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This study, a qualitative, practitioner inquiry, utilized Purkey and Novak's Invitational Theory and Nasib's Human Relations Theory to illuminate and examine the experiences of teachers and school leaders in a rural, Title I laboratory school in an effort to document factors related to teacher attrition and teacher retention in this setting. The participants were divided into three groups: those who had taught at the target school for at least 4 years, those who left the school, and the school leaders; the teacher participants were interviewed in a one-on-one format regarding their experiences working in the school, and the school leaders engaged in a focus group with conversations geared toward their understanding of teacher attrition and retention issues in the school. The recorded experiences of these participants speak to the greater problem of teacher attrition in this country and have implications for similar schools situated in areas that have been historically underserved. Attracting and retaining high quality teachers in such environments is critical for providing advantageous educational opportunities for students, thus increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes for them. Not doing so exacts a cost that is unacceptable for students and could lead to the continuance of inequitable educational experiences, especially in marginalized communities. Findings based on the input of the teacher participants in this study oppose the common narrative that teacher attrition can be mainly attributed to low salaries to assert that lack of support and difficulty maintaining a healthy work/life balance were among the foremost concerns. The targeted suggestions of these participants for addressing these concerns and potentially curbing teacher attrition in similar school communities could be beneficial for other schools or districts seeking to increase teacher retention.

Keywords: teacher retention, teacher attrition, Title I laboratory school

TEACHER RETENTION: WHO STAYS, WHO GOES,

AND WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my beautiful daughters, Keegan and Kinsey. Your love and unwavering support have given me the strength and inspiration to fulfill the goal I have been contemplating for many years. It is a proud moment when a parent can acknowledge the positive influence their children have had on them, and it is my hope that this will serve as a reminder to each of you that you can accomplish anything you set your mind to do. I love you both beyond words.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Jamie Lloyd has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

My goal in conducting this research is to bring additional conversation and information to the educational community regarding the current crisis surrounding teacher attrition in this country. Why do I say crisis? It is no secret that many states in the United States today are experiencing a teacher shortage, which has only worsened following the onset of the Covid19 pandemic in March 2020. According to well-known researchers in this area, Simon and Moore Johnson (2015), "Over the past three decades, teacher turnover has increased substantially in U.S. public schools, especially in those serving large portions of low-income students of color" (para. 1). Teacher attrition is impacting schools serving marginalized communities much more than those in affluent areas, creating greater inequities than those that already exist. Further adding to the difficulty of securing a qualified teaching force, fewer and fewer people are pursuing degrees in education. According to Goldberg (2021), "the number of education degrees conferred by American colleges and universities dropped by 22 percent between 2006 and 2019," and that was before the pandemic. Goldberg goes on to say that following the onset of the pandemic, up to 19% of the country's undergraduate teaching programs indicated that they had seen another notable drop in enrollment. Fewer candidates in the pool and increased numbers of current teachers leaving schools (or the field in general) are creating major shortages nationwide. Many of those who are staying are reporting decreased levels of satisfaction in their roles and increased levels of stress. It is these realizations and a desire to help mitigate some of the related issues that prompted me to do research in the area of teacher retention. In this study, I uncovered themes revealing why some teachers leave Title I schools and also studied those who, seemingly against the odds, choose to stay in high-needs schools. I conducted this research in my current

setting at a Title I elementary school, but it is my hope that the information gained might provide some insight for others who work in similar environments.

The reasons for high teacher attrition rates are plentiful and well-documented, but if you ask the general public, many would assume it has something to do with salary. In fact, in a recent publication in *The Teacher's Lounge*, Emily Howard (2021) urged the general public to veer away from that assumption about low pay and consider other reasons teachers might leave the field, such as unreasonable expectations, testing pressure, poor work/life balance, few options outside the classroom/less upward mobility, and the "high emotional price tag" of teaching (para. 5). Howard goes on to list the many responsibilities teachers have today, as well as the roles that they often play, including therapist, nurse, and sometimes "sole disciplinarian," attempting to provide a sense of stability for each student often at a great physical and emotional cost to the educator (para 2). She also posits that years of experience, advanced degrees, and additional certifications are sometimes seen negatively in the field, making veteran teachers too expensive and, therefore, less desirable. This contributes to the devaluing of those who could be mentoring others and the "deprofessionalization" of the field in general, which according to BBC News journalist Pratiksha Ghildial (2021), is exacerbated because of the "female-centric" tradition of education in K-12 settings. Many agree that low pay and lack of recognition for experience and expertise would not be tolerated in a male-dominated field.

