). Gen Z in general, are actively
engaged in social and environmental issues and often seek purpose-driven careers (Wang et al.,
2014). Social justice and equity are imbedded in their workplace experiences and contribute to
fostering a sense of belonging and purpose in their careers (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Seemiller &
Grace, 2018). Gen Z teachers are notably influenced by the changing landscape of education and
the evolving expectations of new students (Garg & Gautam, 2022).

Theoretical Context

Gen Z's employee relationships were explored through Donaldson and Dunfee's
integrative social contracts (ISC) theory (Douglas, 2000). The theory provided a valuable
framework for this study to aid in the understanding of K-12 teachers' workplace relationships
within the institutional setting. Seminal research by Donaldson and Dunfee (1994, 1999)
explored the ethical dynamics of employee workplace relationships using two main levels of
hypernorms macro-level societal contracts such as social responsibility and equity, and micro-
level organizational contracts such as collegiality and collaboration (Baird & Mayer, 2021;
Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999; Douglas, 2000). Studies on Gen Z specifically as employees
provided context on them in the corporate world (Messerer et al., 2021; Pattison et al., 2021;
Paul Grayson, 2021).

David Stillman, a member of Gen X, and his son Jonah, a Gen Z member, published a book in 2017 about Gen Z in the workplace. Their book focused on the corporate workforce and how it was communally changing into one in which Gen Z looked to align with their social, political, economic, and global views (Stillman & Stillman, 2017; Vitezić & Perić, 2021). More research conducted by Akgül (2023) focused on the emergence of Gen Z as adults in the context of Ryan and Deci's (2020) self-determination theory. From their study of 23 Gen Z college students, qualitative data found that they had difficulty with online education, causing negative moods, loss of socialization, difficulty returning to daily life, and the development of poor physically conditioned habits (Akgül, 2023). Furthermore, it was publicized that Gen Z felt a loss of autonomy and friendship within the family context and sought out media as a daily activity, resulting in lower life satisfaction and increased anxiety relating to their psychological well-being (Akgül, 2023).

Problem Statement

The problem is that Gen Z teachers' workplace relationships are affected by their thoughts, beliefs, and values, which impact retention rates at K-12 schools. The development and maintenance of the classroom environment depends largely on relationships in the workplace and Gen Z teacher interactions will be new for the education world (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1995). Gen Z teachers are entering the classroom and what they think, believe, and value from the workplace is different from their predecessors (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic produced difficulties such as addressing social justice issues and combating misinformation making it difficult for new teachers to adapt to a more self-sufficient and independent learning style (Sun et al., 2021). There are specific challenges faced by early career teachers and the distinct traits of Gen Z educators remain to be explored. Through this

exploration of Gen Z teachers in K-12 schools, stakeholders will develop effective strategies for supporting and retaining Gen Z teachers during critical early stages in their careers (Haleem et al., 2020; Jafri et al., 2021; Kochan, 2021; Paul Grayson, 2021). Researchers are still exploring Gen Z teachers in the workplace and the relationships obtained and maintained that impact the recruiting of new teachers and the ability to retain them, specifically in America (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Sanjeev et al., 2022; Shanks et al., 2022).

This new generational cohort expects the workplace to be a community that fulfills specific expectations of their unique thoughts, beliefs, and values effectively channeling their behavior and conduct (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999; Vitezić & Perić, 2021). Gen Z's entrance into the teaching world has changed the institutional foundation, inferring school leadership needs more information to understand the needs of Gen Z teachers in the workplace (Vitezić & Perić, 2021). Focusing primarily on predicting future workforce integration of Gen Z, schools must seek to modify workplace values, processes, and practices to address factors such as pay, relationship development, stress, and burnout (Sun et al., 2021). In 2023, Americans are witnessing an emerging workforce like none they have seen before, and understanding how their expectations are aligned for their workplace has shed light on existing school relationships and offers insight into support for positively affecting future ones (Riley & Nicewicz, 2022; Sun et al., 2021; Vitezić & Perić, 2021).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe Gen Z teachers' experiences with integrative social contracts within workplace relationships and their effect on retention at K-12 schools in the United States. Integrative social contracts in this study have been generally defined as the evolving community standards, moral practices, and social

norms within K-12 schools within teacher relationships (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999). Throughout this study, development and maintenance of workplace relationships were seen through the lens of Donaldson and Dunfee's (1995) integrative social contracts (ISC) theory. In the year 2023, Gen Z teachers were between the ages of 21-25, and at this age have already had exposure to societal norms that shaped them as members of their communities (Mejía-Manzano et al., 2022; Parker & Igielnik, 2020). They declared factors that matter most to them in a job are salary, flexibility, relationships, and workplace environment (Mejía-Manzano et al., 2022). Gen Z wants to feel respected and appreciated at work (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Dorsey et al., 2020). They also have had to navigate remote and hybrid work environments while attempting to stay connected when physical distance was common (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Hearing their stories is beneficial to schools in developing a desirable workplace for future Gen Z teachers.

Significance of the Study

Research indicates that leadership support, job satisfaction, and work engagement are significant predictors of turnover at K-12 schools and these factors have a stronger effect on Gen Z teachers (Zainuddin et al., 2022). By studying Gen Z workplace relationships, researchers and educators gain insight into the unique characteristics, values, and expectations of this generation as they enter the workforce. This understanding helps inform educational policies, teacher training programs, and school environments to better meet the needs of Gen Z teachers. The quality of teacher workplace relationships has a direct impact on teacher retention and job satisfaction (Wang et al., 2014). Research has shown that supportive and positive relationships with colleagues and administrators contribute to teachers' overall job satisfaction, well-being, and commitment to the profession (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Collaboration and professional development are crucial for teachers' growth and effectiveness (Zainuddin et al., 2022).

Gen Z teachers bring unique perspectives and skills to the teaching profession; therefore, by studying their workplace relationships, researchers can identify the factors that facilitate or hinder collaboration. Gen Z has grown up with technology as an integral part of their lives (Mejía-Manzano et al., 2022; Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Understanding how they integrate technology into their teaching practice and their relationships with colleagues and administrators will help schools and educational institutions adapt to technological advancements and provide effective support. Overall, studying workplace relationships of Gen Z teachers remains significant for adapting educational practices, promoting teacher well-being, enhancing collaboration, and improving student outcomes in an evolving educational landscape. Providing initiatives and opportunities for career development is important for retaining Gen Z teachers (Wang et al., 2014).

Theoretical

Donaldson and Dunfee's (1995) integrative social contracts theory provides a viable theoretical framework for understanding Gen Z teachers' workplace relationships. Specific demonstrations of how ethical leadership, social exchange, psychological contract fulfillment, workplace values, career adaptability, and perceived organizational support all play important roles in ISCs. When Gen Z teachers encounter relationships with other teachers, parents, or administrators, they place significant importance on ethical behavior and organizational support, creating workplace contracts for innovative work behavior and career success.

One key strength of Donaldson and Dunfee's (1995) theory is its ability to provide a nuanced understanding of the relationships between individuals and institutions. This theory recognizes that individuals and organizations have mutual obligations and responsibilities towards each other and that these obligations and responsibilities are shaped by various

contextual factors such as cultural norms, power dynamics, and institutional practices. These contextual factors influence the social contracts between Gen Z teachers and their coworkers including administration, by supporting them or hindering them, which can lead to negative outcomes such as turnover intention and emotional exhaustion.

Overall, the theoretical significance of Donaldson and Dunfee's (1995) theory in understanding Gen Z teachers' workplace relationships, suggests that ethical leadership, social exchange, psychological contract fulfillment, emotional exhaustion, workplace values, career adaptability, and perceived organizational support all play important roles in shaping Gen Z teachers and their workplace relationships. This study added to the theoretical significance of understanding how Gen Z teachers in the U.S. use integrative social contracts to build and maintain positive workplace relationships. Additionally, it shed light on the specific strategies and approaches employed by Gen Z teachers to navigate workplace dynamics and foster a sense of belonging. Moreover, the findings provided valuable insight for educational institutions and policymakers in creating supportive environments that promote the well-being and professional development of Gen Z teachers.

Empirical

This study adds to the existing literature on Gen Z teachers in the classroom by bringing insight to their relationship experiences in K-12 classrooms. Current literature on teacher relationships points to the importance of competencies, ethical beliefs, and values by highlighting them due to their significant impact on various aspects of professional development, such as job performance, job satisfaction, and organizational success (Albrecht et al., 2015). In addition, research suggests that these competencies, ethics, and values are becoming increasingly important in the modern workplace, where there is a growing emphasis on collaboration, social

responsibility, and ethical behavior (Aguinis et al., 2020; Matsumoto, 2023). Therefore individuals, organizations, and educational institutions must prioritize the development and assessment of these key competencies and values to ensure success in the current and future K-12 classroom work environments.

Practical

The significance for this research is practical in its direct connection between teacher retention and various negative outcomes, include student demotivation, low academic achievement, and disruptive student behavior (Bottiani et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2020; Oberle et al., 2020). This study explored the mutual obligations and expectations that arise between employees and employers as well as the reciprocal relationship between an individual's personal values and the organizational context (Herman et al., 2020). The integrative social contracts theory emphasizes the interconnectedness between individuals and an organization's values and expectations (Aguinis et al., 2020; Matsumoto, 2023). The integrative social contracts theory can shed light on a school's culture support systems and interactions within the workplace conducive to Gen Z teachers' professional growth, job satisfaction, and overall well-being (Albrecht et al., 2015). This research highlighted the teachers' responsibilities toward the institution such as adhering to professional standards, actively engaging in collaboration, and demonstrating commitment to their roles.

Teachers who have positive relationships in the workplace are more likely to stay in the teaching profession, which leads to increased productivity and effectiveness (Baralt et al., 2020; Schroth, 2019). This mutual success benefits both the school and the teachers themselves (Adams, 2020). Moreover, the findings from this study have enhanced understanding of how schools can attract and retain Gen Z teachers, which is particularly important in addressing

teacher shortages (Baralt et al., 2020; Schroth, 2019; Will, 2022b). Additionally, this study provides valuable insight for employers outside of the education sector who are interested in hiring from the Gen Z population.

Research Questions

One central research question and three sub-questions guided this research. Questions were corroborated through the theoretical framework of Donaldson and Dunfee's (1995) integrated social contract constructs. I sought to gather in-depth descriptions of the experiences of Gen Z teachers' workplace relationships. I wanted to be able to describe Gen Z teachers' expectations of the workplace by utilizing feedback from the central research question. Additionally, I explored the perceptions of teachers' experiences with relationships and how these influence their expectations in the workplace. These research questions provided a deeper understanding of Gen Z teacher's workplace relationships based on their reflections, experiences, and perspectives regarding relationships. The information gained from these questions illustrated Gen Z teachers' experience with relationships with colleagues, administration, students, and parents in the workplace.

Central Research Question

What are Gen Z teachers' shared experiences with workplace relationships at K-12 schools in the United States?

Sub-Question One

How do Gen Z teachers describe challenges of being from this generation when teaching at a K-12 school?

Sub-Question Two

How do Gen Z teachers describe workplace relationship values and how they have changed over their four years of experience?

Sub-Question Three

How do Gen Z teachers' workplace relationships foster teacher retention?

Definitions

Terms and definitions pertinent to this research are listed here:

1. *Authentic Norms* - Norms formed through human interactions and based on the attitudes and behaviors of individuals in a group or community (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999; Dunfee, 2006).

2. *Digital Natives* - Also referred to as Gen Z, these are individuals in the generational cohort born between the years 1997 and 2012. The term was coined because of this generation's access to and use of technology (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Stillman & Stillman, 2017).

3. *Hypernorms* - The expected conduct and behavior among members of a community and how individuals are treated (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999).

4. *Macro Social Contracts* - The assumed social contracts where rational members of a broad community, such as a school, form agreements (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1995).

5. *Micro Social Contract* - The rules that exist at the lowest level of the community, such as the classroom, which is part of a broader community, such as school (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999).

6. *Moral Free Space* - The area of decision-making where personal values and ethical principles intersect with cultural norms and expectations (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999).

7. *Personal Precepts* - The views about the ideas and principles that a school should uphold (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999).

8. *Priority Rules* - The fundamental principles of a community for resolving conflicting authentic norms (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999).

9. *School Morals* - The shared perceptions of what is right and wrong, good and bad, or fair and unfair within a school community (Tsang, 2019).

Summary

Gen Z makes up 32% of the global population, just half a percent higher than their predecessors, the Millennials (Kronos, 2019). While many may refer to themselves as *digital natives,* ironically 75% of Gen Z prefer face-to-face communication in the workplace (Kronos, 2019). With moral ideals such as those concerning the environment and human consumption, Gen Z is globally distinct from previous generations (Kirkpatrick, 2021). This study's focus was based on the premise that Gen Z has a unique workplace footprint and the next track for exploration should be in the classroom as teachers at K-12 schools. Retainability remains the main concern for educational institutions (Jayathilake et al., 2021). The lived experiences of Gen Z teachers lend awareness that assists in identifying and overcoming barriers to their integration into the workplace and retention.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe Gen Z teachers' experiences with integrative social contracts within workplace relationships and their effect on retention at K-12 schools in the United States. A systematic review of the literature surrounding the problem was conducted to explore Gen Z teachers' professional relationships and their subsequent effect on retention in U.S. K-12 schools. This chapter first presents Donaldson and Dunfee's (1995) integrated social contracts theory (ISC), followed by a synthesis of current literature on the current teacher shortage, K-12 teacher communities, and the profiles of generations from 'Boomer to Zoomer', with an emphasis on their specific relationship demands as employees and teachers (Will, 2022a & b). This chapter examines the current research on teachers' experiences of relationships with neighboring teachers of other generations and their administration. Specifically, this chapter presents a synthesis of the current literature regarding the teacher shortage epidemic, generational differences among teachers, Gen Z's employee profile, and finally Gen Z's teacher profile, while focusing on workplace integrative social contracts. This chapter's summary identifies a gap in the literature and explains why the current study was necessary.

Theoretical Framework

This literature review examines how the phenomenon, the teacher shortage, and workplace relationships relate to Donaldson and Dunfee's (1995) work on integrative social contracts (ISCs). Donaldson and Dunfee's (1995) work was developed to help managers find ways to bring equilibrium to contradictory morals in the workplace, while also drawing "the line at flagrant neglect of core human values" (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999, p. 2). The entry of Gen Z

teachers into the workplace, with their unique life experiences as digital natives and social justice missionaries, fit the criteria of this study. Donaldson and Dunfee (1995) stated that integrative social contracts (ISCs) refer to the unspoken rules and norms that shape the professional relationships among employees in the workforce of corporate settings. These types of communities are formed by individuals who share responsibilities, values, and goals and can establish ethical norms and behaviors for themselves (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999). For this study, ISCs provided the framework for understanding how Gen Z teachers form and maintain workplace relationships.

ISCs are informal yet critical agreements that provide rules of ethics and morals among individuals in common professional communities. They recognize that morality can be conditional or situational and may involve competing views of hypernorms that are accepted within a given community (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999). To balance diverse views, there are universal moral principles known as hypernorms, which limit the range of hypothetical community-based social contracts (Dunfee, 2006). Hypernorms are essential for establishing consent in micro-social community norms and recognizing the precepts and values shared by most people. They additionally serve as important limitations to moral free space (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999).

Contextually for this study, ISCs and hypernorms offered a useful lens through which to understand the workplace relationships of Gen Z teachers in K-12 school communities. By exploring the unspoken rules and norms that shape these relationships, the study aimed to shed light on the unique challenges and opportunities that Gen Z teachers in K-12 school communities have. This contributed to a broader understanding of how to support and retain teachers in the digital age. Teaching in 2023 required a new approach to school morality that exposed the

implicit understandings or contracts that morally bind teachers and administrators in their communities (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1995).

Donaldson and Dunfee (1995) describe ISCs as essential for preventing a society in which people only act to further their own self-interests. They follow universal ethics such as *do not lie, cheat, steal, or kill* to synthesize and discover experiential community norms and universal ethical principles that create moral free spaces (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1995). Moral free space is the realm of ethical decision-making where people have the discretion to make choices that are not explicitly governed by formal rules or regulations (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999).

Social contracts are unwritten moral agreements between members of a community, such as those between teachers in the workplace. Schools are formed as local communities that have their own moral free space for determining appropriate actions within the time and situation (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999). In 2023, many social contracts were formed over political, environmental, and economic views from global social media outlets (Junker et al., 2021; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). This study relates the ISC theory to community standards, moral behaviors, and social norms of teachers in K-12 schools to identify various constructs that impact workplace relationships (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1995).

In educational settings, teachers' relationships at work have been found to play a key role in retention (Gomez, 2022; Junker et al., 2021; Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). ISCs were established principally by Donaldson and Dunfee (1999) as a practical framework to assist in grappling with the ethical challenges institutions are likely to confront with their employees. ISC is intellectually coherent with Western philosophical discourse as demonstrated by its dependence on global hypernorms and, at the same time, practical and approachable in its

focus on local genuine community norms that allow for significant moral free space (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999; Gomez, 2022). The ISC theory highlights the moral weight of an informed individual's options to leave a community and someday return if they are not in agreement with any communal norm. This study exposed the implicit workplace relationship understandings, as micro-social contracts between teachers, their students, and administration, which established classrooms as communities of their own (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999).

Related Literature

Constructive workplace relationships are essential for creating an optimal school environment in which teachers from all generations can thrive (Wiedmer, 2015). Teachers develop supportive relationships with other teachers in the school who are able to provide emotional support (Wiedmer, 2015). An educator's workplace is a living environment that prospers from the relationships that are built within and maintained throughout the faculty and administration's lives (Junker et al., 2021; Zeng & Abidin, 2021).

Relationships have a direct impact on cooperation and the internal systems that foster teacher growth, including a pleasant school environment and an indirect impact on student accomplishment (Day et al., 2021). High rates of teacher burnout, attrition, stress, and excessive workloads have long plagued the teaching profession and with the addition of a worldwide pandemic, there is now an unprecedented impairment to the educational system on a global scale (Leslie et al., 2020). In addition to the pandemic of 2020's vast economic impact, the introduction of Gen Z as teachers in the classroom has also introduced an unconventional environment to all levels of education (Leslie et al., 2020; Vu et al., 2020).

The common themes identified within the literature discussed various issues in the field of education, such as the teacher shortage, teachers' first and second-year experiences,

generational differences among employees, Gen Z's employee profile, and Gen Z's teacher profile and experiences. This chapter will conclude with a summary of what is known and unknown, as well as an analysis of the gaps in the literature related to the current problem. Considering teachers' perspectives and experiences on the topic along with specific questions about teacher relationship expectations were essential in filling the gap in the literature.

The Teacher Shortages

Teaching is a culturally-based, honorable profession that makes a dynamic contribution to societal conventions (Christensen et al., 2020). Teachers are historically well esteemed and considered competent professionals who are entrusted for most of the day with someone else's child (Krantz & Fritzén, 2022). Attrition causes about 90% of the teacher shortages annually (Sutcher et al., 2019; Will, 2022a & b). Unfortunately, since around 2015, teachers have become crestfallen by the profession and often leave their positions citing inept pay, lack of respect, and lack of developmental opportunities as reasons for quitting (Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Weyers et al., 2023). Consequently, schools face difficulties when there are too few teachers (García & Weiss, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2018; Sutcher et al., 2019).