Similar to the low pay mantra, another common reason associated with high attrition among teachers is "burnout." Doris Santoro (2018), who has spoken and written widely on this topic, believes that teacher "burnout" is far less common than reported. She indicates that it is actually "demoralization" causing so many to become dissatisfied and leave; "demoralization occurs when pedagogical policies and school practices (such as high-stakes testing, mandated

curriculum, and merit pay for teachers) threaten the ideals and values, the moral center, teachers bring to their work—things that cannot be remedied by resilience" (p. 5). A moral dilemma of sorts is brought about when teachers are constantly required to engage in certain practices, like teaching so students will be successful on tests, that they know are not in the best interests of their students. She goes on to say that this is a way of placing the onus of the problem on the teacher, "You didn't take care of yourself," rather than on a broken system which often renders even the best educators ineffective. Add to these issues other known attrition factors such as dealing with ever-changing mandates, subpar school facilities, lack of resources, inadequate teacher preparation, poor leadership, safety concerns, student turnover, management of student behavior, complications brought on by the pandemic, lack of support, and what's an educator to do? Many leave.

Amid this plethora of complicating factors in the field of education, why do some choose to stay? Liana Loewus (2021), a contributor to *Education Week*, said, "Many teachers who say they're considering leaving won't actually do so. Many teachers simply can't afford to lose their pay and benefits; some older teachers will decide they're close enough to a pension to hang on" (para. 10). Is that what we really want, an uninspired group of people who are just "hanging on" until they can retire? Surely not, our students deserve more than that; they deserve educators who are supported, prepared, and motivated to provide them with quality experiences. Fortunately, some are compelled to stay for reasons other than impending retirement. Loewus states that according to a survey conducted by *Education Week* of 700 teachers, "When asked which factors play the biggest role in keeping them in the teaching profession, teachers were most likely to point to 'love for students'" (para. 12). Additionally, this survey indicates that many teachers say that love and passion for the subject(s) they teach are secondary factors in keeping them in the

classroom. Some teachers report that feeling recognized, appreciated, and supported in their roles and in their schools can make a difficult job more worthwhile and a rewarding job even more gratifying. I sought to uncover and highlight factors that could increase teacher retention in my current setting, hoping that they might bring about better practices and policies for preparing, hiring, and retaining teachers who are a good fit for the environment and culture.

In this dissertation, I examine why teachers leave, why some teachers stay, and perhaps most importantly, what we can do to increase the likelihood of the latter. As I previously mentioned, pay is typically not the pivotal factor in determining whether or not many leave the profession, but it is certainly a consideration. Aside from the actual salary increase itself, teachers feel more valued and appreciated when they receive adequate pay and recognition for the long hours required to do their jobs well. Competitive salaries also elevate the status of the profession in general. According to Loewus (2021), "Increased salaries, too, would play a major role in keeping teachers in their classrooms, according to the survey, with 7 out of 10 school leaders listing a salary bump as the factor they believe is the most important to entice teachers" (as cited in Barnes, 2021, para. 8). In addition to salary considerations, administrators removing unnecessary burdens from teachers to better support them could go a long way in aiding retention. Perceived support may also be in the realms of assisting with managing student behavior, lessening the pressure of testing, and allowing necessary time for collaboration and required tasks outside of instruction. "Perhaps the biggest takeaway from the report is that even while many teachers feel underappreciated and worn out, there are some concrete steps administrators can take to increase the odds they'll stay—but it all starts with listening, Loewus concluded" (2021, as cited in Barnes, 2021, para. 9). Administrators recognizing teachers' contributions and expertise would also motivate many to stay. All of these things are doable and

attainable, and many can be achieved on a local (school) level with no major federal mandate required. So, why aren't we doing them?

Statement of the Problem

This question of why we are not doing more to recruit and retain teachers leads me to the problem that motivates this dissertation. If teachers are leaving the field in record numbers, and we can mitigate many reasons for their departures, why aren't we doing so? Specific and targeted information for decision-makers is necessary to create positive changes in this area. Through this dissertation research, I hoped to better understand the factors related to teacher attrition and teacher retention in the Title I school where I worked that might help inform decisions at our school and other similar schools. Schools across the country are seeing teacher turnover rates of about 16% annually, according to an Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) report in 2020. According to this report, Title I schools are seeing up to 50% higher than that by some estimates (ACSA, 2020). Simon and Moore Johnson (2015) state that "students at high-poverty schools are more likely than their peers in wealthier schools to experience inconsistent staffing from one year to the next and to be taught by teachers who are new to their school and, often, new to the profession" (para. 12), which sometimes compromises the quality of educational opportunities being provided for them. Unfortunately, this trend often translates into lower scores on performance indicators such as standardized testing, further perpetuating the "deficit lens" that so many of these schools and students are viewed through already. This worsens the staffing problem by making these high-poverty schools less attractive to qualified teaching candidates because of the negative stigma associated with low test scores.

Schools serving historically marginalized populations and populations experiencing high poverty rates are more difficult to staff and often fail to attract and retain highly qualified

teachers, which is detrimental to student learning. Additional factors make teaching in Title I schools even more challenging than in other settings. Title I schools, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), are those "with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families (who receive extra funding) to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards." According to Bettini and Park (2017), concerns related to the challenging nature of teaching in high-poverty schools can include less access to needed resources (despite Title I funding), larger than average numbers of inexperienced teachers who sometimes require extra support, overwhelming workloads associated with trying to meet students' needs, the negative stigma of working with disenfranchised students, greater "control" (and less autonomy) of the schools by bureaucrats who perceive the schools as failing due to reliance on test scores as indicators of effectiveness, and feelings of inadequacy perpetuated by constantly being compared to schools with dissimilar demographics. In conjunction with the factors that impact all schools, these factors make hiring and retaining educators in high-needs environments difficult to say the least. The resulting turnover rates have negative implications for students, the overall school climate, and the community as a whole.

Why is teacher turnover in Title I schools such a critical issue? Simply put, it affects a great number of students in our country. According to *Education Post* (Waters, 2021), "Right now more than half of all American school children, about 25 million, about 60% of American public schools receive some Title I funding" (para. 14). Millions of students are being negatively impacted by teacher turnover each day. High turnover rates compromise the educational offerings for students, negatively impact the school and community connections, and affect the school climate overall. Obviously, working to recruit, hire, train, and retain qualified teachers who are a good fit for high-needs school environments is paramount in providing the quality

education that all students need and deserve, especially in underserved communities. In this dissertation, I explore how teacher attrition and retention factors have come into play in a Title I elementary school in North Carolina situated in a community typically characterized by the term "rural poverty" due to its location and relative lack of access to resources and services.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to document factors contributing to teacher attrition from both a teacher perspective and a leadership perspective in a Title I school located in a rural community with a high poverty rate. I used a qualitative approach consisting of interviews and focus groups to collect this data. Additionally, I explored contributing and motivating factors communicated by teachers who have chosen to stay in this environment and report a feeling of satisfaction and effectiveness in their roles. Finally, I examined possible strategies and procedures that may increase the likelihood of hiring and retaining teachers who are a good fit for this environment and whose practices will positively impact student outcomes, community connections, and the school climate. The results of this study may inform policies, practices, and supports to promote teacher retention. I also hoped to determine some experiences and preparation before entering the classroom that may be advantageous for equipping teachers to meet the challenges they may face daily in a Title I school.

Setting

The school I used for this research, Moss Street Partnership School, is unique in that it is one of North Carolina's laboratory schools overseen by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Research in this school provided some needed insight and perspective into which teacher supports and teaching practices lead to better outcomes, as well as what kinds of teacher preparation can help to develop teachers who will be successful in Title I schools like Moss

Street. A laboratory school is in a particularly well-situated position to impact teacher preparation strategies due to the close connection between the school and the university's education department. Better prepared, qualified, and informed educators likely yield better results for students and report higher job satisfaction for themselves, which are both critical in providing students with stable and engaging learning environments. This is one of the most important goals that educators hold, after all. To my knowledge, there have been few, if any, studies that have researched teacher attrition and teacher retention factors in the unique setting of a Title I laboratory school with strong connections between classroom teaching practices and teacher preparation programs. I hope that this study will aid in identifying beneficial practices and policies that might impact those in the classroom currently as well as future educators by improving their experiences and preparation to better equip them to serve students, especially in marginalized communities.