When recruiting, hiring, and supporting new teachers who might lack expertise or comprehensive understanding, educators may experience additional stressors outside of teaching itself (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020; Sutcher et al., 2019). In schools, especially private schools, the rate of teacher turnover increases for new teachers and teachers holding provisional licenses (Sutcher et al., 2019). Researchers have reported that the national cost of replacing teachers who leave the profession could exceed $8 billion per year (Workforce Institute at UKG, 2022). Losses in the learning outcomes of students are correlated with teacher turnover (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Support for new teachers is

beneficial, particularly at the beginning of their careers as teachers frequently described feeling alone, lacking helpful partners, and occasionally working in a school setting that is more competitive than cooperative (Steiner & Woo, 2021; Weyers et al., 2023).

In the current economy, there are different rules, penalties, and advantages in societal norms than decades ago (Gorski, 2022). Gorski (2022) explained that the economy has shifted in such a way that there is less job security and fewer benefits for workers, making attracting and retaining talented leaders more difficult and leading to increased precarious employment and gig work. Gig work refers to short-term, temporary, or freelance jobs that are often project-based and involve working for different clients or companies rather than being employed by a single employer. Most of these jobs are facilitated on digital platforms or apps, making them a constant as-needed customer service hub, which can have negative effects on workers' mental health and overall well-being (Jotkoff, 2022; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Weyers et al., 2023).

Socio-cultural pacts made by individuals of a community are quietly agreed upon during interactions within employee relationships (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999; Krantz & Fritzén, 2022). Events like the Great Recession from 2007 to 2009 (Temin, 2010), the global COVID-19 pandemic which began in 2019 (Iivari et al., 2020), and the Great Resignation that began in 2021 (Tussing et al., 2022) have created cultures with newly developed dynamics (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). Due to attrition and the present lack of attention to teacher training in the United States, psychological and emotional resilience are skills that need to be acknowledged, controlled, and handled without passing judgment (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019). Teachers must constantly improve their critical reflection on expectations, understanding, attitudes, and actions if they are to affect their students and create change (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019). However,

time is needed to develop workplace relationships for both novice and preservice teachers (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019).

The teaching profession has become increasingly demanding, driving the need for specific strategies to maintain effectiveness (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019). Relationship problems and developmental challenges in the classroom typically emerge within the first year of teaching (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019). Additionally, rookie teachers are more susceptible to weariness, worry, irritation, insecurity, and fear; all emotions that result in burnout (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019). The capacity to foster a positive learning environment, which is a predictor of student success in schools, is required of instructors (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019). However, teachers must possess these skills themselves to guide students in this way.

School Culture

Teachers' psychological empowerment may be favorably impacted by how they see their school's culture Allan et al., 2018). A school's culture is affected by student behavior and how teachers respond to that behavior (Lambersky, 2016). When an employee is hired, there is an unwritten agreement between the employee and the organization, known as psychological contracts, that defines the mutual expectations and obligations of each party Allan et al., 2018). Boomers and Gen X have already set the present corporate climate and ideals (Barhate & Dirani, 2021). School culture has been described as the set of shared values, beliefs, and practices that shape the atmosphere and character of a school Allan et al., 2018). It is influenced by a variety of factors, including the leadership style of school administrators, the teaching staff, the student body, and the wider community Allan et al., 2018; Lambersky, 2016). Differences in generational values, beliefs, and experiences also impact school culture (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Jotkoff, 2022; Lambersky, 2016).

Baby boomer teachers are known for their strong work ethic and loyalty to their profession (Teaching as if Learning Matters, 2022). They place a high value on discipline and structure in the classroom and prioritize traditional teaching methods (Kirschner & Stoyanov, 2020). Technological advancement may often be challenging for Gen X teachers, as many find it difficult to adapt to the rapidly evolving technologies in the classroom (Wunderlich, 2019). However, their high levels of self-efficacy and motivation counter technological challenges and engage Gen X to forge forward, enhancing learning practices through their lifelong commitment to teaching (Fernández Ruiz & Panadero, 2023). Millennials are known for their comfort with technology and may be more likely to integrate it into their teaching practices (Kirschner & Stoyanov, 2020). They are also known for their collaborative and team-oriented approach to work. Gen Z teachers seem to be similar to millennials thus far in valuing collaboration and connectedness in their workplace (Setyo, 2021). They are known for being independent and self-sufficient, which may translate into a more individualistic approach to teaching. Gen Z teachers who are just entering the workforce have been described as valuing work-life balance and may prioritize social and economic issues (Brewster, 2022). Millennials bring a more collaborative and tech-savvy approach to the classroom, while Gen Z teachers may seek a more balanced approach to relationships with others (Brewster, 2022).

Baby boomers, gen Xers, and millennials have different work values, career goals, and attitudes toward work (Smadi et al., 2020). Boomers are more likely to prioritize job security and financial rewards, Gen X value work-life balance and flexible work arrangements and Millennials seek meaningful work and personal fulfillment (Scholz et al., 2019; Smadi et al., 2020). In terms of practical teaching differences, boomers tend to have more experience and expertise in traditional teaching methods, while Gen X, millennials, and Gen Z all are more

comfortable using technology in the classroom (Fernández Ruiz & Panadero, 2023; Wunderlich, 2019).

The experiences of baby boomer, Gen X, and millennial teachers in K-12 schools have influenced their perceptions of workplace culture. For instance, baby boomer teachers tend to value hierarchical structures, formal communication, and loyalty while Gen X teachers value work-life balance, autonomy, and flexibility (Karakose et al., 2021). Finally, millennial teachers tend to value collaboration, social justice, and innovation (Karakose et al., 2021). These differences in values and expectations may have implications for their relationships with colleagues and administrators, as well as their overall job satisfaction. Further research on how these differences shape the workplace culture of K-12 schools is needed.

Relationships

Relationships are fostered by psychological factors that influence individual interest in work, a sense of satisfaction, and responsibility (Vermeulen et al., 2022). Teachers' innovative behavior, creative thinking, and inquiry-based techniques are fostered by the quality of relationships they keep between fellow teachers and administration (Vermeulen et al., 2022). Interpersonal relationships with other teachers and administrators are critical for maintaining and sustaining workplace community satisfaction which is directly correlated with retaining individuals in the profession (Holme et al., 2016; Kongcharoen et al., 2019). It is crucial to have teachers who are satisfied with their work in a school environment. The teaching and learning process is at its best when teachers are highly driven and eager to show passion in their lesson delivery (Şenol & Akdağ, 2018).

When leaders experience stress related to social ethics and moral rules involved in relationship maintenance, they may experience a negative work environment characterized by

mistrust, conflict, and disengagement (Ingsih et al., 2021). Conversely, when leaders can navigate these challenges effectively, they can create a positive work environment characterized by trust, cooperation, and engagement. This requires leaders to be conscious of their values and biases, to include the values and needs of their employees in their day-to-day, and to be willing to adapt their leadership style as needed to meet these needs (Şenol & Akdağ, 2018). In addition, teacher relationships are correlated to work discipline and can be attributed to the intrinsic factors that maintain effective teaching practices (Ingsih et al., 2021).

Burnout

Teachers stay in the profession due to factors of their lifestyle that they become accustomed to, such as routine and autonomy (Chiong et al., 2017; Ingsih et al., 2021; Kongcharoen et al., 2019). Burnout is still a major factor in the nationwide teacher exodus and has led to a reduction of teachers in the field by about 500,000 (Aucejo et al., 2020; Jotkoff, 2022). In 2019, COVID-19 made the national shortage worse, with school staff still experiencing lingering difficulties two years later (Jotkoff, 2022). The pandemic created an unconventional environment within all levels of teaching was followed by high rates of teacher burnout, attrition, stress, and excessive workloads piled on top of a decade of previous work (Aucejo et al., 2020; Cataudella et al., 2021; Leslie et al., 2020; Vu et al., 2020; Will, 2022a & b). Many teachers have been driven to change careers due to the repeated switch between hybrid learning models and navigating the numerous COVID-19 mitigation guidelines while dealing with ever-increasing expectations (Jotkoff, 2022). At least 124,000 public and private schools were shut down because of the COVID-19 pandemic and school systems were compelled to switch from in-person instruction to online learning, which isolated teachers in more than 220 countries (Pandita & Kumar, 2022; Pattison et al., 2021).

Pay

The pay scale is another cause for the continuing decline in undergraduate enrollment in teaching degree programs (García & Weiss, 2019; Gomez, 2022; Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Weyers et al., 2023; Will, 2022b). Salary disparities between districts and more attractive opportunities in larger cities have created difficulties in hiring and retaining teachers at rural schools (Ruecker, 2022). Furthermore, teachers support pay increases based on principal and peer evaluations and whether they are teaching disadvantaged students rather than on how the students learn (Gorski, 2022; Krantz & Fritzén, 2022).

Development

In a study conducted by Chaaban et al. (20221), teachers reported uncertainty about the career advancement opportunities available to them. As a result, they believed that there were few prospects for teachers to be promoted and compensated for high performance (Chaaban et al., 2021). Many educators also reported distinct individualized development plans for career progression were lacking (Van Gordon et al., 2022). Growth and development are shaped by beneficial experiences that call for comprehension of the ever-evolving domains in the workplace environment, culture, social norms, relationships, and instructional methods (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Teachers who are also caregivers with dependents are disproportionately affected by penalizations for taking contractually-allowed sick days to care for them (Ruecker, 2022). An important matter of teaching in the 21st century is having resources and technology for exploring new ideas and access to information for framing and solving problems (Kislik, 2020). Collaboration is a key element of a favorable teacher profile, as the shift in educating children has bled into teacher-student, teacher-parent, and teacher-teacher collaboration (Christensen et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Krantz & Fritzén, 2022). Teachers are more motivated and

actively participate in professional learning activities in schools where leadership is a part of collaborative actions (Bektaş et al., 2022). Studies on the quality of relationships between school leaders and teachers found that these relationships were crucial for encouraging teachers' innovative behavior and developing their habit of inquiry (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Krantz & Fritzén, 2022; Vermeulen et al., 2022).

Teachers' Initial Years Experiences in Teaching

The initial years of teaching are a key period for newly certified teachers to define themselves in their new positions, start new and difficult work routines, and form attitudes and opinions toward their peers, administrators, and workplace environments (Shanks et al., 2022). The first year of teaching is unquestionably and universally difficult for new teachers (Weyers et al., 2023). Stahnke and Blömeke (2021) explored novice teachers and found that those in their third year who had more appraisal from administrative leadership, autonomy in classroom management, and a trusting climate indicated significant improvement in their quality of teaching. A large difference exists between beginner and experienced teachers' approaches to classroom management, and it sometimes takes years of practice and education to close this gap (Weyers et al., 2023).

Perhaps the most extensively studied modulator of teacher success and retention to date is social support from colleagues, which is defined as interpersonal interactions that give emotional, influential, and informational assistance viewed as advantageous to educators (Krantz & Fritzén, 2022). Unsatisfactory social connections with other adults (such as colleagues, head teachers, principals, parents, and administrators) can cause hostile feelings and stress in teachers (Weyers et al., 2023). However, some research had indicated that social support from coworkers

reduces stress more than other forms of support (such as friends and family) and can increase relational trust inside an organization (Shanks et al., 2022).

Newer teachers, particularly those with less than two years of experience, are frequently assigned to more challenging classrooms with disadvantaged and low-achieving students compared to their veteran counterparts (Shanks et al., 2022). Novice teachers face additional challenges, including a higher proportion of English learners, students with lower achievement, and increased disciplinary issues (Weyers et al., 2023). Lopez-Fernandez et al. (2022) found that the instructional load of educators emerged as a consistent predictor of outcomes, which suggests that placing novices in such demanding situations may impact their effectiveness. Lopez-Fernandez et al. revealed long-term effects on both teachers and students of such placements, coupled with the ongoing struggle with teacher shortages in public schools, this underscores the need for improved recruitment and retention strategies at state and district levels (Cohen, 2019). Students experience academic setbacks and lower scores due to teacher turnover, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of teacher retention, school climate, and culture. The critical role of teacher mentoring programs and professional development opportunities was emphasized, offering less-experienced teachers the chance to learn from experienced colleagues and enhancing their skills (Shanks et al., 2022).

Newly certified teachers must establish themselves in their new careers, adjust to tough work schedules, and form attitudes toward their new roles and tasks (Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2022; Shanks et al., 2022). The experiences of new teachers are influenced by variables including the school environment, the connection between them and their colleagues, and how they rely on their initial teacher training to comprehend their experiences (Shanks et al., 2022). A bridge from being a novice teacher to an experienced one is made possible through regular

observation, feedback sessions, adequate in-person training, a supportive school environment, available professional development, and mentorship (Cohen, 2019).

Saint et al. (2021) described school environment factors as parental participation, school connectivity, school safety, and academic rigor. A teacher's motivation to engage in professional development is influenced by the school environment and leadership (Bektaş et al., 2022; Cohen, 2019). Shanks et al. (2022) explored mentoring new teachers with support in combating isolation and fostering collaboration. These factors are critical to relationships and the creation of community environments that enhance professional practice and aid in retention intentions (Shanks et al., 2022).

Social Contracts and Classroom Environments

Teachers coexist, cooperate, and organize their relationships to create functional classrooms, though the specifics of how each school is organized vary depending on their microsocial contracts. To obtain microsocial contractual consent, certain rights must be upheld. Donaldson and Dunfee (1999) identified three categories of hypernorms: procedural, structural, and substantive. Procedural norms are a community member's right to express disapproval and exit the community (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999). Structural hypernorms create and sustain political and social organizations (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999). Finally, substantive hypernorms define the fundamental notions of good and right (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999).

Social contracts are expectations that teachers and other stakeholders agree on as guidelines for behavior and consequences of not buying into the agreed upon rules for moral and ethical commitments to one another. In K-12 classrooms, self-governance can be accomplished using integrative social contracts to create classroom norms. If the students are allowed to argue their positions and convince their peers through negotiations, the contract will be formulated and

ratified addressing political and philosophical problems, such as the tyranny of the majority, the meaning of consent, and the issue of contract enforcement (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999).

Administration can impact teacher happiness by offering integrative social contracts in their classrooms which carry rewards and recognition for moral and ethical principles adhered to, thereby effectively reinforcing favorable outcomes (Abu Nasra & Arar, 2020). Intrinsic factors of teaching at work are in the form of autonomy, prestige recognition, status, professional development, and social norms (Abu Nasra & Arar, 2020). Apart from trust, conveying positive emotions elicits more positive reactions through present conditions, recollections of past experiences, and future projections (Wang et al., 2014).

Effective social-emotional teaching provides possibilities for professional growth and creates a helpful teaching environment, especially when activities are tailored to meet requirements and carried out in the course of daily work, providing relevant experiences for improving performance (Jones et al., 2016). With this reinforcement, school leaders who display responsive behaviors to teachers' demands and provide praise for efforts influence perception and staff agreeableness (Wang et al., 2014). Enhancing the emotional health and well-being of the entire school, including staff and students, is a necessity for effective teaching and learning (Coleman, 2020).

Globally, institutional agendas for collective management deal with issues impacting gender, race, and work-family balance (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999). With the amount of workplace violence, teachers experience from students, parents, colleagues, and supervisors, along with the possibility of a school shooting, they are likely to leave the profession for safety reasons (Maran & Renggi, 2020). Teachers perceive past instances of violent behavior as

indicators of future actions by aggressors, which impacts teacher behavior, school environment, and ultimately student behavior and academic success (Acquadro Maran & Begotti, 2020).

Administrator Behavior

School administrators lead in setting social and ethical boundaries for safe classroom communities that allow teachers to thrive (Ingsih et al., 2021). Increasing exploration has revealed that positive relationships and introspective thinking are essential in creating a school environment free of conflict and misunderstanding (Da'as, 2023). Administrative leaders can intrinsically influence teachers by taking opportunities to make teachers feel valued (Bektaş et al., 2022). Inclusion in school initiatives and rule forming offer ways for teachers to feel valued and recognized. Bektaş et al. (20220) found that school administrators who share responsibilities with teachers are often trustworthy and open to professional learning activities. A negative school environment is a significant barrier to classroom management.

Bullying and abusive leadership in the workplace are collectively referred to as toxic leadership (Cohen, 2019). Toxic leadership includes traits like egotistical attitudes, motives, and actions that negatively impact the performance of subordinates, the organization, and the mission (Cohen, 2019). This may also have an impact on a classroom's overall consistency, the continuity of students' learning, and teachers' capacity to foster students' academic commitment and achievement (Acquadro Maran & Begotti, 2020). The management of emotions by principals, according to research, can boost teacher motivation (Cohen, 2019).

Studies have found that an administrator's legacy may create challenges for new administration when re-engineering and restructuring social rules and ethics (Hulsbos et al., 2016; Ingsih et al., 2021). An administration's flexibility and willingness to grow ensures higher rates of success among leaders and teachers (A Meta-Analysis, 2019). The driving force behind

novel learning is school leaders who support creative conflict or ideas to spur improvement and innovation (Hulsbos et al., 2016). Because factors related to a school's leadership behavior have an indirect impact on teacher retention rates, it is crucial to comprehend the challenges that school leaders face (Hulsbos et al., 2016; Ingsih et al., 2021; Rytivaara & Frelin, 2017).

School policy, administration, pay, physical work conditions, and security are all factors that influence retention (Ingsih et al., 2021). Administrators can serve teachers in the workplace by knowing teachers' past experiences, present emotions, and future expectations (Rytivaara & Frelin, 2017). Participative leadership styles have an impact on leaders' commitment to their organizations and level of job satisfaction (Ingsih et al., 2021). Teacher effectiveness increases when administrators provide incentives like opportunities to lead and engage in the creation of the school climate (Wang et al., 2014).

Teacher Behavior

Unlike any other community, teachers are a special group to lead since teaching is leading in and of itself (Ingsih et al., 2021). Teachers have a direct influence on how well and satisfactorily educational improvements are implemented (Emiroglu et al., 2017). Vrhovnik et al. (2018) suggested school administrators who offer opportunities for teachers to exercise their leadership skills create a sense of psychological empowerment among their staff. School administrators, who provide teachers with leadership opportunities to exercise their abilities foster a high level of psychological empowerment in their staff (Vrhovnik et al., 2018). When teachers are involved in creating milestones, school leaders are enabled to practice participatory leadership and increase the happiness and workplace satisfaction of the faculty (Ingsih et al., 2021).

Teacher empowerment is an inspirational feeling that encompasses professional purpose, competence, and self-determination (Abu Nasra & Arar, 2020; Lee & Nie, 2017; & Vrhovnik et al., 2018). Teachers exhibit more collaborative behaviors and take part in school decision-making when there is a high feeling of organizational self-efficacy in the school environment (Friedman & Kass, 2002). Teacher effectiveness may be influenced by school administrators' actions in both positive and negative ways. If administrators fail to interact and pay attention to teachers, teachers will often have a negative perception of school administrators, leading to dissatisfied teachers who consider changing careers (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Baker et al. (2021) research on teachers' opinions of school administrators explained that teachers need "support and encouragement" as well as "recognition of achievement and contribution" (p. 656).

Teachers who feel less effective at organizing themselves tend to stay in the classroom (Friedman & Kass, 2002). Teachers' opinions of school administrators can be negatively impacted by their disregard for the teachers' fundamental needs by abusing their power. School administrators may not comprehend how their actions affect teachers or how to use their influence constructively (Orange, 2018). Absence of action on the part of school administrators is interpreted as being disengaged (Baker et al., 2021). The effectiveness of staff relationships is influenced by a variety of factors, including the school administrator's actions (Fors Brandebo, 2020). Growing evidence of generational variance is a known element that may affect teachers' conduct because of administration philosophies that do not consider a multigenerational workplace (Edge, 2014; Ewest, 2018).

Distinctions Across Four Generations

The generational theory presumes that a cohort of individuals born within the same range of dates (approximately 12-15 years) will express similar socio-demographic and behavioral

characteristics (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). These different backgrounds, shared experiences, and histories are generational in nature (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). Generational differences come from events that affect the cohort in times of calamity such as the wars, pandemics, climate change, global financial ruin, and political divides (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). Generations have been defined by Mannheim (1952) as individuals who share historical events and mutual social experiences during their lives. Over the decades, new generations have come along, stemming from social and academic movements (Huang et al., 2022). As schools recruit teachers, they see different proportions of applicants from a range of ages, all of whom have experienced different eras of society, with varying professional opportunities, academic norms, and workplace practices (Marquina & Jones, 2015).

Baby boomer teachers tend to value traditional forms of communication and may prefer face-to-face interactions with students and parents (Weinburgh, 2020). They also prioritize establishing clear boundaries between themselves and their students (Weinburgh, 2020). Additionally, they tend to view parent involvement as limited to the classroom and may prioritize their role as the primary decision-maker in the educational process (Van Beek & Patulny, 2022). Conversely, millennials view parents as partners in the educational process and may prioritize building trust and open communication with them (Van Beek & Patulny, 2022). They also tend to value building strong relationships with their students using social media and other digital tools to connect with them outside of the classroom and prioritize collaboration and communication with colleagues (Baralt et al., 2020).

Teaching is a dynamic profession that is constantly evolving, and as new generations of teachers enter the workforce, they bring unique perspectives, experiences, and challenges (Nazarian et al., 2017). This section of the literature review explored the current four generations

of teachers, including baby boomers, Generation X, millennials, and Generation Z (Paul Grayson, 2021; Steiner & Woo, 2021). The following section will examine their distinct characteristics, experiences, and contributions to the field of education.

Baby Boomers

Baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1964, when defining moments in history happened such as the war in Vietnam and the deaths of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr (Sabir & Bhutta, 2018). The baby boomer generation is characterized as working incredibly hard and being dedicated to both their professional and personal goals (Wiedmer, 2015). Boomers value workplace visibility and while independent, they feel it is important to be seen arriving and leaving on time and to be recognized as working hard until the day ends (Sabir & Bhutta, 2018). Additionally, baby boomers care greatly about appearance and adhere to a more formal work attire, rather than a relaxed dress code, if offered (Wiedmer, 2015).

Teachers, who are boomers, value discipline and structure in the classroom as essential to creating a positive and productive learning environment (Lee et al., 2021). They also tend to be dedicated to their students, often going above and beyond to help them succeed (Ben Hagai et al., 2022). As they are motivated by self-esteem, personal satisfaction, commitment to cause, giving back to the community, health and longevity, and their legacy, Boomers may spend extra time with students after school or provide additional resources to help them succeed academically (Steiner & Woo, 2021). They may also struggle to adapt to changes in the field of education, such as new teaching methods and technology (Paul Grayson, 2021).

Many boomers struggle to incorporate technology into their teaching practice, as they may not be as comfortable with it as younger generations (Malatras et al., 2017). Boomer teachers face challenges as they near retirement, experiencing burnout as they approach

retirement age and a reduced job satisfaction and decreased engagement in their teaching

practice (Ben Hagai et al., 2022). Additionally, boomers tend to be more intellectually oriented,

shifting focus to more relational learning than materialistic learning and replacing emotions with

rational decision-making (Paul Grayson, 2021). Sabir and Bhutta (2018) reported that baby

boomers tended to be more traditional in their teaching style, relying on lectures, textbooks, and

other traditional teaching materials (Wiedmer, 2015).

Generation X

Generation X (Gen X) were born between 1965 and 1980 and are known for their

independence, adaptability, and resilience (Steiner & Woo, 2021). Also known as "latchkey

kids," many members of Gen X experienced daycare, broken families, and absent parents from

being left on their own after school and while their single parent worked a second job (Wiedmer,

2015). Other significant events Gen X experienced include the fall of the Berlin Wall and the

Soviet Union, and the AIDS epidemic (Schroer, 2008; Wiedmer, 2015).

Self-reliance is evident in Gen X's independent work ethic and ability to identify basic

objective of teaching and then their way to achieve it (Heppers, 2018). They are comfortable

with change and are more likely to embrace new teaching methods and technology (Cannon &

Kendig, 2018; Heppers, 2018). They are also more likely to value collaboration and teamwork in

the classroom and may use these methods to create a more student-centered learning

environment (Junker et al., 2021). Gen X teachers tend to be more flexible and adaptable than

their baby boomer counterparts (Mahmoud et al., 2021).

Gen X witnessed significant changes in interactions and curriculum planning in the field

of education and has adapted their teaching strategies accordingly (Heppers, 2018). Many Gen X

teachers value collaboration, critical thinking, and real-world application in their lessons, and

often prioritize creating a supportive classroom environment for their students (Junker et al., 2021). Findings by Mahmoud et al. (2021) suggested that Gen X are more likely to behave in ways that are motivated by social rewards such as praise.

Gen X teachers are more likely to have teen children as compared to boomers and may struggle to balance their teaching responsibilities with their parenting duties (Barhate & Dirani, 2021). This can lead to increased stress and burnout, which may negatively impact their teaching practice (Junker et al., 2021). With their years of experience and a deep understanding of educational systems and policies, Gen X teachers are often sought out for leadership positions and play a crucial role in shaping the future of education (Junker et al., 2021).

Millennials (Gen Y)

Millennials were born between 1981 and 1996 are the largest generational group since the baby boomers and are the largest generational group in the current workforce (Raišienė et al., 2021). This generation lived through Princess Diana's death, Columbine, the World Trade Center attacks, the Oklahoma City bombings, the Iraq War, and Hurricane Katrina (Wiedmer, 2015). Growing up in a time of so much global conflict, rapid technological advancement and societal change, millennials bring a unique set of skills, experiences, and perspectives to the workplace (Raišienė et al., 2021). Many entered the workforce having experienced economic instability and limited job opportunities, leading to increased stress and burnout (Cannon & Kendig, 2018). They are likely to struggle with student loan debt and financial constraints that make it difficult to pursue further education or professional development (Raišienė et al., 2021).

This generation needs clear objectives and structure, oversight and feedback, and coaching because they are more social and inclusive than their predecessors (Wood et al., 2020). Brydges and Hracs (2019) found that millennials tend to be highly collaborative and tech-savvy.

They are comfortable using technology in their teaching practice and are more likely to incorporate digital tools and resources into their lessons (Cannon & Kendig, 2018). They also value relationships and teamwork and may use these methods to create a more inclusive and student-centered learning environment (Raišienė et al., 2021).

Millennials are more likely to prioritize their personal lives over their careers and may be less willing to work long hours or take on additional responsibilities (Junker et al., 2021; Wronowski & Urick, 2021). Many millennials are concerned with gender roles in the workplace, worry about socioeconomic inequalities, are pessimistic about the future, and are more progressive in their gender beliefs (Baralt et al., 2020). This can lead to tension with older colleagues who may have different expectations regarding work ethic and commitment (Raišienė et al., 2021).

Gen Z Employee Profile

Gen Z, born in 1997, is the newest generation entering the workforce (Raišienė et al., 2021). A trait particularly developed in Gen Z is their comfort with technology. Having grown up with smartphones, social media, and the internet, they are tech-savvy and can quickly adapt to new software and tools (Vitezić & Perić, 2021; Wood et al., 2020). They value honesty and openness and expect their employers to be upfront about company practices, policies, and goals (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Seemiller & Grace, 2018). Their unlimited access to the internet and technology inherently developed the need for continuous access to the world and its goings on (Vitezić & Perić, 2021).

Gen Z experienced the viral boom of Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube going worldwide during their earlier years (Seemiller & Grace, 2018). They were raised with tech-savvy peers who have used new technologies in inventive ways to change social norms and the

way society functions (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Malatras et al., 2017). Gen Z has a futuristic outlook that is both optimistic and realistic because of their exposure to technology and globalization (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2018). Their generation is aware of and attuned to the present and the future because of this mindset (Seemiller & Grace, 2018).

Gen Z's main characteristics are described as ambitious and self-confident, yet realistic and accepting of their fate (Magano et al., 2020; Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy, 2021; Scholz et al., 2019). Gen Z is highly achievement-oriented and seeks interesting and meaningful work (Barhate & Dirani, 2021). More entrepreneurial than millennials, Gen Z is motivated by finding their dream job and advancement opportunities, increased salary, meaningful work, and a good team (Magano et al., 2020; Scholz et al., 2019). They also are motivated by opportunities to expand their skills and have dreams and predilections dependent on external situational factors like tragedies, war, technological advances, artificial intelligence, and other developments during their youth (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022).

Gen Z is financially conscious and more ethically aware of consumption and diversity than any previous generation (Sladek & Grabinger, 2014). Additionally, they prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion and are more likely to seek out companies with a strong commitment to these values. (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2018). They also expect companies to take a stand on social and political issues and are more likely to work for organizations that align with their values (Livingston, 2019; Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy, 2021).

Development

Gen Z has a more developed social conscience than their proceeding generations, having a yearning to do good for others with meaningful reasons, a concern for other's well-being, and the need for a supportive network (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2018). In

addition, Seemiller and Grace (2018) claimed that Gen Z cares about other people's welfare and aspires to create networks that support those in their immediate vicinity (Barhate & Dirani, 2021). Making a difference is more important to this generation than achieving financial security or professional success (Seemiller & Grace, 2018). Gen Z is likely to say climate change is due to human activity as it relates to the sustainment of the world (Seemiller & Grace, 2018). Further, Gen Z advocates for achieving personal future goals such as their own, "continuing education, freedom of speech, bequeathing to the future, and a desire to own a home, in that order" (Demirbilek & Keser, 2022, p. 213). They would like to be respected for their uniqueness and allowed to exercise innovation and creativity in their roles (Sidorcuka & Chesnovicka, 2017).

Sidorcuka and Chesnovicka (2017) found Gen Z to be less concerned with lifelong careers in one location and more interested in short-term results, and they would rather have their positions treated with flexibility and inventiveness and their individuality honored. This shows that Gen Z need consistent developmental opportunities that will keep them engaged. Allowing Gen Z to make their judgments, exercise critical thought, and voice their ideas in their professional development would probably further engage them since they want to feel powerful (Mendoza, 2020).

Due to their previous learning experiences, Gen Z is highly achievement oriented, seeking interesting and meaningful work, and disengaging when challenging work is absent (Schroth, 2019). They want to watch others learn, whether in real-time or through TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube (Sidorcuka & Chesnovicka, 2017). Gen Z prefers intrapersonal learning, preferring to think independently first before engaging with others (Seemiller & Grace, 2018; Wood et al., 2020). Gen Z is looking for personalized direction from leaders that consider their

individual learning styles (Rothman, 2016). For Gen Z to learn effectively, they must have access to technology, social media, visual media, and entertainment (Sidorcuka & Chesnovicka, 2017). These mediums call for little concentration and quick information absorption (Kirschner & Stoyanov, 2020).

Gen Z are likely to be unconcerned about losing their jobs, albeit they do yearn for a reasonable basic income without giving incentives any thought (Kirschner & Stoyanov, 2020). Meret et al. (2018) stated that although some Gen Z desire work stability, they prefer a career where learning, development, and trust are at the forefront. Lazányi and Bilan's (2017) research found Gen Z workers require superiors to earn their respect and trust by first demonstrating a high degree of professional performance.

Relationships

Gen Z are social investors who do not consider their job their priority (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2018). Instead, they feel as though it is a place that supports their way of life, while impacting the world positively helps them to establish relationships and develop personal abilities for productivity (Leslie et al., 2020; Sidorcuka & Chesnovicka, 2017). Social investors gain meaning from their personal lives, not their careers (Leslie et al., 2020). They value their employer's awareness to have high, worldly, moral motives in all their business dealings (Leslie et al., 2020; Malatras et al., 2017). This group desires workplace development and training opportunities where everyone is respected and valued equally (Barhate & Dirani, 2021). Gen Z places a high value on inclusion, diversity, and equity at work. More than any other generation, they view greater racial and ethnic diversity as beneficial for society (Malatras et al., 2017; Sidorcuka & Chesnovicka, 2017). They believe responsibility pushes them to be better and do not mind going outside their comfort zones (Leslie et al., 2020).

Gen Z is looking for leaders who can effectively employ emotional intelligence, provide mentorship, demonstrate competence, and communicate support equally (Demirbilek & Keser, 2022). They prefer a transformational leader who offers a participatory style and supports them in their personal development overall (Demirbilek & Keser, 2022). In Gen Z's opinion, the ability to emotionally connect should promote greater self-awareness and consciousness (Rothman, 2016). With their highly educated upbringing and digital innovativeness, Gen Z has effortless capabilities with the integration of technology in the workplace (Riley & Nicewicz, 2022). Additionally, Gen Z makes up most of today's hospitality and tourism employee populous around the world and is the most of the future talent recruits (Vitezić & Perić, 2021). Further research refers to Gen Z as preferring a workplace that is eudemonic (experiential) and hedonistic (happy) (Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Vitezić & Perić, 2021).

Gen Z employees prefer working in environments that promote both physical and emotional comfort (Vitezić & Perić, 2021). They value clear instructions, privacy, and limited management because these things allow them to work independently and receive more positive feedback and recognition for a job well done (Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy, 2021; Sladek & Grabinger, 2014). GenZ prefer that their workplace have lax expectations, standards, and dress regulations (Barhate & Dirani, 2021). The ideal environment is a big, comfortable, well-lit, and secure space (Leslie et al., 2020). Gen Z appreciate physical work if the instructions are clear and they feel secure (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Leslie et al., 2020).

Workplace Behavior

An innovative work environment should be provided for Gen Z employees, along with opportunities for growth and advancement (Magano et al., 2020). They consider skill development and feedback to be essential for the best possible career growth (Scholz & Rennig,

2019). They have no problem taking the initiative on projects, attending conferences on occasion, or even getting expert training regularly (Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy, 2021). Gen Z also look for employers who support innovative ideas and bring about positive social change (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Leslie et al., 2020).

Gen Z values others for their work ethic and quality, demonstrating the influence and impact of their intrinsically motivated and driven behaviors (Leslie et al., 2020). They proceed proactively in executing the assigned task, eschewing passivity or dependency on explicit instructions while demonstrating confidence in their cognitive constructs and problem-solving and striving for elevated benchmarks of performance (Leslie et al., 2020). Their inception into a digital world has given them unique experiences (Parker et al., 2020).

Studies have shown that Gen Z employees often face high levels of stress and anxiety while struggling to balance work and life (Magano et al., 2020; Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy, 2021; Scholz et al., 2019; Sousa & Colauto, 2021). This may in part be due to the pressures of social media, where they constantly compare themselves to their peers, a fear of missing out (FOMO), and a desire to always be connected (Seemiller & Grace, 2018; Sladek & Grabinger, 2014; Vitezić & Perić, 2021). However, despite their domicile predilections, Gen Z is optimistic about their future and is willing to work hard to achieve goals and manage anxiety and stress so that it will not hinder their success at work (Magano et al., 2020). According to Venida (2021), they tend to be highly adaptable, innovative, and focused on social justice and equity. Gen Z is bringing about a distinct change to the workforce worldwide.

Gen Z Teacher Profile

Gen Z teachers are more likely to use multiple forms of communication simultaneously, including texting, social media, and email (Antonucci, 2022). They are comfortable using

technology and digital tools in their teaching practice and may incorporate them in their classrooms (Barhate & Dirani, 2021). This preference for digital communication may influence their teaching practice, as they may be more likely to incorporate technology into their lessons and communicate with students through digital channels (Barhate & Dirani, 2021). Gen Z teachers value diversity and inclusivity in the classroom (Demirbilek & Keser, 2022). They may also be more likely to advocate for marginalized students and work to create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment (A. Smith, 2022).

Gen Z teachers have grown up in a more diverse and inclusive society than previous generations (T. Smith, 2022). Venida (2021) found that Gen Z teachers are more likely to have experienced diversity in their personal lives and may be more comfortable addressing issues related to diversity in the classroom (Venida, 2021). They may also be more likely to use inclusive language and incorporate diverse perspectives into their lessons (Venida, 2021). A challenge Gen Z teachers face is the potential for age-based discrimination from colleagues and administrators (Venida, 2021; Vu et al., 2020), as Demirbilek and Keser (2022) confirmed that, age-based stereotypes may lead to negative attitudes toward younger teachers, such as Gen Z.

Gen Z teachers like to feel supported by available opportunities for professional development, incorporating technology into the classroom, and promoting an environment of diversity and inclusivity (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). With social media's grip on the world and Gen Z's grip on social media, trending social norms they are invested in have begun to bleed into the classroom (Parker et al., 2020). To effectively support Gen Z teachers in the classroom, administrators and colleagues need to understand their unique characteristics and provide opportunities for professional development and a supportive workplace environment (Day et al., 2021).

Summary

Generational differences, particularly the introduction of Generation Z, on the teaching profession, have affected workplace relationships in K-12 schools in the U.S. The teaching profession has long been facing challenges such as teacher shortages, attrition, stress, and excessive workloads. These issues have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Weyers et al., 2023; Will, 2022a & b). Further, schools face difficulties when there are not enough teachers (García & Weiss, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2018; Sutcher et al., 2019). Gen Z teachers bring unique perspectives and experiences to the classroom. They value building strong relationships with their students and colleagues, often using digital tools for communication (Holme et al., 2016; Kongcharoen et al., 2019). They also prioritize collaboration, diversity, and inclusion in the workplace. However, they do not consider their job their priority but rather, a place that supports their lifestyle and allows them to make a positive impact on the world (Malatras et al., 2017; Sidorcuka & Chesnovicka, 2017).

Studies also highlighted the importance of supportive workplace relationships for all teachers, not just Gen Z (Malatras et al., 2017; Sidorcuka & Chesnovicka, 2017). These relationships directly impact cooperation and foster teacher growth. Gen Z is looking for leaders who can effectively employ emotional intelligence, provide mentorship, demonstrate competence, and communicate support equally (Demirbilek & Keser, 2022). Furthermore, initial years spent in teaching are crucial for defining educators in their new position and forming attitudes towards their peers and workplace environment (Weyers et al., 2023). The quality of relationships teachers experience between fellow teachers and administration fosters their innovative behavior, creative thinking, and inquiry-based techniques (Vermeulen et al., 2022). Ultimately, understanding the unique characteristics of Gen Z teachers and providing them with

a supportive workplace environment that values diversity, inclusion, and collaboration is

essential for addressing the current challenges in the education field.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe Gen Z teachers' experience with workplace relationship values and their effect on retention at K-12 schools. The design, participants, setting, and methods are covered in this chapter. Also included are the researcher's roles and beliefs. Further, this chapter includes a discussion of the data analysis techniques recommended by Moustakas' (1994) phases. Lastly, reliability and ethical factors are discussed.