Research Questions

To gain a better understanding of factors contributing to teacher attrition in this Title I school setting, determine how better preparation and hiring practices could improve the likelihood of retention, and examine what teacher supports would be most helpful from an administrative position, I framed my research around the following questions:

1. What are some commonalities among teachers who have left Moss Street Partnership School and among those who have stayed?
2. What policies, practices, interventions, and supports could achieve higher retention rates among teachers in this setting?
   a) What pre-service, recruitment, and hiring practices could ensure a better fit between the school and potential candidates for teaching positions?

b) What are some predictors of turnover that could be identified and mitigated early on?

c) What characteristics of those who stay might be tractable/transferable through preparation, experiences, and supports?

Methods

This study falls into the practitioner inquiry category of basic qualitative research because this framework best fits my intended methods and goals; I planned for this study to meet the criteria of being "pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people" as Marshall et al. (2022) define as the nature of qualitative research (p. 2). While I am not examining my teaching practice per se, I am exploring the practices related to teacher retention in my current setting. Drawing from Cochran-Smith and Donnell (2006), my research also fits under the "teacher research" category of practitioner inquiry because I conducted this research in an "inquiry community" consisting of other educators and administrators to "examine (my) own assumptions, develop local knowledge by posing questions and gathering data, and work for social justice" (p. 505). I am particularly concerned about attrition in this environment because I have seen firsthand the negative impacts it has on students and school culture as a whole. I also feel that the consequences of teacher attrition in our school have added to the inequities experienced by the community at large. Acknowledging this fact also aligns with my purposes because "address(ing) issues of inequality in schooling is the radical root of many forms of educational practitioner inquiry," according to Brydon-Miller and Maguire (2009, para. 1). In looking at retention issues in a Title I environment, I hope to shed some light on just one of the many, but potentially one of the most important, factors lending to the lack of equity in our educational system in the United States, teacher attrition. Brydon-Miller and Maguire (2009)

maintain that practitioner inquiry "expands the notion of researcher to include a range of stakeholders who collaboratively engage in all phases of the action-reflection cycle" with the goal of "bring(ing) about meaningful change" (para. 1). The changes I am hoping to bring about in my current school are those that will positively impact teacher retention with the ultimate goal of providing a more stable environment and higher quality educational experiences for students.

Data Collection and Sample Population

I used interviews and focus groups as my main strategies for collecting data. Conducting in-depth interviews and then utilizing member checks helped me ensure the accuracy of my interpretations, adding to the study's validity. This also added to the cyclical, rather than linear, nature of the process to ensure that I accurately recorded, interpreted, and shared the participants' voices and experiences. Marshall et al. (2022) refer to qualitative research as being "layered in complex hermeneutic circles" (p. 2). Additionally, I used focus groups in which my research questions served as a guide, but I encouraged a more open-ended conversation with multiple participants about issues of retention and attrition. The focus group allowed participants the space to be part of the "action-reflection" cycle mentioned above by *reflecting* on their own experiences and by being invited to suggest *action* steps for Moss Street Partnership School moving forward.

I used purposeful sampling to identify participants who could provide information specific to answering my research questions. The participants I selected were four previous teachers at Moss Street Partnership School, four current teachers, and three current administrators. The teachers who left were people who could shed some light on how they might have been better prepared or supported to have felt more successful in the environment, which may have impacted their decision to leave differently. The teachers who have stayed were

selected based on the criteria that they have been at Moss Street for at least 4 years and reported that they feel effective and satisfied in their current roles. The administrators were current members of the school leadership team. All participants were solicited via email, phone call, or in person, depending on the access I had to each at the time of the data collection; some participants were people I work with daily, and others were not.

Pilot Study

To refine my interview questions and test my research protocol, I conducted a pilot study to determine if my preliminary questions would gain the desired level of input in speaking to my research questions. I implemented the pilot study in the spring of 2022 with a list of six questions that had been modified from my original list of seven questions which was shared with several members of my EdD cohort before conducting the pilot interviews. My fellow students' feedback was that some of my questions were too vague or unclear and that one was redundant. I conducted my pilot study with a list of questions that had been altered per this feedback.