Research Design

Since it concentrated on the participants' firsthand accounts of a particular phenomenon, this study employed a qualitative research approach to understand how participants created their worlds, evaluated their experiences, and provided meaning to those experiences (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). When sharing people's experiences, listening with a childlike innocence is necessary to become open minded and without judgment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To better understand how certain ethical and moral norms in the classroom affect teacher retention ability, this study examined teachers' interactions with other teachers and school administrators. An in-depth study of the influence workplace ethics and morals have on Gen Z teacher relationships was possible through each person's extensive account of their experiences.

To understand the phenomena of workplace norms from the Gen Z teacher perspective in a K–12 school setting, their experiences were investigated. Consequently, a phenomenological method was chosen to analyze teacher experiences. The science of phenomenology is the description of what one sees, feels, and learns through experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological research, as expounded by Moustakas (1994), encompasses an in-depth

exploration of human experiences within their natural context, aiming at grasping the essential meaning and underlying structures through rigorous processes of reflection, analysis, and interpretation. Since it offers a thorough account of the interactions between teachers and their administrators, a phenomenological method was the most appropriate. A phenomenological approach brought rich descriptions and personal meaning to light as the researcher illuminated the lived experiences of Gen Z teachers and their workplace norms when interacting with other teachers and administrators.

A transcendental phenomenological design was selected to explore the rich textural details of Gen Z teachers' relationship experiences in K-12 schools (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transcendental research allowed me to surrender my preconceived judgments and personal biases while analyzing the phenomena under research. By yielding my beliefs and biases, the phenomenon was available for interpretation openly, concept this is known as epoché (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché is explained further by Moustakas (1994) as a "new way of looking at things, a way that requires that we learn to see what stands before our eyes" without preconceived notions, predilections, or judgments (p. 33). Objectivity is a critical element of transcendental research; therefore, the researcher bracketed personal opinions relating to the topic before going on with the experiences of others.

Research Questions

Research questions in a phenomenological research design incorporate social significance and are anchored in autobiographical meanings obtained from the participants' shared phenomenon through lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). There was one central research question and three sub-questions in this study. After evaluation of the problem and the purpose, the following research questions yielded.

Central Research Question

What are Gen Z teachers' shared experiences with workplace relationships at K-12 schools in the United States?

Sub-Question One

How do Gen Z teachers describe challenges of being from this generation when teaching at a K-12 school?

Sub-Question Two

How do Gen Z teachers describe workplace relationship values and how they have changed over their four years of experience?

Sub-Question Three

How do Gen Z teachers' workplace relationships foster teacher retention?

Setting and Participants

The setting for this study was K-12 schools located in America. This study used the workplace as the setting, specifically, the classroom in which Gen Z teachers taught their first four years. Additionally, participants were age appropriate by belonging to the generational cohort labeled Gen Z (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Participants were purposefully selected to be novices with one to four years of teaching experience.

Setting

Participants resided in the United States and taught at public K-12 schools. The rationale for choosing the U.S was due to recruitment issues and the utilization of snowball sampling. My initial setting was going to be the Southwest region of the United States due to my familiarity with more Southwest states than others. There are 11 states in the Southwest: Arkansas, Colorado, Louisiana, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas,

Utah, and Wyoming (Hollins, 2023). Table 1 displays the 2021 Kaiser Family Foundation demographics for each of the Southwest states (*Population Distribution by Race/Ethnicity*, 2022). I am familiar with three of the 11 states (Hollins, 2023). In addition to their shared rural and urban characteristics, including major cities and small-town communities, these states also have similarities in terms of Hispanic, Native American, and Anglo traditions (Hollins, 2023). Furthermore, all three states boast a diverse range of demographics, encompassing various ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, due to the presence of military bases and installations that significantly contribute to the states' economies and cultures (Jafri et al., 2021). Given that my children have attended K-12 schools in these states, it was relatively straightforward to identify participants through prior contacts who still reside in those states. The setting encompassed schools located in both rural and urban areas.

Table 1

2021 Demographics of Southwest United States, (Population Distribution by Race/Ethnicity, 2022)

State	White	Black	Indian	Asian	Hawaiian	Other
Arkansas	3.81%	0.08%	0.11%	0.02%	0.01%	3.59%
Colorado	14.02%	0.20%	0.43%	0.06%	0.02%	6.93%
Louisiana	2.92%	0.25%	0.06%	0.02%	0%	1.97%
Montana	2.20%	0.09%	0.26%	0.01%	0%	1.33%
New Mexico	33.32%	0.26%	0.73%	0.11%	0.02%	14.76%
North Dakota	2%	0.07%	0.26%	0.02%	0%	1.64%
Oklahoma	6.25%	0.14%	0.38%	0.03%	0.02%	4.11%
South Carolina	3.07%	0.19%	0.06%	0.02%	0%	2.50%
Texas	27.78%	0.34%	0.25%	0.07%	0.01%	10.99%
Utah	7.23%	0.10%	0.17%	0.04%	0.02%	6.60%
Wyoming	6.78%	0.06%	0.26%	0.03%	0.02%	2.97%

Participants

For this study, the number of participants resulted in 12 Generation Z teachers from K-12 schools in the United States. Each participant had one to four years of teaching experience at their school. One to four years was determined as the time when teachers are susceptible to leaving the profession due to various challenges they encounter during this critical period (Haleem et al., 2020; Jafri et al., 2021). For this study, the sex of the participants was not a factor. Pseudonyms were applied throughout the study to protect the privacy of each participant.

Recruitment Plan

For the first step in recruiting, I used convenience sampling by acquaintance and created a recruitment flyer for distribution to my known teacher contacts. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling method that allows the researcher access to a familiar location or to glean a sample through the internet where exposure is conveniently situated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After convenience sampling, snowball sampling needs to be implemented if acquiring more participants. I asked participants to recruit peers who fit the criteria, and have shared the same lived experiences, and were likely to yield informed data of importance to the study. It is important to note that participants willingly shared and communicated their experiences and views in a reflective and expressive manner.

A consent form was provided via email to each willing participant verifying their voluntary contribution to induvial interviews, journal entries, and focus groups. Consent, which confirmed eligibility, also assured participants of their volunteerism and that pseudonyms would protect their identity (see Appendix B). The consent form explained the purpose of the study. Participants received request for consent prior to any invitation for data collection; each

participant was given the opportunity to review the form before signing it and returning it via email.

Researcher's Positionality

I am an Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom Air Force veteran and government civil servant who served four months in Iraq (July - October 2003), one year in Korea (January - December 2005), five years in Texas (2011-2016), and going on 15 years now in New Mexico. Before and during the military, I had never supervised anyone. However, I now supervise civilians, contractors, and military members from three generations (all but Gen Z), for the Department of the Air Force (DAF). I have six years of active-duty experience, 15 years in the civil service (10 of which have been in education and training), and eight years in my current role at an Air Force Base (HAFB) in New Mexico. My seven years of supervisory experience has given me a new perspective on professionalism and how to influence employee buy-in. During the last nine years, I have been promoted three times within my section. Going from a coworker to a supervisor made learning the role more challenging. This transition was difficult to one day be someone's coworker and the next their supervisor continues to be a learning experience.

My skills, knowledge, abilities, and confidence have come from my active-duty service and carried over into my civil service. The core values of the Air Force have become my core values as well; they are Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in All You Do (AFI 1-1, 2015). In the short 45 years I have been alive I have experienced poverty, abuse, divorce, and single motherhood to becoming an airman, dedicated wife, mother of five, and first-generation graduate degree holder and Ph.D. candidate. These experiences have taught me much

about human nature and intentions. And, with my empathetic personality, putting myself in others' shoes was natural and allowed me to focus on participants' genuine perspectives.

My leadership style is to influence and not manipulate, to inspire and not invoke, and to grow and not squash the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are best for this research, the teacher, the student, and the school. It appears simple enough, but it is harder than it seems to live out the Christian worldview, that repeats Psalm 7:8, "Let the LORD judge the peoples" and "vindicate me, according to my righteousness and integrity" (New International Version, 1982/2015). The Lord demands integrity, and I too employed integrity throughout this research and analysis process.

There are many motives I had for choosing to study the Gen Z teacher populous. Three of the major motives come from my personal experiences beginning in childhood and moving into adulthood. Firstly, I grew up in a strict, religious home in one of the Bible Belt states, Oklahoma. My strong foundational Christian belief system is rooted in my mother's favorite saying when I was a child, "bad associations, spoil useful habits." To me, the context of this phrase is the same of that as "you are what you eat," in the sense that you are whom you hang around, good, bad, mischievous, curious, intelligent, or successful. And that no matter what choices I have made and must still make in life, they are mine alone and I will have to live with the consequences, good or bad. It seems like today's society is more influenced by the young than ever before, which makes their opinion valuable even if it is immature.

Secondly, I have learned that four out of five of my children are digital natives (Gen Z), so my research could have possible implications for not just them but also my youngest who is part of the Alpha Gen along with my new grandsons. Being able to understand the current lived experiences of Gen Z teachers in the workplace, I can better know what my children and

grandchildren will be experiencing and how those experiences affect their learning and development through childhood and into their adult lives in the education world.

And lastly, seven years ago when I became a supervisor my first two years were very challenging. My most challenging employee was a millennial and a previous coworker. From that experience, I learned how to manage difficult situations as a supervisor by creating a new environment in the workplace in which all generations could thrive. I was deeply curious to understand how millennials view the workplace and came across more questions about Gen Z views as employees and in relationships at work. My experiences with Millennials have given me new knowledge, skills, and abilities empowering me to be a better supervisor. This study added to my competencies while also contributing empirical knowledge on this topic.

Interpretive Framework

A conservative approach to social constructivism was the lens through which this study was conducted. As a transcendental phenomenological study, I, the researcher, used inductive logic in the context of the phenomenon to capture emerging themes from the experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a social constructivist, I view learning as a positive process that happens when students create new meaning using concepts they have already learned combined with their experiences. In my opinion, learning is a social process in which interpersonal interaction between students foster experiential learning. As I looked for accounts of Gen Z teacher perceptions of their workplace connections and how they affected retention, I used the integrative social contract theory to account for my constructivist foundation.

Philosophical Assumptions

My philosophical assumptions stand on the belief that through hard work, one can accomplish anything in America. I believe everyone has a right to pursue happiness from that

hard work. Teachers of K-12 schools must be understood, especially their expectations for harmonious workplace environments, in order to flourish. Without harmony, teachers, students, parents, and administrators cannot accomplish their vision. Turnover would decrease if employees felt harmony in the workplace. I believe that quality performance involves addressing the needs of teachers across America, especially those who are new to the profession. The three philosophical assumptions from my beliefs come from ontological, epistemological, and axiological reasoning.

Ontological Assumption

My ontological assumptions involve optimistically viewing reality as concrete and subjective in nature. Reality is socially constructed and shaped by individuals' interpretations, meanings, and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consequently, I value the pursuit of knowledge from others' experiences and sought the participants' reality within public K-12 school classrooms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, I sought to understand and interpret the social world from the perspectives of those involved, acknowledging multiple subjective realities (Moustakas, 1994). The firsthand, primary knowledge that Gen Z teachers shared gave transparency and rigor to the research (Moustakas, 1994).

Epistemological Assumption

Epistemological assumptions create awareness of specific aspects of reality while exploring justified claims of knowledge. My epistemological assumption is that knowledge is derived from the interactions between individuals and their environment, as well as from personal experiences, critical thinking, and the accumulation of information over time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I also recognize that knowledge is not solely constructed through individual efforts, but is also influenced by cultural, social, and historical contexts. Therefore,

understanding the origins of knowledge requires acknowledging the complex interplay between personal cognition, social interactions, and broader societal factors. I uncovered the knowledge regarding the phenomenon from the participants. While recognizing that absolute truth exists, objective knowledge could only be gleaned from the participants' perceptions of their firsthand experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I am not in the same teaching field as the participants, and I am of the Generation X cohort and therefore have not lived their experiences or seen the workplace through Gen Z's perspective. This study depended on subjective data acquired from the participants to build upon a narrative (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Axiological Assumption

Philosophical values and ethical principles which have built my character throughout my life experiences are the assumptions that influence my perception of life (Moustakas, 1994). I value integrity, service to others, and excellence in all things an individual sets their mind to. I am a wife, a mother of four Gen Z and one Alpha Gen, a supervisor, and a lifelong learner. I disclosed my axiological assumptions to the participants and in a reflective journal while employing epoché each time presumptions encroached on my consciousness to make certain my openness remained receptive (Moustakas, 1994).

Researcher's Role

As the "human instrument" in this study, my role was guided by the dissertation guidelines and steps of progression described by Liberty University. Transparency and honesty during this study was of utmost importance. As I do not teach, the participants were not under any authority of mine. Phenomenological studies are designed to direct questions on clear connections to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). As the researcher, I felt a personal connection to the phenomenon studied and sought to acquire a respectable understanding

(Moustakas, 1994). As a mother of four Gen Z learners and one Alpha generation, and grandmother to two Alpha generations, it behooves me to understand the latest generation of teachers who will be influencing their academia. These unique roles allowed me to create effective conversational spaces for the interviews and focus groups. This was beneficial when collecting and analyzing the data as a study that was personal to me. I ought to understand how Gen Z teachers affect our youth in academia and during social interactions. I chose to conduct a transcendental phenomenological study so that I could articulate the experiences of the participants and establish themes to ensure predominantly public K-12 schools can utilize the information.

Procedures

Before any research was conducted and any data was collected, I first sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Liberty University (Appendix A). Two methods of sampling were used to gather participants. Upon IRB approval, I began recruitment by contacting education professionals that are acquaintances of mine via email and in person. These acquaintances are teachers at K-12 schools throughout New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma. For the first sampling method, I created a recruitment flyer that I distributed to my acquaintances for distribution to their interested co-worker teachers who they deemed eligible. The flyer had purposive recruitment qualifications for participation (Appendix C). Additionally, the flyer encouraged participants to forward the invitation to other individuals who may be qualified and interested in participating in the research. This is called snowball sampling, which was my second method of recruitment. During recruitment efforts for snowball sampling, potential participants, after confirmation, were asked to identify other potential participants who met the criteria and might be willing to participate (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants rendered from

snowball sampling were identified and contacted by email with an invitation to participate in the study, along with information from the flyer for criteria eligibility purposes.

Sample sizes for qualitative research must draw enough data for saturation of knowledge from experiences with descriptions of the phenomenon and to answer the research questions. Once enough participants were gathered to collect rich significant data, a consent form was sent to the participants with any further clarifications needed (see Appendix B). In the consent form, participants were given an overview of the problem statement and the purpose of the research, with advisement on what to expect throughout the study. The ability to withdraw from the study was also included in their consent, along with information on whom to contact should they have any questions. I returned a digital copy of each participants' signed consent form (Appendix B) to them for their records.

Data Collection Plan

The data collection plan employed a multifaceted approach, utilizing individual interviews, document analysis, and focus group interviews, to gather rich and credible insights into participants' workplace relationships and experiences. The three data sources were used to build credibility by correlating the facts and illuminating a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Validity and dependability were ensured by this approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to gather rich, thick data on participants' workplace relationships. Next, journal entries were requested from prompts regarding specific workplace relationship experiences with teachers of other generations, along with workplace norms. Lastly, a semi-structure focus group was conducted that allowed participants a platform to actively participate until data saturation, providing an extensive description of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Individual Interviews

The first data collected was from in-depth interviews as a natural investigation that studies a social phenomenon to gain an understanding of what an individual has, why they have it, and how they describe their experience and perceptions about it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The most effective method of interviewing for qualitative research is semi-structured interviews. They are guided by primarily open-ended questions with flexibility for further probing and modifications. The focus of the interview was Gen Z teachers at K-12 schools and their relationship interactions with other teachers and administrators.

Interviews are appropriate methods of data collection as they provide rich data that cannot be observed, and they can describe in great depth and detail with further explanations and definitions that may not be garnered by observations alone. According to Colaizzi (1978), phenomenological research success depends on how deep interview questions delve into participants' lived experiences particularly their workplace relationships. Interviews were used to gather insight into the perspective of Gen Z teachers' lived experiences of their workplace interactions with workplace relationships.

The interviews were conducted via a virtual platform with visual and audio capabilities for recording. Interviews began with scheduling times to meet on Google Meets for a 30 to 45-minute interview. While virtual images may only be of their face, there was still context to be derived from visible facial expressions. The purpose of this was to not lose any of the rich comprehensive story details that were expressed through movements in the face (Moustakas, 1994). Face-to-face meetings are crucial for gathering body language or in this case the face language, which aided in vivid, vibrant, accurate, and elucidating findings (Moustakas, 1994).

The main purpose was to acquire unique generalizations that may not be known, as well as discover new ground for further research (Patton, 2014).

All individual interviews were transcribed with the transcripts sent to each participant for an accuracy check. Participants were urged to return any feedback from areas needing clarification or to add information they thought of after the interviews were conducted. After introspectively considering my biases and opening my mind to new knowledge, I read through the transcripts and field notes to identify invariant horizons or units of meaning with each unit having equal value. With this type of horizontalization, I was able to conduct the process of phenomenological reduction of the data.

For an effective semi-structured interview, breaking the ice with the interviewee is important for establishing rapport. So, to begin with, I ensured confidentiality and relayed the potential for future focus group selection. It was important for the participants to feel comfortable with sharing their stories and opening to deeper and more richly compact responses. This was accomplished by inviting participants to take me on their journey, of what it meant to be a Gen Z teacher at a K-12 school from 2020 to 2023. Interview questions are in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself by stating your name, as well as how many months you have taught at what current teaching location, subject, and grade level.

2. Describe your experience with workplace relationships. (CRQ & SQ1)

3. How have your workplace relationships evolved over the four years you have been teaching? (CRQ & SQ1)

4. Describe the workplace relationships that support your teaching abilities. (CRQ)

5. Describe the workplace relationship experiences that are harmful to your productivity. (CRQ)

6. How do you describe the responsibility of teaching your subject and grade from a Gen Z point of view? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, & SQ3)

7. Tell me about an unforgettable experience (good or bad) of a workplace relationship that made you question your values. (CRQ & SQ1)

8. What workplace relationship experience do you have with teachers of other generations? (CRQ & SQ2)

9. Please describe a workplace relationship that has encouraged you to stay in your position. (CRQ)

10. What advice or suggestions do you have for first- and second-year teachers to help them create valuable workplace relationships? (CRQ & SQ3)

11. Is there anything else about this subject you would like to share?

Question one served as an introductory question to gather basic information about the interviewee's background, which was useful in understanding the context of their responses to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Question two aligned with the central research question and the first sub-question, which sought to explore participants' experiences with workplace relationships (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994; Parker et al., 2020; Smith Washington, 2022). Question three aligned with the central question and the first sub-question by exploring support Gen Z teachers received from workplace relationships (Vaitzman Ben-David & Berkovich, 2022). Question four aligned with the central question and all three sub-questions.