My pilot study consisted of interviews with two current teachers at Moss Street. My initial interview guide comprised six questions, and I expected the interviews to take up to an hour each. Surprisingly, I found that each interview only lasted around 20-30 minutes. While insightful and beneficial, I determined they were somewhat lacking in yielding the insights I hoped to gain for my research. Upon conducting the pilot study, I realized that some of the questions I originally planned to ask failed to elicit the depth of answers I hoped to get without much probing. As a result, I adjusted the questions and added questions to the interview guide to get information more specifically honing in on my research questions and agenda. I also left out one of the questions on the revised interview guide as I did not feel like it necessarily fit into my study. The updated interview guide I used for this study yielded more targeted information as

participants spoke more directly to my research questions. From my pilot study experience, I was better able to anticipate some of the probing I needed to do to clarify or gain a better understanding; I included the revised questions and prompts in the updated interview guide. This expanded the number of questions in the interview guide from six to nine (Appendix A). Overall, I feel that my revised set of questions better yielded the insights and information I hoped to gain through my research.

Interviews, Focus Groups, and Data Analysis

Once I secured the desired number of participants, I conducted an in-depth interview with each of the teachers, asking questions derived from my research questions, the review of the literature, and adapted from my pilot study (Appendix A). As described by Bhattacharya (2017), in-depth interviews are an attempt to "focus on digging deep into one's experiences … using the key questions as probes to peel away a superficial understanding of one's experiences to a deeper understanding of one's experiences" (p. 127). Gaining a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences in schools illuminated some ways the educational community can support them to promote better retention, which I discuss in more detail in my final chapter. In addition to the interviews with teachers, I met with the administrators once in a focus group format, collectively asking questions similar to the questions posed to the teachers but more from their perspective as observers since their roles differ from those of the teachers (Appendix B). Discussions with the focus group were informed by the data collected from the teachers, so I scheduled it for after the teachers' interviews had been completed.

In contrast to the teachers' interviews, I asked the administrators to share experiences based on their observations and opinions about what they have observed, not necessarily on their own firsthand experiences, as none of them have served as teachers at Moss Street. The group

aspect of exploring these observations and opinions with school leaders added to the richness of the data. This is one of the benefits of using focus groups, according to Gibbs (1997): “If multiple understandings and meanings are revealed by participants, multiple explanations of their behavior and attitudes will be more readily articulated” (para. 11). She goes on to say that “focus group interviewing is particularly suited for obtaining several perspectives about the same topic.” Since the leadership perspective is not one based on personal experiences, I thought the depth of information obtained from multiple perspectives and observations could be very helpful and enlightening.

I recorded all interviews and focus group discussions using Zoom on my laptop and the Otter app on my phone. I then transcribed the recordings and coded for similarities and differences among the responses, looking to identify relevant themes that spoke to my research questions and agenda. First, I conducted the teacher interviews and then used the information gained to inform my focus group discussions with school leaders. I analyzed the information gathered in the interviews and the focus group conversation using an interpretivist lens with an emphasis on converging the experiences and opinions of the individuals in a way that informs future plans and protocols for the betterment of teaching practices, teacher retention, outcomes for students, community/school connections, and school climate.

Trustworthiness

I used several strategies to enhance trustworthiness in this study. First, I utilized member checking with all the teacher participants to check that my preliminary findings resonated with them, allowing for further reflections and encouraging suggestions for improvements to our practices and policies as a school. I asked my participants to review the transcripts and my initial themes to ensure I adequately and accurately captured their contributions. Second, I used a

researcher reflexivity journal to record my reflections, account for my biases, and log the steps along this study's journey.

Theoretical Framework

I drew from two theoretical frameworks that align with the goals of this study, as well as with my personal philosophy. I first discuss them individually, specifying how they apply to my teacher attrition and retention foci, and then, I show the connections between the two. The first is Invitational Theory. "Invitational Theory seeks to explain phenomena and provide a means of intentionally summoning people to realize their relatively boundless potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor … to address the entire global nature of human existence and opportunity" (Purkey & Novak, 2015, p. 1). I feel that this theory speaks to the potential that teachers have to be highly effective and feel fulfilled in their roles if they are in supportive and encouraging environments. Additionally, this could translate into teachers creating similar environments for their students, thus increasing positive outcomes for them. According to Purkey and Novak (2015), the five basic tenets of the Invitational Theory are:

- People are able, valuable, and responsible and should be treated accordingly.
- Educating should be a collaborative, cooperative activity.
- The process is the product in the making.
- People possess untapped potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor.
- This potential can best be realized by places, policies, programs, and processes specifically designed to invite development and by people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others, personally and professionally. (p. 1)

These tenets align with my personal educational philosophy and what I hope to inspire in others to improve teacher and student experiences. Based on these principles, I feel that I can make a

case for looking at educational leadership practices, support systems/policies, and teacher preparation/development that will achieve these goals, which leads me to my next consideration.