Question five aligned with the central research question and all three sub-questions by delving into Gen Z experiences from their unique generational point of view.

Question six related to the central research question and all three sub-questions, focusing on relationship values. The seventh question related to the central research question and the first sub-question by asking about specific generational experiences. The eighth question aligned with the central research question and the third sub-question by exploring positive relationship experiences. The ninth question correlated with the central question and the second sub-question by exploring advice participants would give to first- and second-year Gen Z teachers (Vaitzman Ben-David & Berkovich, 2022). The last question, number 10, served as an open-ended question to allow participants to share any additional insights or perspectives related to the subject that may not have been covered in previous questions.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Throughout the analysis phase of the investigation, this study relied on bracketing, horizonalization, and development of themes (Moustakas, 1994). Each experience was recorded and individually transcribed by a hired professional on Fiverr.com. This was done for all interviews. The requested format for transcription was both Microsoft Word and Adobe PDF forms. I read each transcript while listening to the audio versions for accuracy and errors, then corrections were made and accounted for in writing throughout. Additionally, each participant had the opportunity to read their transcript for accuracy and clarity. Following data collection each source of evidence was safely secured electronically and individually as its own file for simpler identification purposes and then put into a secured folder on my personal, password-protected laptop.

Bracketing came first in the steps for conducting phenomenological reduction (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). All data collected was examined utilizing epoché, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994.) Epoché is defined as the laying aside of prejudgments and approaching the investigation with an impartial receptive presence (Moustakas, 1994). Throughout the data collection and analysis phases, I kept a reflective notebook, to promote transparency and to attain what Moustakas (1994) defined as a "state of freshness" without adulteration (p. 41). By admitting my own beliefs and thoughts in the reflective notebook bracketing assumptions and mitigating bias was transparent throughout my analysis to better identify and acquire the shared experiences of participants. Horizonalization of the data was then conducted to create a list of statements relating to the phenomenon by examining the participants' experiences of relationships in the workplace. Each participant's account was turned into a form of text-based data that was used to derive keywords and phrases of important researchable data for this study and further analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each account held the same value as the previous, putting each experience in the realm of phenomenological investigation individually and equally.

After removing redundant, overlapping, and outlier statements, I manually searched the transcripts in their PDF form for common keywords. I further manually determined invariant constituents to reduce and eliminate experiences that were insufficient and had no connection to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Next, all related experiences were placed together and organized according to themes. Verbatim excerpts from interviews were matched with themes to create categories. Each participant's interview was given a textural-structural depiction of the essence from their experience and then categorized according to the invariant constituents and themes (Moustakas, 1994). Analysis and data collection were conducted concurrently to

determine when the moment of saturation occurred. Saturation occurs when new interviews provide little to no new evidence for further research collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Journal Entries

Journaling was the second technique used to gather data for this study. Research has shown that journaling is a reliable approach for gathering rich, qualitative data and was used as a means to revive the true meanings, making it a good choice for a transcendental phenomenological design (Chabon & Lee-Wilkerson, 2006). Because it contains individual reflections, records of specific occurrences, and descriptions of actual experiences, the reflective journal became a blend of a diary and log (Chabon & Lee-Wilkerson, 2006). When participants write about an experience, personally, they give the reader access to their perspective and new knowledge is gained. I requested participants to produce a journal entry of how many relationships they experienced interactions with daily and what specific conduct or behaviors were involved with them (van Manen, 2016).

The gathering of information from depictions of an experience externally from the interviews was an effective means of data collection that helped draw out rich descriptions of the phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1995). After conducting the formal individual interviews, I requested all participants complete a journal entry that documented workplace relationship conduct and behaviors they have experienced in their own words. This involved Moustakas' (1994) and Patton's (2014) methodology which advocated for gathering and recording experiences of the phenomena through journaling. Journal prompt responses were to be typed in a Microsoft Word document and returned by email. Participants were asked to complete one journal entry.

Journal Prompt

The journal prompt was, "Think about a normal day at work, list the relationships you encounter, and explain your conduct and behavior during each encounter to include your thoughts, perceptions, and emotions. Write your response in no more than 5,000 words."

The objective was to access each participant's voice in its authenticity. The prompt related to the central research question by exploring participants inner thoughts and emotions which may have been challenging to access in person for fear of objection. By exploring the specific conduct and behaviors expressed by the participants, I was able to gain insights into the types of ethics and morals that exist among workplace relationships of Gen Z teachers at K-12 schools (Dickhäuser et al., 2021; Orange, 2018).

Journal Prompts Data Analysis Plan

As in the individual interviews, I continued to use phenomenological epoché to ensure I set aside any bias and prejudgments I may have had when analyzing the journal responses (Moustakas, 1994). I conducted continuous bracketing of my own experiences and perceptions regarding any data collected. The phenomenological reduction and categorization of themes were completed, and the themes were categorized and coded according to textural structural topics (Moustakas, 1994).

Focus Groups

The third collection method for data was a focus group. Qualitative data collected through the focus group contributed to the central research question by providing an opportunity for the researcher to interact with multiple participants at the same time, while encouraging dialogue amongst participants about the topic being researched (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus group was useful for exploring complex, multi-layered concepts from the perspectives of

the participants. It was facilitated in a way by using varied sources of evidence in the study and conserving time rather than conducting follow-up interviews of all participants. A focus group was appropriate for this qualitative study to understand the thoughts and feelings of Gen Z regarding their status in the workplace as a collective (Moustakas, 1994). I took detailed notes immediately following the discussion for comparison with transcripts during the analysis stage in my reflective notebook.

I conducted one focus group with three participants virtually on Google Meets that lasted between 60 and 90 minutes long (Patton, 2014). Participants invited to the focus group were contacted and coordinated with for scheduling so that they could choose the best times for their arrangement needs. I guided the group conversation by collecting responses to 10 questions, eliciting rich, thick, expressive data for triangulating the newly acquired data with the previous individual interviews, the journal entry, and my continuous reflexive notes. My goal for the focus group was to ensure an open and in-depth discussion for bringing rich and thick data to light for analysis. Responses were captured via audio and video recording virtually via the Google Meets platform and then transcribed.

Table 3

Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourself and state how long you have been teaching, in what grade(s) and subject(s), and for how long. (CRQ)

2. Why did you choose to become a K-12 schoolteacher? (CRQ)

3. How would you describe your first impression of the workplace environment? (CRQ)

4. How would you describe your experience with workplace relationships with teachers from other generations? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ2)

5. How do you feel workplace relationships positively affect your teaching abilities? (CRQ, SQ2, SQ3)

6. How have workplace relationships impacted your intentions to remain a teacher? (CRQ, SQ2, SQ3)

7. Describe any challenges you have experienced as a Gen Z teacher you feel other generations may not have experienced. (CRQ, SQ1, SQ2)

8. Describe how your expectations before teaching compare to the reality you have experienced after teaching for four years. (CRQ, SQ2)

9. What standards and expectations in the workplace would you like to challenge, how, and why? (CRQ)

10. Since the individual interview and journal entry, are there any experiences you have recalled that you would like to expand on today? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3)

Question one was an icebreaker for building rapport and setting the participants at ease. Along with addressing the eligibility for participation, this question effectively addressed the central research question as well as sub-question two. Question three related to the central research question by gathering data on participants' initial impressions of the workplace environment upon entering the teaching profession (Coleman, 2020). The fourth question connected to the central research question and sub-questions one and two by investigating participants' experiences with teachers from other generations in the workplace (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999; Leslie et al., 2020). The fifth question addressed the central research question and sub-questions two and three by exploring Gen Z workplace relationships and their relationships to performance abilities (Sun et al., 2021).

Question six was relevant to the central research question and both sub-questions two and three by examining how workplace relationships positively contribute to retention (Sun et al., 2021). The eighth question is connected to the second sub-question by comparing participants' expectations of the workplace before employment and after four years of experience (Sun et al., 2021). Question nine addressed the central research question by inquiring about participants' desire to challenge standards and expectations in the workplace and related to sub-question three by seeking information on what participant would like to challenge and why (Parker et al., 2020). Question 10 related to the central research question by exploring if participants had recalled any experiences since the individual interview and journal entry that they would like to expand on, and it related to sub-question two by focusing on any additional experiences that they remembered had happened after four years of teaching (Moustakas, 1994).

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

The focus group discussion was conducted after the individual interviews and the journal entries. The focus group session was recorded on the same virtual platform as the individual interviews and was transcribed using the same transcriber from fiverr.com. Data collected from the focus group was analyzed similarly to the manner as the individual interviews and journal entries. This discussion provided further clarification and understanding of Gen Z teacher experiences. Upon analysis of the focus group discussion, the number of thematic units were reduced (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data from the interviews, journal entries, and focus group was done using a step-by-step process following the procedures identified for transcendental phenomenological research designs (Moustakas, 1994). Steps in the data analysis process include epoché,

phenomenological reduction with bracketing and horizonalization, synthesis, and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). Emerging themes and significant statements were searched for throughout the data review of the transcripts from the interviews, journal entries, and focus groups (Moustakas, 1994). The themes, patterns, and significant statements were examined and served as the framework for understanding the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Open coding was accomplished by highlighting themes in different colors. This allowed me to determine concepts and categories. Manual coding helped in managing, organizing, and manipulating the data from the transcripts and journal entries (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Emphasis was placed on defining the dynamics and the underlying meanings of thought, feelings, and perceptions as emerging themes within the context of shared experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Donaldson and Dunfee's (1999) integrative social contracts theory was considered throughout the analysis of the data.

Epoché

The process of epoché was employed to direct the study past the constraints of any prejudices. Epoché is the researcher setting aside prejudgments and biases to embrace a new knowledge of people, events, and things "as if for the first time" through the eyes of a child (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). By doing so, I was able to control my interest in the subject and maximize the benefits of the transcendental research approach (Moustakas, 1994). The participants were able to use me as a receptive and neutral listening ear as they recalled their experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenological Reduction

The process of phenomenological reduction was conducted by analyzing and footnoting the data throughout (Moustakas, 1994). During this process, I was examining and reexamining

the data to find necessary statements and experiences with descriptions of those that were

texturally rich in the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Two critical processes in

reduction are bracketing and horizontalizing (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing is the process of

emphasizing only research topics and questions (Moustakas, 1994). Horizontalization is the

initial effort of treating every statement with authenticity and as genuinely valid and valued

equally (Moustakas, 1994). Reduction is the process of eliminating repetitive and overlapping

experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Multiple data sources were used to create core themes from

clustering for validation (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, textural descriptions of participants were

crafted to become testimonial accounts (Moustakas, 1994). Upon analysis, I was able to derive

textural descriptions of the significance and essence of the phenomenon.

Imaginative Variation and Textural-Structural Description

To understand the underpinnings of each experience I employed creative variation to

concentrate on the descriptions of each topic. The steps for imaginative variation include

deriving textural meanings from structural meanings, recognizing the underlying themes,

consideration of feelings and thoughts brought on by the phenomenon, and developing

descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation was used to find the "how" that

illuminated the "what" from the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). From

the textural and structural descriptions, a composite description was created, allowing for the

development and organization of the combined writings of themes from all the participants'

stories (Moustakas, 1994). This process enabled me to arrive at the essence of the lived

experiences of Gen Z teachers' relationships in K-12 schools in the US.

Trustworthiness

The goal of this section was to describe in detail the measures taken to conduct a rigorous and valid study. Lincoln et al (1985) eloquently stated that "if prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth" (p. 304). Qualitative research is rigorous, reliable, and objective if conducted correctly. This qualitative approach synthesized experiences and focused on meanings and essences, thus revealing that experience and behavior are essential ingredients of subjectivity and objectivity, and that all parts make a whole (Moustakas, 1994).

Credibility

Credibility for this study came from prolonged engagement with participants during the individual interviews and focus group. Credibility was achieved through triangulation from the interviews, journal entries, and focus group. This allowed for the checking for multiple sources of data for evidence of consistency and validation of emergent themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln et al., 1985; Patton, 2014). Spending a prolonged amount of time engaging with the participants allowed me to invest enough time to build trust (Lincoln et al., 1985). Participants were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the transcripts rendered from the interviews and focus group to evaluate the "accuracy and credibility" of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261). Member-checking has been established as the "most crucial technique for credibility" (Lincoln et al., 1985, p. 314). Throughout all processes, I employed reflexivity to bracket out my presuppositions through epoché during the analysis process (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). A reflective notebook was utilized to keep reflexivity in check in order to increase credibility of the qualitative research conducted.

Transferability

Transferability is the ability to apply the findings of the study being conducted to similar cases (Lincoln et al., 1985). For this study, the findings could be applied to Gen Z teachers at other schools in other regions of America. By properly describing information with rich context from the participants, others can determine whether the findings apply to their situation (Lincoln et al., 1985). I provided thick descriptions of participants' expressions during the interviews and focus group to aid in explaining my rationale for decisions made throughout the study, as well as for transparency and transferability to other research studies.

Dependability

Dependability and reliability share a similar focus on the research study's methodology, and it was my responsibility to make sure the study was logical, recoverable, and well-documented with the ability to repeat the study and produce similar findings (Lincoln et al., 1985). I utilized an effective dependability trail through a reflective notebook, providing a thorough collection of my thoughts and perspectives for personal reflections, and my data analysis though expressive notes that illuminated the study's limitations (Lincoln et al., 1985). Additionally, to maintain dependability, I kept a record of the notes and memos compiled during the interviews, journal entry analysis, focus group discussion, and committee member meetings. Committee members will serve as external reviewers to ensure processes are thorough, detailed, and objective.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree of objectivity or the extent to which study participants contributed to the findings, as opposed to the researcher's bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln et al., 1985). I showed transparency in relaying explanations of the steps taken from the beginning

of the research to the development of the findings in the reflective journal, notes, and memos. Korstjens and Moser (2018) defined confirmability as the clarity with which findings are derived from data. To do this, I chronologically documented my thoughts, perceptions, pre-judgments, notes, memos, summaries, and information regarding iterations of data analysis. Additionally, my chair provided a review of the process throughout data collection and analysis.

Ethical Considerations

With integrity being my foremost value, ethical considerations are vital for this study. I took Patton's (2014) suggestion for using pseudonyms for all participants to maintain confidentiality. Pseudonyms were compiled from names associated with the alphabet and were assigned beginning with the letter "A" in the order in which participants returned consent forms. I was the only person with access to the documentation regarding the identity of the participants for this study. The replies from the focus group and interviews are being kept private on my password-protected laptop. Participants sent their journal entries directly to me through secure email to safeguard the data and integrity of the research. There was no potential for ethical issues to arise throughout the course of the procedures. All data and materials collected during this research are being stored on a password-protected personal laptop for a minimum of three years and will then be destroyed. Participants received teacher supplies ($15-$20 value) as a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Results may have provided a deeper understanding of classroom ethics and morals common to K-12 schools while adding to the existing knowledge on the subject. The risks involved in this study were minimal, which means they were equal to the risks one may encounter in everyday life.

Permissions

Before any data was collected for this transcendental phenomenological study, permissions had to be obtained. Firstly, IRB approval (Appendix A) was obtained through Liberty University (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following the approval of the IRB, I utilized personal and professional acquaintances to assist in finding participants born within Gen Z. I posted recruitment flyers at local businesses and sent out recruitment emails to large school districts beginning in the Southwest. Each participant was given a consent form to sign (see Appendix B).

Other Participant Protections

The consent form was provided to potential participants via email and verified their willingness to participate voluntarily by contributing to individual interviews, journal entries, and a focus group. Consent also assured participants of their volunteerism and that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identity, which also confirmed their eligibility (see Appendix B). The consent form explained the purpose of the study. Participants received the consent prior to any invitation for data collection; each participant was given the opportunity to review the form before signing it and returning it via email.

Summary

The techniques applied in this qualitative study were described in this chapter. A qualitative transcendental phenomenological design was utilized to investigate how Gen Z teachers in K-12 schools in the United States engage with one another at work. Because it concentrated on reporting participants' experiences with the phenomena rather than an interpretation of those experiences, transcendental phenomenology has been adopted (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One primary research question and three supporting research questions served as

the framework for this study. The research study's setting was the workplace and participants were selected using convenience sampling, with the sample size determined by topic saturation at 7 Gen Z teachers. In the researcher's role section, my presuppositions were described for bracketing and reevaluating for openness (Moustakas, 1994). This study explored Gen Z teacher workplace relationships utilizing a rigorous research approach while investigating Gen Z teachers in their professional setting, providing valuable insight for future research.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine Gen Z teachers' experiences with workplace relationships and their effect on retention at K-12 schools in the United States. This chapter begins with a description of the 12 participants who volunteered for the study. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and identified as a Gen Z teacher born on or after the year 1997, with one to four years of experience in a K-12 school. Semi-structured individual interviews, one journal prompt, and a focus group were conducted to collect data for analysis. A thematic data analysis was conducted where three main themes and seven sub-themes emerged. In addition, this chapter contains responses to the research questions. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to discussing the research data and outlier findings.

Participants

Upon IRB's approval to conduct the study, chapter three's outlined recruitment procedures were followed. Within nine weeks, six teachers responded to the email invitations and six responded through snowball recruiting a total of 12 participants (see Table 4). Each participant met the criteria of belonging to Gen Z, being a K-12 teacher, and having one to four years of experience. Their average age was 23, while the average years of experie3ce was tied between one and three years. Additionally, there were six females and six males with five participants teaching at middle schools. Each participant's description is listed in Table 4 below, followed by narrative form and listed alphabetically.

Alex

Alex was a 24-year-old female and in her third year of teaching first grade at her second school of employment. Both K-12 schools she taught at were located on the east coast of Florida. She held two teaching certifications and a reading endorsement, along with her bachelor's in elementary education. The first school she taught at gave Alex her first two years of teaching experience. She had been with her current school for one year now and grew close to a recently befriended teammate, while remaining close to two teammates from her previous school. There is only one other first grade teacher, in her school. Alex is the eldest and they are best friends. She said her current administrator went out of her way to make the workplace feel like a family by engaging in activities such as hanging out after work and on the weekends.

Avery

Avery, a 25-year-old male teacher, had a little more than a year of experience teaching at a high school with approximately 70 other teachers. His instructional expertise included teaching ninth through twelfth grade advanced mathematics and geometry in a large city in Oklahoma. Avery grew up in the same district he now teaches, in a city with a population of over 400,000. He has demonstrated remarkable personal academics by already reaching his third year of pursuing his PhD. Avery stated he found it hard to relate to older teachers of the baby boomer generation and Gen X, and it easy to relate to his students who are also members of Gen Z.

Bailey

Bailey was a 23-year-old female who taught band at a middle school and fine arts academy in Midwest Texas. She prided herself on being a Longhorn, as she graduated from the University of Texas (UT) at Austin. Proving UT is in her blood, during our interview she proudly adorned her burnt orange shirt and enthusiastically showed me her fingers in the "stick'em"

gesture, representing the Texas Longhorns. Bailey, like Avery, also grew up in the same district she teaches in. At age 14, Bailey knew she wanted to teach at just the same time band came into her life giving her the passion to teach band herself. It was her band director's scary attitude from his competitive nature that inspired her to be an understanding and calmer teacher. Bailey said she should have graduated during COVID-19 but did not want her first teaching experience to be online, so she decided to stay at UT for another year and enter the field when the pandemic declined. Like Alex, Bailey is best friends with her coworker and expects to remain at her school for a very long time.

Blair

Blair a 25-year-old female, teaches sixth and eighth graders in a Michigan middle school. Entering her fourth year in the profession, she vividly recalls her initial year, which felt somewhat unusual as she endeavored to establish positive connections with students. She had built these close relationships at the first school she taught. Blair observed that some of the older teachers appeared to have lost their enthusiasm, possibly due to an overload of extracurricular responsibilities put upon themselves by themselves. She believes this affects their interactions with students. For Blair, the workplace has enabled her to cultivate strong ties with the special education teachers whom she values for their guidance in navigating day-to-day challenges with students.

Cameron

Cameron, a 23-year-old female, lived and taught in Washington, DC. She taught grades six and seven. She was a fast talker, very enthusiastic and energetic. She started her career in 2020 at the height of COVID-19, which presented challenges with virtual learning and limited in-person interactions. She has seen her workplace relationships evolve from virtual interactions

to more organic and collaborative encounters with colleagues since the end of the pandemic. Cameron values her workplace relationships with her administrative team and fellow teachers, particularly in her math department. She also directs the after-school program, which0 gives her more time with administrators. These supportive relationships contribute to her teaching abilities and help in collaborative efforts to best support students and develop curriculum, which has given her a dynamic relationship with one specific co-worker. Cameron further noted a difference between generations of teachers regarding their willingness to engage in diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) at work.

Casey

Casey was a 23-year-old Spanish teacher with two years of teaching experience in two Arizona schools. She remembered in her first years facing challenges with feeling torn between two schools during a transitional period, which lead to feelings of isolation. As she transitioned to a single school, her workplace connections deepened and she began to, foster a sense of community, particularly with five of her colleagues. These relationships played a key role in supporting her teaching abilities. When discussing collaboration, Casey revealed that her school was an avid instructional and aspiring Ivy League school. In the interview Casey underscored her commitment to understanding her students, learning from experienced peers, and the importance of cross generational relationships to enhance the teaching experience.

Drew

Drew, a 24-year-old male, has two years of teaching experience with 11th and 12th graders in Texas. The day of the interview he wore a shirt and tie showing tribute to his role as an educator. Drew mentioned that he was new to teaching and as such, spends significant time planning and working, which leaves him with less time to socialize. He discussed the need to

manage relationships with colleagues spanning various age groups. Furthermore, he addressed the difficulties associated with comprehending and implementing policies mandated by the district or higher authorities, which may not align with his perspective. Additionally, he highlighted the challenge of establishing meaningful connections with students and ensuring that he imparts accurate knowledge to them.

Finley

Finley, a second-year elementary school teacher in Michigan specializing in grade four and teaching physics science, considers her profession a calling driven by deep love for children and a passion for helping them. Despite initial nervousness in her first year, she viewed the experience positively, citing guidance from older colleagues as instrumental in her growth. Finley views learning from her experience as a valuable aspect of her journey. However, she noted challenges, particularly in dealing with disrespect among students, which she perceives as an obstacle to gaining absolute respect as a teacher. Additionally, she expressed a sense of skepticism from older staff members who may question the capabilities of newer educators like herself. Finley remains dedicated to finding effective ways to manage a classroom and is determined to address issues of disrespect to establish a strong teacher student dynamic.

Harper

Harper, a first-year art teacher residing in Florida, teaches sixth grade and is motivated by personal reasons to assist his widowed mother. Despite initial nerves in the beginning, Harper describes his experiences as pleasant, noting the friendliness of older teachers. After teaching for just a year, he believes the role has significantly enhanced both his confidence as a teacher and as an individual. Harper expressed concern on the potential challenge of being overused or taken

advantage of by older teachers and expressed his intent to change this perceptio. Harper concluded with the hope that his contribution will lend aid to this research.

Kai

Kai has a positive outlook on his future teaching math for junior high schoolers in Illinois. He has three years of experience which he said has solidified his commitment to remain in the teaching profession. As a Gen Z teacher, he highlighted the ease of adapting to technology and that acknowledged the challenge of navigating traditional teaching methods. Despite initial expectations of a dynamic classroom, while jostling his chin-length hair, Kai said his reality has been a rewarding yet demanding journey. Workplace relationships positively impacted his teaching abilities, motivating him to continue making a difference in students' lives. Challenges as a Gen Z teacher include bridging the generational gap in teaching methods. After two years of teaching Kai reflected on the evolving nature of his expectations and expresses a desire to challenge traditional views on classroom structure for better student engagement. He shared an experience with introducing artificial intelligence into the classroom, shaping his approach to students' intellectual strength and hard work.

Morgan

By age 25, Morgan, had taught English Language Arts to sixth grade students for three years. He chose to become a K-12 schoolteacher because of his love for children and his desire to impart knowledge. Initially, he found it uncomfortable to work with people from other generations, but over time he found them to be more easy-going than teachers from his generation. Morgan learns from observing other teachers and their different teaching styles and approaches. He has faced challenges with the current generation of students who exhibit a lack of respect and eagerness to learn. His initial expectations of teaching were high, but he found the

reality to be more challenging than expected, particularly in managing students with different learning speeds. Despite these challenges, he has moments of genuine connection and progress in his teaching career.

Peyton

Peyton is a 24-year-old from Chicago. He has been teaching for two years in a junior high school, specifically English Language Arts. Peyton chose to become a schoolteacher due to the passion he saw in his parents who are both teachers. His first workplace environment was more of an assistant as he was under supervision as a student teacher. His experience with workplace relationships with older generations was mixed; some instances he found himself resistant to change, while others he welcomed. Peyton is open to learning and accepting new ideas and changes. He expressed some dissatisfaction with the quality of some teachers in the system, which motivates him to stay and make improvements. His initial expectations of teaching were challenged by the reality of dealing with different learning speeds among students, which required a closer teacher-learner relationship.

Table 4

Teacher Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Years Exp	Sex	Type of School	State	Grades Teaching
Alex	24	3	F	Elementary	FL	1st
Avery	25	1	M	High School	OK	9th-12th
Bailey	23	1	F	Middle School	TX	6th-8th
Blair	25	4	F	Middle School	MI	6th-8th
Cameron	23	3	F	Middle School	WA	6th
Casey	23	2	M	High School	AZ	11th-12th
Drew	24	2	F	High School	TX	11th-12th
Finley	23	1	F	Elementary	MI	4th
Harper	23	1	M	Middle School	FL	6th
Kai	25	3	M	Junior High	IL	9th-10th
Morgan	25	3	M	Middle School	IL	6th
Peyton	24	2	M	Junior High	WA	9th-10th

Results

One central research question and three sub-questions guided this study. I sought out large U.S. school districts for K-12 teachers born in or after 1997 with one to four years of experience. Recruitment of participants for the study began by searching for large public school district websites via Google and then selecting specific schools within the districts. I located contact information for teachers on the school's *contact us* or *directory* section on their websites. From more than 5,800 contact attempts, six individuals replied to the email search and six were acquaintances of a family member and their friends using snowball sampling. Over nine weeks, I collected data through individual interviews, journal entries, and one focus group.

Each participant was from a different United States school district with varying social backgrounds, making each response uniquely diverse concerning cultural norms. There were 12 interviews, three journal entries, and one focus group with five participants. Four interviews and

the focus group were audio and video recorded through Google Meets while the remaining eight

individual interviews were only audio recorded through the camera app on my laptop, with my

phone on record as a backup. After the interviews and the focus group were conducted, I sent the

files to a hired transcriber through Fiverr.com. Each transcript was printed out for easier note

taking.

My notes consisted of thoughts and perceptions I had during the initial review of video

and audio recordings and the transcripts. During data analysis I created a reflective journal where

I kept my thoughts about the data collection process. The reflective journal helped to separate my

perceptions from the study. By annotating prejudgments and observations during review of the

audio and video files, and transcripts, this reflective journal demonstrated my personal biases,

emotions, perceptions, and ideas.

During review of the transcripts, the words and phrases that stood out were divided into

groups of significant codes. While codes became distinct during the initial scrub of the

transcripts, themes and subthemes also emerged. The three themes which surfaced include:

relatability with the students, interactions with older generations, and workplace challenges (see

Table 5).

Table 5

Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Sub-Theme	Evidence
1. Relating to the Students	(1a) Shared Interests and Experiences	"I think that it's easier for me because I'm closer in age."
	(1b) Emotional Awareness	"Make the kids feel valid in their thoughts and feelings."
2. Interactions with Older Generations	(2a) Learning from Older Generations	"I really connect with people that are older than me."
	(2b) Differences in Perspective	"I learn from their experiences."
3. Workplace Challenges	(3a) Need to be Taken Serious	"Maybe you can take me a little bit more seriously."
	(3b) Work-Life Balance	"They give so much of their own personal time to be a teacher."
	(3c) Effects of COVID-19	"The nature of being in school during COVID too, like, it was really hard to ask people questions."
4. Advice for New Teachers	(4a) Listen to Colleagues	"Definitely listen."
	(4b) Workload Management	"Don't reinvent the wheel."

Relating to the Students

The first theme focused on the establishment of a connection between Gen Z teachers and their Gen Z students. This theme was common among each of the 12 teachers, appearing 87 times in the interviews, 18 times in the focus group, and twice in the writing prompts. Each Gen Z teacher valued open communication, emotional understanding, mutual respect, and reliability in their workplace relationships. They believed in connecting with students on a personal level,

validating their emotions, and acknowledging their individual experiences. When speaking about relating to their students due to their closeness in age, Alex retorted, "Because I'm so young, the students definitely see me more as like an older brother." Cameron also expressed this sentiment when she said talking to her students is like "talking to younger siblings or younger cousins." Casey explained, "Given my age, I'm probably going to have a better understanding of certain things that high schoolers are going through."

The interviews revealed unanimous agreement among the 12 participants regarding the importance of making a "connection" with their students. This theme spanned across all three data collection methods, emphasizing the reoccurring mention of the participant's having a "connection" with their students. It is important to note that Alex teaches the youngest age as a first-grade teacher, while the rest of the participants taught students age nine and up. Additionally, the middle school teachers, Bailey, Blair, Cameron, Harper, and Morgan mentioned in their interviews how important their connection with their students was to gain and maintain. In the focus group, Harper emphasized the need for teachers to be "understanding, accepting, and relatable," while both Kai and Finley agreed "there is a connection" between them and their students. In all, the code "connection" appeared 145 times collectively, underscoring the formidable quality of relatability that Gen Z teachers feel with their Gen Z and Alpha Generation students.

Shared Interests and Experiences

The first sub-theme relating to the students, was (1a) Shared Interests and Experiences. The interview transcripts from the 11 participants whose students were age nine and older talked of sharing values and experiences with their students. In the focus group, all participants unanimously included technology, consumption, the comeback from COVID-19, and social

injustice as experiences they shared. Avery said in his interview, "As for being a Gen Z, it is a lot easier to connect because we're still part of all of these new technologies and everything." Blair said, "I could get on their level, and I could have more like a pure conversation." In the focus group, when asked "Why did you choose to become a K-12 schoolteacher?," Finley, Harper, and Kai collectively mentioned having a generational "connection" as part of their drive to, as Kai put it, "make a positive impact on the lives of students in my same generation, through education."

Emotional Awareness

The second sub-theme under relatability was "Emotional Awareness". The relevance of this theme, among Gen Z teachers, was exposed by the five teachers from the focus group. N their interviews, another five teachers revealed that they felt they could advocate better for their students on issues like cyberbullying and gender rights because they have a better understanding of these issues compared to older generations. Blair said, "I think I can advocate for the kids better. . . cyberbullying was a really big issue we had, and a lot of kids would come in and other teachers weren't able to validate their emotions, like I did." Morgan echoed, he felt the need to "spread the understanding and importance of emotional awareness and validation in students" to foster strong relationships. The fourth-grade teacher, Finley, said she feels "more comfortable discussing topics like LGBT issues, cyberbullying, and mental health" with her students than the older generations at her school.

Interactions with Older Generations

The second main theme involved Gen Z teachers' "interactions with older generations." Ten of the participants reported favorable interactions with their older counterparts in the teaching profession. The code word that generated this theme was "respect." This code word was

mentioned 37 times throughout seven of the interviews and during the focus group discussion. In the focus group, Finley acknowledged, "They guide me most times, and I mostly go to them for help probably because they are older and have better experience." Peyton agreed, "The older teachers here are quite friendly." Morgan realized, "Watching how they manage their own classes and how they relate with their students has greatly improved my teaching abilities." Morgan talked about the importance of maintaining professional boundaries and being careful about what to share with colleagues to avoid conflict.

Avery said, "Admin is a strong one. . . I guess just a lot of support being able to talk to them about anything, if we need anything from them." She described her relationships with her teammates and administrators as "close, supportive, and understanding." Bailey mentioned having a supportive team at her school, which helped her navigate through her first year of teaching. Cameron spoke about the support she received saying, "I feel motivated to like stay in the profession because I just know that I am supported, and I know that, like, my work is valuable to them." Contrastingly, three Gen Z teachers felt a lack of support from older generations. Further, Harper explained he felt younger teachers may be vulnerable to "being maybe controlled or overused by older teachers."

Learning from Older Generations

From the transcripts, seven Gen Z teachers found that they often learned from the experiences of older teachers and appreciated their guidance. They valued the experience and wisdom that older teachers provided, Drew articulated that he listened to their advice while he brought his "own unique perspectives to the table". The journal entries revealed Drew, Cameron, and Peyton had relationships with their older counterparts when they reported that they formed close bonds with teachers who were Millennials and Gen Xers. In her interview, Bailey

reiterated, "I love the people that I work with, especially Millennials and Gen X." In his interview, Morgan asserted, "I found out they're easier going than teachers from my generation." Blair commented that having a co-teacher who was "supportive and understanding" helped her "feel heard and validated," which in turn positively influenced her teaching. Kai spoke about his approval to introduce things to their programs from current leadership, saying, "I feel like I'm heard all the time."

Differences in Perspectives

The interviews and focus group exposed that 10 of the 12 teacher participants felt they were more understanding and accepting of their students' individuality and personal experiences, while older teachers' perspectives tended to be more traditional and focused on conformity. Cameron said, "I think Gen Z teachers are more willing to, like, do the DEIB work versus, like, older teachers," while Blair supposed, "I think my generation is a lot better at being able to acknowledge issues that come up like LGBT and just anything along that line." Alex explained, "You really have to be careful with what you say and share with people, and I tend to just not say or share anything with anybody that can be controversial." In the focus group, Peyton recalled that older generation teachers act as if they "know it all and things should be done the way they've been doing them".

Peyton noted that, "Students won't learn if they don't feel safe or believe that their teacher cares about them." Accordingly, Drew said, "Understanding is key to connection. It is not just about imparting knowledge but creating a space where understanding bridges gaps and cultivates meaningful relationships."

Workplace Challenges

The third main theme, "workplace challenges" in teaching, was discussed throughout the interviews and focus group and included managing classroom behavior, dealing with bureaucratic steps, and handling difficult situations like unruly students. Morgan voiced angst with this generation of students saying they "have little or no respect and are also, not so eager to learn." Cameron talked about her first year of teaching when she would ask questions and the older teachers "would just tell me acronyms or abbreviations" and she felt it was "harmful" to her initial learning, saying that she "always felt kind of, I guess, dumb because I just didn't understand what they were talking about." She also expressed a feeling of not being taken seriously, which aligned with the same view as nine other teachers.

Need to Be Taken Serious

The first sub-theme, "The Need to be Taken Seriously," was mentioned in 10 of the 12 interviews and five times in the focus group. Bailey, Blair, Cameron, Casey, Drew, and Kai spoke about wanting their students to take them seriously, while Alex, Harper, Finley, and Avery spoke about wanting both the students, colleagues, and administration to take them more seriously. In their interviews, Alex, Casey, Finley, and Kai specifically mentioned administration coming into their classrooms to conduct evaluations and the disruption and disrespect caused from invaluable assessments wherein the feedback was not helpful. Peyton worried about being "seen as juvenile." Bailey said, "Being younger can sometimes lead to perceptions of being inexperienced" or not being "fully grown adults" by both colleagues and students. Peyton articulated that what he learned as a student aid was "totally different" from what he learned as a teacher. Morgan said that "while there are still challenges after two years, there are also moments of genuine connection and progress."

Work-Life Balance

The second sub-theme that came from workplace challenges was the perspective of stress and exhaustion from classroom responsibilities. Six of the Gen Z teachers remarked that they felt "stressed" and "drained" due to their workload and responsibilities. Seven interviews revealed Gen Z teachers in the K-12 school setting found work-life balance to be crucial. Kai, Finley, Harper, and Morgan expressed they often managed a heavy workload, that was challenging to maintain. Drew remarked that he would work "all day and then" must "prepare for the next day for a few more hours," explaining this extra commitment was not an expectation prior to entering the career. Similarly, Harper struggled with balancing grading papers while taking care of his widowed mother, remarking that, "Being a new teacher impacts my family and social interactions." Contrarily, three of the teachers, Drew, Bailey, and Casey said they developed a good work-life balance where they could disconnect from their job when they got home and not think about it until the next morning. Cameron said "I love the concept that I teach. It's just like the workload I think is unique to like just this profession." Blair said, "I had a co-teacher who didn't do a lot of work, so they would use all my plans which just made it harder for me."

Effects of COVID-19

The third sub-theme emerged in the interviews and the focus group showing up 52 times in conversations. The pandemic led to a shift in how teachers and students interacted with each other. Gen Z teachers noted that students are now more comfortable sharing personal information and feelings. Morgan also said that during the pandemic, "I didn't really talk to other people because we were just on Google Meets." Casey said he felt a shared connection from shared experiences with the students who experienced at-home schooling from the shut-down and then the return to their classrooms. Drew said he felt a closeness and comfortableness from the

students in expressing their feelings and sharing personal information about themselves. Three teachers in their interviews mentioned that the pandemic has made it harder to control or understand relationships in the school area due to students missing out on in-person kindergarten and pre-K classes. Bailey said, "It's funny to see that change, because after COVID, we really, really value that in-person connection."

Advice for New Teachers

The fourth main theme emerged from question 10 of the individual interviews. From the question, "What advice or suggestions do you have for first and second-year teachers to help them create valuable workplace relationships", all 12 teachers gave advice to new teachers. The top recommendations were prioritizing work-life balance by avoiding bringing work home, engaging in workplace relationships?," embracing technology in teaching methods, understanding students by staying updated on trends and social issues, and being prepared for challenges such as heavy workloads and misunderstandings about the teaching profession. These suggestions were broken down into two sub-themes, "Listen to Colleagues" and "Workload Management".