To complement the Invitational Theory, I utilized Human Relations Theory to examine the data I gathered throughout this process. This theory focuses on how leadership and administration can structure organizational support to place more "emphasis on employee motivation and job satisfaction" (Nasib, 2018, para. 1). Nasib (2018) maintains that this theory places primary importance on the human factor in organizations rather than focusing on productivity and performance. Returning to the humanistic side of our field is important in this time of heavy reliance on test scores as indicators of teacher effectiveness. Seeing teachers as people with their own needs, desires, and motivations might help make them feel more understood and valued, which could lead to better retention. In conducting this study, I learned about the specific practices that make teachers feel more valued and fulfilled and serve as motivators in their endeavors.

Similarly, with incentive pay being linked to student achievement and test scores, this theory notes that "non-economic rewards such as security and happiness, can motivate workers more than wages" (Nasib, 2018, para. 15). Building from this theory, I looked into the factors/practices that increase a sense of happiness and security for teachers. Human Relations Theory aligns with my beliefs about leadership's role in helping create positive school cultures. I anticipate Moss Street's leadership team may use this study to affect teacher retention, satisfaction, and performance positively.

Invitational Theory and Human Relations Theory support the goals of this research of improving teacher retention but in slightly different ways. Invitational Theory points to the importance of teacher supports and relationships outside of administration alone; for example,

these may include relationships with fellow teachers, students, community members, and all stakeholders. Human Relations Theory complements this, but it focuses more on the role of administrative/school leadership in teacher retention. It highlights how positive relationships between school leaders and educators can support greater job satisfaction, promoting retention and improving the school climate overall. Together, I used these theoretical perspectives helped to guide my analysis of the data to meet my goals and objectives.

Researcher Experience, Perspective, and Motivation

I come to this research as a teacher of almost 30 years. I have taught everything from elementary school to community college, with a few stops in between. I have worked in Title I schools and in fairly affluent ones as well. I taught fifth grade in the school where I conducted this research, Moss Street Partnership School in Reidsville, North Carolina. My own life experience has been that of a White female from a middle-class, urban upbringing. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), over 80% of elementary teachers in this country "look" like me; that is, they are White and female. This is problematic because our student populations are much more diverse than our teaching staffs in general. Hopefully, the insight gained from my research and the research of others on teacher attrition will help to create better scenarios for all teachers but will especially encourage more teachers from marginalized groups to enter and stay in the field.

Why does this topic of teacher attrition matter to me, and why should it matter to others? Simply put, it matters because of the impact teachers have on students. Fewer teachers mean larger class sizes, where students become numbers, and personal relationships suffer. Differentiation and meeting individual student needs become almost impossible, even for the most well-meaning instructors. Teacher turnover creates instability and diminishes school morale

and culture. For those who stay despite the difficulties, some are negative and ineffective; this, of course, also creates negative student outcomes and experiences. Some, however, seem to rise above all the challenges and thrive. I am interested in learning more about their experiences and why they succeed in challenging settings. Is it something tractable and teachable, or are some people simply equipped with innate skills and characteristics that enable them to survive and function better despite stressful circumstances? Is there some way we can better prepare educators to work in challenging environments?

As I previously mentioned, to attempt to answer these questions, I used the school where I was working as a teacher when I conducted this research, Moss Street Partnership School. Moss Street is a Title I school serving a largely marginalized community with its own particular subset of concerns, many related to rural poverty and lack of access to resources. Like many similar schools, Moss Street has experienced a fairly high teacher turnover rate in the 4 years I was there, and I saw firsthand how detrimental this was to the school climate and morale. It negatively impacted the students, the school, and even the community.