Listen to Colleagues

The first sub-theme under advice for new teachers was for them to listen to their elder colleagues. Avery underscored the "vital role of active listening" in the process of building meaningful relationships, emphasizing its significance within both the classroom and external interactions. Accordingly, Finley spoke about the act of attentive listening serves as a necessity in "maintaining open communication channels." Avery stressed, "Whether you take the advice or not, it's completely up to you, but definitely listen". Similarly, Bailey echoed the importance of listening, urging first-year teachers to prioritize this skill alongside keen observation. She urged

new teachers to "be really observant with the people that you work with and make sure that if there's any bit of conflict arising, don't put it on the back burner."

Workload Management

Sub-theme number two came from expressed advice given by Gen Z teachers to novice teachers about workload management. Bailey said not to "reinvent the wheel," and Casey said to, "take things at your own level of comfortability." Drew theorized there are many resources already created that can be used, so it is not necessary to "create everything from scratch." Blair talked about working all day and then "contacting parents after work hours and working all summer." Harper also recommended that teachers "not respond to emails or work after hours" unless it is urgent. Bailey advised new teachers to "take weekends off and maintain a good work-life balance."

Outlier Data and Findings

One unexpected finding and theme came up that did not align with specific research questions from one participant. Student dress code was mentioned by Bailey. She discussed a specific instance during a professional development session. She said that over the summer, the dress code was changed and older teachers "were pleased that students would get referrals for wearing crop tops to school." She further expounded on her contention, emphasizing that this focus is directed toward girls more often than boys. Drawing from her time in school, the participant conveyed the opinion that it is discriminatory to base dress code solely on what girls wore to school every day. Bailey found this female-directed scrutiny was found to be concerning and unfair. She spoke about it saying, "Dress code in general is so directed to women, which is like not okay to me."

She spoke of a more relaxed perspective on dress codes in schools and believed that students should be allowed "to express themselves freely" through their clothing, "as long as it is not distracting." She also thinks that conversations about dress code should happen "woman to woman," and found it "strange for a man to be dress coding a woman." After COVID-19, she noticed that the school district's dress code became more lenient due to "lawsuits from parents" claiming unfair treatment. Bailey detailed that she still believes there should be some boundaries, such as not allowing a "sixth grader to come to school in a bra and low-rise jeans."

Research Question Responses

This research on the lived experiences of Gen Z teachers' workplace relationships at K-12 schools attempted to answer one central research question and three sub-questions. The central research question for this study was founded on previous research and aimed to give a voice to the lived experiences of Gen Z teachers and the impact their workplace relationships have on retention. Sub-question one aimed to identify challenges of being a K-12 teacher and from Gen Z. Sub-question two sought to describe workplace relationship values of Gen Z teachers and how they have changed over their four years of experience. And the third sub-question aimed to understand how Gen Z teachers' workplace relationships foster teacher retention.

Central Research Question

What are Gen Z teachers' shared experiences with workplace relationships at K-12 schools in the United States? It is important to note that when asking Gen Z about workplace relationships, the teacher-student relationship was the first to be mentioned by 10 of the 12 teachers. Themes one through three, Relating to the Students, Interactions with Older Generations, and Workplace Challenges, supported the central research question. All three

appeared during the analysis of the interviews, journal entries, and focus group session. Additionally, five of the seven sub-themes directly addressed the central question, (1a) Shared Interests and Experiences, (1b) Emotional Awareness, (2a) Learning from Older Generations, (2b) Differences in Teaching Styles, and (3a) The Need to be Taken Seriously. Gen Z teachers in K-12 schools highlighted the significance of the teacher-student relationship, particularly stressing shared interests, emotional awareness, and the need for respect as key factors shaping their workplace experiences, revealed throughout the interviews, journal entries, and focus group session.

Gen Z teachers' ability to connect well with students due to their age proximity related directly to sub-theme (1a) Shared Interests and Experiences and was a dominant belief among the participants. Blair said she was more "in-tune with artificial intelligence (AI) and technology" and likes to teach her students "how to email and use tech-tools." Casey highlighted the advantage of being closer in age to his students, which allowed him to "connect with them on a deeper level." Gen Z teachers believed their connections with students evolved from a traditional teacher-student dynamic to an older sibling dynamic. Finley, Harper, Kai, and Morgan talked about this phenomenon in the focus group and stated they had seen it as a positive influence on their teaching experiences. Sub-theme (1b) "Emotional Awareness," explained that the relative closeness in age between these teachers and their students enabled them to have more authentic connections, facilitating engagement with diverse student interests and concerns. Bailey talked about misgendering and how teachers and students alike should "call everybody by their name all the time" instead of a specific pronoun. This relatability extended to a nuanced understanding of contemporary social issues and a heightened willingness among students to engage in emotional disclosure, attributing this openness to in-person connections.

Sub-themes (2a) Learning from Older Generations and (2b) Differences in Teaching Style, both addressed the variances between the older and younger generations. In this study, 10 participants voiced that they had positive relationships with their colleagues, including administrators. Finley said, "I mostly go to them for help probably because they are older and have better experience." Gen Z teachers appreciated collaboration with their peers, especially when it came to supporting students and curriculum development. This generation of teachers were also more comfortable with technology. As Peyton said, "I love using technology in the classroom."

The third theme, Workplace Challenges, specifically sub-theme (3a) The Need to be Taken Seriously, addressed the shared experiences of Gen Z teachers not being respected due to their age. Respect was described by Finley and Harper as "a mutual agreement" between them and their students or them and their colleagues and administration. Respect and appreciation played a significant role in Gen Z teachers' workplace relationships. Bailey said her sixth-grade students "respect me more" than teachers from older generations when she spoke of specific co-workers who she described as "ticking time bombs of emotions." These factors not only influenced Gen Z's job satisfaction, but also impacted their decision to stay in the teaching profession.

Sub-Question One

How do Gen Z teachers describe challenges of being from this generation when teaching at a K-12 school? This first sub-question was created to understand how Gen Z teachers viewed themselves in comparison to older generations of teachers. Themes two and three Interactions with Older Generations and Workplace Challenges both answer sub-question one. Sub-theme (3a) The Need to be Taken Seriously", (2b) Differences in Teaching Styles and (3b) Work-Life

Balance, each supported this question. Gen Z teachers, when reflecting on the challenges of being from their generation while teaching at K-12 schools, expressed concerns about the need to be taken seriously by older staff, resistance to innovative teaching styles, and the struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance, as highlighted in the interviews, journal entries, and focus group discussion.

Sub-theme (3a) The Need to be Taken Seriously was directly referred to in Finley's interview when she said, "Older staff thinks we are not the right employee for the job, thinking we are newbies." These comments alone amplify the impression Gen Z teachers have that older teachers do not trust them or take them seriously as educators. Alex also felt like administrators were intrusive, disrespectful, and unhelpful when evaluating his class. He expanded upon this, saying they "are just going through the motions" and do not really care to "actually improve or help anything."

Sub-theme (2b) Differences in Teaching Styles was addressed across each of the 12 interviews, two of the journal entries, and in the focus group. For example, Casey mentioned resistance from older generations posed a significant hurdle when he tried to introduce innovative teaching methods at work. Avery described his difference approach to communicating with students when he said, "I feel like I can tell them things that will get through to them more than what other teachers would be able to tell them." Sub-theme (3b), Work-Life Balance, underscored the formidable challenge of maintaining a healthy work-life equilibrium for Gen Z teachers. The recognition of a deficit in teachers was highlighted, alongside an acknowledgment of the challenges and burdens that existing educators bear because of the shortage. Casey stated, "Because of everybody always being short-staffed after the pandemic, it was very hard to get the

help that we needed from our admin because they were in the classroom teaching too." Harper added, "It just makes me sad for those teachers because they're pulling a lot of weight."

The exploration of sub-themes (2b) Differences in Teaching Styles" and (3b) Work-Life Balance illuminated the pervasive challenges faced by Gen Z teachers, as evidenced by the recurring issues of resistance to innovative methods, difficulties in achieving a harmonious work-life equilibrium, and the strain imposed by teacher shortages. The collective voices of educators like Casey and Harper underscored the pressing need for systemic support and resource allocation to address these multifaceted challenges in the teachers' communities.

Sub-Question Two

How do Gen Z teachers describe workplace relationship values and how they have changed over their four years of experience? Themes two and three Interactions with Older Generations and Workplace Challenges both addressed changes in Gen Z teachers' workplace relationship values. Sub-theme (2b) amplified Differences in Teaching Styles with Gen Z participant unanimously agreeing that an emphasis should be placed on the importance of workplace relationship values such as open-mindedness, understanding, and relatability. Over their one to four years of experience, Gen Z teachers have observed a transformation in their workplace relationship values, emphasizing the importance of open-mindedness, understanding, and relatability, as reflected in the changes addressed in sub-themes (2b), Variations in Teaching Styles and (3c), Consequences of COVID-19, highlighting the impact of both professional growth and the challenges posed by the pandemic on their evolving approach to relationships within the educational setting.

Gen Z also observed a shift in their approach to relationships. While initially Alex, Blair, Cameron, Drew, Finley, and Peyton were more open, they developed caution when sharing their

thoughts on certain subjects in a professional setting to keep clear from conflict. This suggested that they became more guarded and selective in their interactions as they gained more experience in the field. Sub-theme (3c) Effects of COVID-19," was emphasized by 11 of the 12 teachers throughout all three data collection methods. Some exposed COVID-19 as a contender to the pandemic of teacher shortages while others said it caused "social and learning deficits among students." The weight of heavy workloads was deemed palpable, as participants grappled with the relentless demands of teaching and juggling classroom responsibilities.

Gen Z were worried about COVID-19 restrictions, after-hours preparation, parent communication, and summer work. Casey expressed a conundrum on whether he believed if the differences among other generations versus his were due to his being from Gen Z or due to the "aftereffects of the pandemic." Avery, the first-grade teacher, said students in "the older grades" were the ones who were a lot harder to control since they were subject to the pandemic during their early school grades. Bailey extended her college career instead of becoming a teacher during COVID-19 to avoid the issues that were happening in the classroom during and after the pandemic. Drew said he began teaching in 2020 at the "height of the pandemic" when she had to be completely virtual and faculty "didn't really interact with each other at all" even upon initial return.

Analysis of sub-themes (2b), Variations in Teaching Styles and (3c), Consequences of COVID-19, illuminated the changing workplace relationship values of Gen Z teachers throughout their one to four years in the field. The consistent focus on values like open-mindedness, understanding, and relatability concerning teaching styles signified a considerable evolution in their attitude toward relationships. Negotiating the hurdles presented by the pandemic, these educators conveyed a noticeable transition from an initial state of openness to a

more cautious approach, underscoring how their collective experiences molded their interactions within the ever-evolving educational environment.

Sub-Question Three

How do Gen Z teachers' workplace relationships foster teacher retention? Themes one and two Relating to the Students and Interactions with Older Generations, answered this question. Gen Z teachers' workplace relationships fostered teacher retention by emphasizing shared interests and experiences with students, as demonstrated by the pleasure derived from teaching and personal connections mentioned by Morgan. This is also evident by the promoting of supportive relationships with older generations, as evidenced by Avery's love for her teammates and the close friendships maintained by Bailey, Blair, Drew, and Peyton with colleagues from older generations. Specifically, sub-theme (1a) Shared Interests and Experiences, was shown through Morgans response that while his relationships with colleagues did not necessarily convince him to stay, he enjoyed "being a teacher and liked the students," which made the job pleasurable for him. Similarly, Alex mentioned that he "did computational methods" in his PhD work, "so, I could work in big tech as a data scientist and make a lot of money, but would I want to?"

Gen Z teachers' ability to connect with students due to their understanding of current social trends influenced many of their decisions to stay in the teaching field. Sub-theme (2a), Learning from Older Generations, was seen through Avery's response that she stayed in her position because she "loved" her "teammates and felt supported by them." Likewise, Bailey, Blair, Drew, and Peyton all mentioned they were close friends with teammates who were in older generations than theirs. Key evidence of Gen Z teachers' retention was particularly evident in themes one and two, Relating to the Students and Interactions with Older Generations. Namely,

sub-theme (1a), Shared Interests and Experiences illustrated how personal enjoyment of teaching and a genuine connection with students contributed to Gen Z teachers' decision to stay. Additionally, sub-theme (2a), Learning from Older Generations, highlighted the significance of supportive relationships with colleagues, showcasing how the camaraderie and support from teammates played a pivotal role in retaining Gen Z teachers at U.S. K-12 schools.

Summary

This chapter unveiled an in-depth analysis of the outcomes collected from the research. The primary focus of this investigation was to unveil the pivotal role of workplace relationships of Gen Z teachers in K-12 schools. This chapter examined the three emergent themes and seven sub-themes derived during the data analysis. The themes and sub-themes aligned with the central research question and the three sub-questions. The themes discovered through the process of data analysis included (1) Relatability with the Students, (2) Interactions with Older Generations, and (3) Workplace Challenges. To substantiate these thematic constructs, relevant In vivo quotes collected from the interviews, journal entries, and focus group discussion were systematically integrated into the research study. The combination of insights derived from the interviews, journal entries, and the focus group served as a comprehensive exploration of Gen Z teachers' experiences with workplace relationships. The insights demonstrated that Gen Z teachers possessed a keen ability to navigate emotional dynamics within their classrooms, attributed partly to a post-pandemic emphasis on personal connection. Positive interactions between them, their colleagues, and their administrators emerged as pivotal for teacher retention, providing invaluable support, and contributing significantly to professional satisfaction. They collectively expressed the need to be seen in a serious light and recognized as significant, like their elder counterparts in the workplace. Negative relationships attributed to burnout and prompted

teachers to consider alternative ways of communicating. The close age proximity of Gen Z teachers with their students and the shared social and technological experiences further enhanced their capacity to relate to their students, fostering a more enriched educational experience.

The findings of the study were primarily established through the responses from the 12 participants during interviews, journal entry responses, and the focus group discussion. The data collection methods revealed that as these teachers progressed through their initial four years in the profession, a discernible shift in their approach to workplace relationships became apparent. Initially characterized by an open disposition, they adopted a more measured approach in sharing personal information, reflective of their accumulated experience and growing professional acumen. This adaptive quality spoke to the fluid nature of these relationships and underscored Gen Z teachers' capacity to navigate the demands of their roles. Moreover, their connections with students are not that of an authoritative figure, but instead as a trusted older sibling. This bond not only deepened their engagement with students, but also significantly heightened their job satisfaction. One minor outlier was detected during the interview component of the data collection, which consisted of one participant reporting their dislike with dress code initiatives within their school, stemming from discrimination concerns against females. Ultimately, this chapter illuminated the central role of workplace relationships in shaping the experiences and retention of Gen Z teachers. It underscored the critical significance of positive interactions with peers and supervisors, as well as the evolving nature of their connections with students.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe Gen Z teachers' experiences with integrative social contracts within workplace relationships and their effect on retention. Twelve Gen Z teachers from K-12 schools in the U.S. serve as participants in the study. This chapter provides a discussion of the research findings that are integral in showcasing the teachers' shared lived experiences. Additionally, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research are addressed herein. Finally, the summary for chapter five is a to a concluding summary of the discussion from the data collected ends the chapter.

Discussion

Three data collection methods were utilized to support the findings. The data collection methods included individual interviews, a journal prompt, and a focus group session. Twelve teachers participated in the study. Each participant was a current K-12 teacher with one to four years of experience teaching in the U.S. and between the ages 23 through 25. It is important to note that 10 of the participants taught sixth grade or higher, making their age gap, at the most 14 years.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The findings of this study revealed that despite diverse backgrounds, Gen Z teachers in K-12 schools shared common experiences. Through interviews, journal entries, and a focus group, participants openly discussed their beliefs, attitudes, and encounters. Three overarching themes emerged including Relating to the Students, Interactions with Older Generations, and Workplace Challenges. Additionally, seven sub-themes provided further insight on the impact of

workplace relationships on Gen Z teacher retention: (1a) Shared Interests and (1b) and

Experiences, and Emotional Awareness, (2a) Learning from Older Generations and (2b)

Differences in Teaching Styles, and (3a) The Need to be Taken Seriously, (3b) Work-Life

Balance, and (3c) Effects of COVID-19. These findings provided valuable insights for

understanding the experiences of Gen Z teachers with one to four years of practice at K-12

schools.

Critical Discussion of Findings

The participants of this study hailed from diverse backgrounds, each contributing a

unique set of experiences. Despite their individuality, common threads emerged in the identified

themes and subthemes that served as the foundation for making sense of their lived experiences.

Gen Z teachers' workplace relationships at K-12 schools in the U.S. and their impact on

retention was the main area of exploration. Key findings highlighted the transformative role of

Gen Z educators, emphasizing their intergenerational synergy and the pivotal importance of

nurturing supportive environments within schools and classrooms.

Relatability and Intergenerational Synergy

The findings illuminated a dynamic shift in the teaching landscape with the emergence of

Gen Z educators. "Intergenerational synergy" refers to the positive interactions and mutual

learning that occurred between Gen Z teachers and their older colleagues in the workplace. The

study found that Gen Z teachers, with their adeptness in understanding of technological and

contemporary societal issues, were able to connect with students effectively and serve as

valuable resources for older colleagues in navigating the digital landscape and communicating

with their students. This synergy enriched the teaching environment and contributed to a more

effective educational experience. However, it also brought challenges as Gen Z teachers felt a

sense of responsibility and faced difficulties in managing expectations due to their dual role of bridging generational gaps and teaching.

Gen Z's values, concerns, and ambitions aligned with their students, fostering a unique connection between them and further enhancing the learning experience. Their technological and social justice fluidity extended to their interactions with older colleagues, positioning them as valuable resources and mediators. However, this dual role of bridging generational gaps came with occasional challenges in managing expectations. The study underscored the significance of fostering intergenerational understanding in educational institutions, where collaborative learning and mutual exchange of knowledge between Gen Z teachers and their more experienced counterparts enriched the teaching environment.

Nurturing Supportive Environments

The research further highlighted the pivotal role of supportive relationships, particularly with administration, in shaping Gen Z teachers' job satisfaction and retention. When Gen Z teachers felt valued and championed by their superiors, they were more likely to consider staying and committing to the profession. Conversely, instances of negative interactions and perceptions of being undervalued or overburdened acted as catalysts for burnout and attrition.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Based on the findings, ensuring the success and retention of Gen Z teachers requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both policy and practice. Policies play a pivotal role in fostering intergenerational understanding, supporting work-life balance, and recognizing the diversity within the teaching staff. Implementing mentorship programs and encouraging technology integration are also key considerations. On a practical level, schools should prioritize understanding and relating to students, cultivating positive workplace relationships, and

respecting the value of work-life balance. Providing opportunities for professional development and aligning communication styles with Gen Z preferences would further contribute to a supportive and inclusive work environment. By strategically combining policy changes with practical initiatives, educational institutions can create a nurturing atmosphere that encourages the growth and retention of Gen Z teachers.

Implications for Policy

Policy implications encompass a range of targeted strategies. First, instituting professional development initiatives centered on intergenerational understanding and collaboration can fortify relationships between Gen Z educators and their more experienced counterparts. Additionally, establishing measures to safeguard work-life balance, like limiting after-hours work expectations, could bolster teacher well-being. Ensuring supportive management by implementing regular feedback sessions between administrators and teachers and among supervisors, subordinates, and peers. Additionally, providing resources and fostering open communication channels will cultivate an environment where all educators, regardless of generation, feel heard and valued.

Mentorship programs, where experienced teachers guide newer teachers, could aid in professional growth while fostering intergenerational bonds. Creating an inclusive and respectful work environment is essential, and this involves acknowledging and appreciating diversity within the teaching staff, including generational differences. Further, policies promoting the seamless integration of technology into teaching practices could tap into Gen Z's technological proficiency, providing an inclusive and inviting arena for their development and professional growth. These policy interventions hold promise in enhancing teacher retention by nurturing a more supportive and empathetic work environment for Gen Z educators. While the literature

review noted low pay as a threat to retention of teachers, pay was not a concern among these Gen Z teachers.

Implications for Practice

The findings in this study are associated with Gen Z teachers' shared workplace relationship experiences at K-12 schools and how they fostered teacher retention. Gen Z teachers emphasized the significance of teacher-student shared interests, emotional awareness, and the need for respect as key factors shaping their workplace experiences. Educational institutions must place a strong emphasis on recognizing the pivotal role of teacher-student relationships in shaping the experiences of both teachers and students at K-12 schools. The effects of COVID-19 were referred to as barriers to the teaching process and overall communication (Sun et al., 2021). Gen Z teachers were concerned about students who missed out on socialization and the academic discipline through in-person classroom settings. Implementing targeted strategies to cultivate shared interests, emotional awareness, and a culture of reuniting within these relationships is crucial. By prioritizing these aspects, schools can contribute to a positive work environment that fosters meaningful connections between teachers and students, clearing a path toward better communication.

When reflecting on the challenges of being from their generation while teaching K-12, Gen Z expressed concerns about being taken seriously, resistance to what they consider to be innovative teaching from older teachers, and the struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Institutions could mitigate these challenges by implementing supportive policies and targeted professional development programs for novice and experienced teachers alike. By acknowledging and actively working to overcome these hurdles, educational institutions can

create an environment that allows Gen Z teachers to thrive, ensuring their long-term commitment to the teaching profession.

Observing the transformation in workplace relationship values among Gen Z teachers highlighted the need for educational leaders to foster open-mindedness, understanding, and relatability within the teaching community. Professional development programs should be designed to focus on cultivating these values, providing educators with the necessary interpersonal skills for effective collaboration and communication. Institutions can use this research to affirm that when encouraging a culture of openness and understanding not only enhances relationships among colleagues but also positively influences the overall work atmosphere, contributing to a more collaborative and supportive educational setting.

Prioritizing teacher-student relationships, addressing specific challenges faced by this generation of educators, cultivating open-mindedness, and integrating technology effectively can collectively contribute to a more supportive and enriching environment, fostering the professional growth of teachers, and enhancing the overall quality of teaching and learning in K-12 settings. Educators can use these findings to understand the values, challenges, and evolving experiences of Gen Z teachers. The data may inspire teachers with similar experiences to collaborate to create various methods and instructional resources for use by others in the field of teaching.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

This qualitative study aimed to discover Gen Z teachers' perceptions of workplace relationships in K-12 school in America. This section will address the theoretical and empirical implications of the study by comparing the themes with the theory and literature presented in Chapter Two to understand how the phenomenon aligned with existing educational theories and

research. The research findings provided valuable insight into the practical implications of Gen Z teachers and their workplace relationships' impact on retention in K-12 schools in the U.S. By providing a nuanced examination of how these findings intertwine with preexisting knowledge, the study provided valuable insight into the practical implications of workplace relationships of Gen Z teachers within the unique context of K-12 schools in the U.S.

Empirical Implications

The empirical implications derived from this qualitative study closely coincided with the insights outlined in the literature review, specifically in the examination and juxtaposition of the pertinent literature discussed in the corresponding chapter. Findings from the study revealed several major viewpoints that echoed the existing literature. This study centered on the idea that high rates of teacher burnout, attrition, stress, and excessive workloads have plagued the teaching profession and are reaching unprecedentedly high levels, causing burnout and stress among teachers (Leslie et al., 2020). While the literature pointed to issues arising from the teacher shortage, the findings were not exclusive in that the shortage was solely to blame (Natanson, 2022; Will, 2022a). During data collection, two participants expressed that they faced difficulties when there were too few teachers due to a shortage (García & Weiss, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2018; Sutcher et al., 2019). However, emphasis was placed on the importance of managing heavy workloads (García & Weiss, 2019), prioritizing a healthy work-life balance (Paul Grayson, 2021), and seeking careers that align with their personal beliefs and values, allowing for flexibility and self-care (Mahmoud et al., 2021).

The study mirrored the literature reviews' emphasis on the challenge of facing heavy workloads and the need to prepare for classes outside of work hours, which led to stress and exhaustion (García & Weiss, 2019; Mahmoud et al., 2021; Paul Grayson, 2021). Research also

found Gen Z's thoughts, beliefs, and values were influenced by social and cultural factors, which in turn impacted their workplace relationships and retention intentions (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Douglas, 2000; Mahmoud et al., 2021). Positive relationships with colleagues and administrators encouraged Gen Z teachers to stay in their positions and supported the empirical data that the quality of teacher workplace relationships have a direct impact on teacher retention and job satisfaction (Wang et al., 2014). The study mirrored the literature again explaining Gen Z teachers brought their values and beliefs with them to their job. They are known for their interest in social justice, community engagement, and making a positive impact on the world (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Douglas, 2000; Mahmoud et al., 2021). In summary, the empirical implications of this qualitative study aligned closely with the literature review, offering practical insights into Gen Z teachers' perspectives on workplace relationships in K-12 schools and their effect on retention. The study highlighted the intergenerational relationships that are beneficial to teaching.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical framework that shaped this study was Donaldson and Dunfee's (1995) integrative social contracts (ISCs) theory. The ISC theory offered an active framework for understanding the dynamics of Gen Z teachers' workplace relationships in K-12 schools. ISCs are characterized as informal yet critical agreements shaping ethics and morals within professional communities. This study highlighted the significance of ISCs and hypernorms in comprehending the unspoken rules and norms that mold workplace relationships of Gen Z teachers, shedding light on the unique challenges and opportunities they face in K-12 school settings.

The study sought to understand generational and workplace norms of Gen Z teachers to expose the integrated social contracts and hypernorms within their workplace relationships. The theoretical implications extended to the understanding that schools, as local communities, have their own moral free space within classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, and other areas within educational settings. For instance, when determining appropriate actions within specific circumstances and situations such as when administrators go into the classrooms to do assessments on teachers, as in Alex's testimony. The study further pointed out, that Gen Z teachers' social contracts in 2023 were influenced by political, environmental, and economic views from global social media outlets, further linking the ISC theory to community standards, moral behaviors, and social norms.

In the present study, integrative social contracts were manifested in how Gen Z teachers adapted with integrating themselves into the workplace through their one to four years of teaching, mainly from the years 2020 to 2023. Gen Z teachers used their own codes of ethics and conduct to operationalize management of their classroom and daily interactions, as shown in Table 5. Additionally, Table 5 gives substance to the specific hypernorms identified in this research. In this study, Gen Z teachers recognized emotional engagement and evaluated each situation based on their knowledge, experiences, and ethics. Their demonstration of innate human sociability seamlessly aligns with Donaldson and Dunfee's (1999) framework.

Table 6

Hypernorm Principles of Gen Z Teachers in K-12 Schools

Hypernorm	Principle	Evidence	Example
Generational Membership	Standards proposed by groups and organizations, such as Gen Z sharing many beliefs, values, and standards.	Consistently referred to by Pew Research Center as a cohort of individuals from the same time, with the same life experiences, creating specific belief systems and values.	Gen Z feel connected to their age group as a collective, referring to their abilities to connect with their students better than older generations.
Generational Emotional Intelligence	A worldwide agreement that everyone has the responsibility for contributing to a more effective global order.	Generally supported by a relevant international community of professionals such as those in education.	The social emotional awareness that Gen Z exhibits to human rights such as equity, diversity, and gender.
Occupational Workplace Support	Best practices, standards, and professional codes.	Every human without distinction possesses an unalienable and untouchable dignity.	The idea that all teachers should accept inclusion of DEIB programs and certain social conversational topics.

Note. Principles and evidence were developed from support statements in *Ties That Bind* by Donaldson and Dunfee, 1999.

The findings supported Gen Z teachers' nuanced approach to school morals by recognizing implicit understandings within their micro-social communities, like individual classrooms, the hallway, cafeterias, or other school settings, and indicating that each member of these communities had the moral free space to change their own rules within relationships between themselves and their students, colleagues, and administration. This theoretical

framework contributed to understanding the generational and professional hypernorms shaping workplace relationships in contemporary K-12 educational settings in the U.S.

Limitations and Delimitations

Within the framework of a qualitative study, it is crucial to consider both limitations and delimitations, which define the study's boundaries, constraints, and potential weaknesses related to its design, scope, and methodology (Patton, 2014). Limitations refer to factors that may impede the study's generalizability, reliability, or validity (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, delimitations signify the intentional and purposeful choices made by the researcher to delineate and clarify the study's scope and objectives, ultimately shaping the course of the investigation.

Limitations

This qualitative study sought to investigate the workplace relationships of Gen Z teachers in K-12 schools across the United States and was subject to certain limitations. Potential limitations included two teachers rejecting the invitation to volunteer, due to the Christian worldview of Liberty University. Their prejudice toward Christianity compelled me to focus recruiting efforts on conservative-led states such as Florida, Oklahoma, and Texas. Those five volunteers garnered seven more from other states around the U.S. This was limiting as it added to the possible exclusion of teachers with liberal beliefs and views. Further, 10 of the 12 participants taught sixth grade or higher, reflecting primarily the experiences and perceptions of educators who teach adolescents and teens, which are also part of the Gen Z cohort. These limitations were beyond the researcher's control.

Delimitations

The qualitative nature of the research introduced the possibility of subjectivity and researcher bias during data collection and analysis, despite efforts to minimize these issues. The

participant selection, achieved through purposive and snowball sampling, exclusively targeted

Gen Z teachers working in K-12 schools in America. The study omitted the perspectives of other

educational professionals, such as guidance counselors, paraeducators, or administrators, which

could have contributed to a more comprehensive analysis of workplace relationships.

Additionally, participants were required to have one to four years of teaching experience,

presenting the teachers as mostly novice. With the participants ranging in age from 23 to 25, the

life experiences reflected are those of novice teachers. Due to the wide range of states in which

the participants taught, the research was conducted in a virtual format, restricting the researcher's

physical presence with the participants during the interviews and in the focus group. These

deliberate delimitations were chosen to concentrate the study on a specific group of educators

within a specific age range and school setting, enabling a focused exploration of their

perceptions regarding workplace relationships in K-12 schools in the U.S.

Recommendations for Future Research

Reflecting on the findings, limitations, and delimitations of the qualitative study, several

recommendations for future research were identified regarding retention and workplace

relationships. The current study specifically focused on the perspectives of Gen Z teachers with

one to four years of experience at K-12 schools, suggesting a narrow viewpoint of teachers who

are part of only one generation. Consequently, the minimal one to four years of experience could

be expanded to include teachers with longevity in teaching. Moreover, future researchers should

consider expanding the participant pool to include perspectives from teachers from other

generations as well as administrators and counselors. These professionals, with their varied roles,

can offer unique insights into the challenges and benefits of workplace relationships. Other than

K-12, schools such as early childhood and higher education should also be further explored.

Including their perspectives would provide a more holistic view of workplace relationships and their impact on retention among Gen Z teachers. Furthermore, future research can explore targeted professional development courses for novice teachers, focusing on the integration of emotional awareness and DIEB initiatives focused on inclusion for all generations of teachers. This focus would contribute to the ongoing professional relationship growth of teachers and improve the quality of the workplace environment in K-12 schools.

Future research endeavors in this area would greatly benefit from diverse approaches. Conducting similar studies with different generations, populations, or in varied geographical locations would provide valuable insights into the universality or context-specific nature of the findings. Additionally, employing alternative research designs or methodologies such as Ryan and Deci's (2020) self-determination theory may offer fresh perspectives and a deeper understanding of the beliefs, morals, and values of Gen Z teachers. Exploring related phenomena or similar topics could also lead to a more comprehensive grasp of the underlying dynamics within K-12 communities. Finally, it is crucial to remain open to unexpected findings or emerging questions that may have surfaced during this study, potentially paving the way for novel avenues of inquiry. These recommendations aimed to stimulate creativity and innovation in the ongoing exploration of workplace relationships among Generation Z teachers in diverse educational settings.

Conclusion

This transcendental phenomenological study delved into the multifaceted experiences of Generation Z teachers within American K-12 schools, focusing on integrative social contracts in workplace relationships and their impact on retention. The theoretical framework of this study rested on Donaldson and Dunfee's (1995) integrative social contracts theory, which was

employed to form a central question and three sub-questions. The research employed individual semi-structured interviews, one journal prompt, and a focus group to answer these inquiries. Specifically, 12 Gen Z teachers at K-12 schools were deliberately chosen to participate in the research. Their experiences were elucidated through a series of qualitative data collection methods, capturing their perceptions of workplace relationships in K-12 schools. The study's outcomes revealed three main themes and seven sub-themes. Both the literature review and the participants shared common threads of relatability, interactions, support, challenges, teaching ability, and advice, shedding light on the intricate dynamics shaping their professional journey.

The study underscored the transformative role of Gen Z educators, emphasizing their technological fluency, intergenerational synergy, and the pivotal importance of nurturing supportive environments. Implications for policy and practice highlighted the need for comprehensive approaches to foster retention, recognizing the unique contributions and needs of Gen Z teachers. Theoretical and empirical insights emphasized the significance of understanding perspectives in constructing knowledge and maintaining ethical standards within educational communities. While this study has some limitations, it still serves as a subtle exploration, offering valuable contributions to the understanding of workplace relationships among Gen Z teachers and paving the way for future research and informed educational practices.

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Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

August 30, 2023

Kimberly Lawhorn
Christine Saba

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-1674 Exploring Workplace Relationships and Retention Among Generation Z Teachers: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

Dear Kimberly Lawhorn, Christine Saba,

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).

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

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 ▮▮▮▮▮

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Consent Form

Title of the Project: Exploring Workplace Relationships and Retention Among Generation Z
Teachers: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study
Principal Investigator: Kimberly Lawhorn, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be born between the
years 1997-2012, be a teacher at a K-12 school, and have two to three years of experience.
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 research is to understand the lived experiences of Gen Z teachers at K-12
schools, specifically their experiences with workplace relationships and the influence that these
interactions have on retention. The results of this study will add to the existing knowledge on
school communities and further help stakeholders such as students, teachers, and administrators
to better understand their working environment, ultimately assisting K-12 schools in retention.

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 things:
1. Participate in one individual interview face-to-face in person or via Google Meets. The
   interview (30-45 min) will be conducted in a private setting to protect your privacy. The
   interview will be video recorded through the Google Meets app if possible and audio
   recorded via Samsung Galaxy smartphone Easy Voice Recorder app for simpler
   transcribing. A copy of your interview transcripts will be provided for you to review for
   any clarification.
2. Write a journal entry on an experience of one interaction in the workplace with another
   individual (10-15 min). Journal entries are requested to be typed in a way to be provided
   via email.
3. After the journal entries have been completed, you may be requested to participate in a
   focus group with four other participants (60-90 min). The focus group will be video and
   audio recorded using the same methods as the individual interviews.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants will receive teacher supplies costing $10-$15 as a direct benefit from taking part in
this study. Results may also provide a deeper understanding of classroom ethics and morals
common to K-12 schools while adding to the existing knowledge on this subject.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by using pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may end up sharing what was discussed with people outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with your place of work. 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 this study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please inform me that you wish to discontinue your participation by contacting me through the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Kimberly D. Lawhorn, ████████████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Christine Saba, ████████████████

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 Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515, or email at 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

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You can print a copy of the document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of

the study records. If you have any questions about the study after giving your consent, you can contact the researcher 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 and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Participant's Printed Name_____

Signature & Date _____

My email address is _____

(An email address is requested to send the research participant a copy of their interview transcript so that the participant may check the transcript for accuracy.)

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

Join A Doctoral Research Study!

Exploring Workplace Relationships and Retention Among Generation Z Teachers: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

ATTENTION: TEACHERS
Are you a Gen Z teacher, born after 1997?
Are you currently teaching at a K-12 school and have one to four years of teaching experience?

If you answered **yes** to the questions above, you are eligible to participate in this research study.

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of Gen Z teachers who have one to four years of experience at a K-12 school in the United States.

Participants will be asked to participate in one 30–45-minute audio- and video-recorded interview and reply in writing to one journal prompt (10-15 min), and you may be asked to participate in a 60-90-minute audio- and video-recorded focus group discussion. All correspondence will be done either in person or virtually over the Internet. Participants will have the opportunity to check the accuracy of their input before the findings are published.

Names and other identifying information while requested as part of this study, participant identities will NOT be disclosed.

All interviews and the focus group will be held on Google Meets and recorded for transcribing.

Participants will receive teacher supplies costing $10-$15.

Kimberly Lawhorn, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study. Please contact me at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ **for more information.**

Liberty University IRB – 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515

Appendix D: Recruitment Email

Greetings fellow educator,

I found your contact info through your school website and need assistance with recruiting participants fitting the specifications below.

This is not a scam; I am pursuing my PhD and am requesting your help in recruiting 10-15 participants fitting the criteria below and on the attached flyer (you can post on your Facebook, Instagram, or other social media or hand out at your school). If you are or know someone who is a passionate Generation Z educator looking to make a positive impact in the field of education, I invite you to take part in a research study titled "Exploring Workplace Relationships and Retention Among Generation Z Teachers: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study."

Purpose of the Study: The main objective of this study is to gain insights into the real-life experiences of Generation Z teachers with one to four years of teaching experience in K-12 schools in the United States. I aim to explore workplace relationships and their influence on teacher retention within this specific demographic.

Eligibility and Participation: Participants must be born between 1997 and 2012, 18 years of age or older, current teachers at a K-12 school, and have one to four years of teaching experience at a K-12 school. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in a 30–45-minute audio-and video recorded interview and complete a written response to one journal prompt (10-15 minutes). Additionally, you may be asked to participate in a 60-90-minute audio- and video-recorded focus group discussion. Participants will be asked to review their transcripts for accuracy. All communication will be conducted virtually over the Internet to ensure convenience and safety.

> **Confidentiality:** Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

> **Virtual Format:** To facilitate participation, all interviews and a focus group discussion will be held either in person or virtually through Google Meets.

> **Researcher Information:** This study is being conducted by Kimberly Lawhorn, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University.

> **Contact Information:** For more information about the research or to express your interest in participating, please reach out to me, Kimberly Lawhorn at ███████████████

> **Compensation:** Participants will receive teacher supplies costing $10-$15.

Your contribution to this study will be invaluable, and I hope you will consider being part of this research. Your insights will help me improve the teaching profession and educational practices for Generation Z teachers.

Thank you for your time and consideration.
Sincerely,
Kimberly Lawhorn
Doctoral Candidate, School of Education
Liberty University
Email: ███████████████