In addition to the area of interest for my research and my target population, I feel it is important to discuss my research philosophy. I used a qualitative approach in pursuing information about teacher retention issues because I felt that interacting with people and listening to their lived experiences would be more impactful than collecting numbers and statistical data in this situation. I wanted to know how people feel, what affects their decision-making, and what adds to (or takes away from) their feelings of satisfaction in their roles. This is based on their individual contexts, identities, experiences, and positionalities, so I feel that qualitative research was the best way to capture and share useful data. Related to this, I also adhere to a constructivist viewpoint. I believe that “truth” and knowledge can be constructed based on our life experiences

and by sharing and engaging in the life experiences of others. I hope that my research in the area of teacher attrition/retention will add to the current dialogue in a positive way and shed some light on challenges that teachers face daily, especially in high-needs schools. Some factors impacting retention can be mitigated, for example, through better support, communication, and/or training. I also hope I uncovered some factors or characteristics that allow some teachers to function effectively and with great satisfaction in this high-needs setting. Adequately staffed schools with educators who feel supported and happy in their roles lead to better student experiences and outcomes. That is paramount in my mind.

Significance of Study

I had hoped to use the data collected from this research to create a potential action plan for teacher support and retention to be presented to the leadership team of Moss Street Partnership School. However, as I will discuss in the final chapter, during the tail end of my data collection, it was announced that Moss Street would close at the end of the current school year. However, the data I collected can nonetheless provide considerations for improving teacher retention and curbing teacher attrition in other settings. Additionally, because Moss Street was a laboratory school connected to a university, I identified implications for pre-service training and experiences for future educators. I also highlighted practices related to specific teacher supports, hiring processes, and ways to improve school climate and community connections that I uncovered in this study.

Although this research is intended to inform policies and practices in Title I environments, it also adds to conversations already occurring around teacher retention and teacher attrition in general in this country. As I stated previously, students deserve the best we have to offer, and unstable, “revolving door” scenarios do not provide the atmosphere students

need to reach their greatest potential. This is especially true in schools that serve disenfranchised groups who have been underserved historically. Simon and Moore Johnson (2015) state that "poor working conditions common in America's neediest schools explain away most, if not all, of the relationship between student characteristics and teacher attrition. This is important because unlike demographic characteristics of students, working conditions can be changed" (para. 85). Since the contributing circumstances leading to high rates of attrition are often amenable, teachers and students would be better served by a close look at what changes can and should be made to improve school climates and increase the likelihood of better outcomes for both. Prioritizing the people who prioritize our students every day is an important step in addressing the teacher shortage in this country and getting our educational system on a good path leading to high-quality and equitable educational opportunities for all.

Limitations of the Study

While it would be beneficial to speak to the greater issue of teacher attrition in this country, I realize that this study only covers the experiences of a very small group of participants, 11 in total, in a very specific and unique setting. Therefore, attempting to generalize the findings to the entire U.S. educational system would be inappropriate and negligent. I also acknowledge that the data and findings only truly reflect the experiences and perspectives of those involved in our specific setting of a rural, Title I laboratory elementary school. The opinions and experiences are filtered through each participant's lens and then through my lens as a White female recording and interacting with the participants (and as a member of the school community myself). Therefore, these reflections are bound by time, space, and perspective. This is not to negate any significance; I hope this study will help to illuminate some practices that could lead to better teacher retention in Title I schools and might give others some insight into

the challenges of working in a community experiencing rural poverty. I also hope that recording these voices and experiences might help similar schools attract and retain qualified teachers who can serve students in highly impacted schools like ours. The students deserve the best we have to offer.

Summary and Overview of Chapters

Following the Introduction, Chapter II of this dissertation contains a Literature Review in which I examine foundational research in teacher attrition and retention from 20 years ago up through recent publications on the subject that consider more current issues like the effects of the pandemic on teaching. In Chapters III and IV, I present my research findings, giving examples of comments elicited during the interviews and focus group discussions, sharing initial themes and similarities that emerged, and examining noteworthy outlier comments or experiences. In Chapter V, I focus on how the data and themes point to areas for improvement and inform suggestions I put forth to the educational community to positively impact teacher retention, including steps that could be taken to potentially curb teacher attrition to promote a more positive school climate for students and staff alike.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

With a looming teacher shortage and even more teachers leaving schools (or the field in general) almost daily, America's educational system, and more importantly, America's students, might be in a dire situation. Before the coronavirus pandemic, teacher attrition rates in the United States were reported to hover around 16% annually, according to a report by the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA; ACSA, 2020). More specifically, 8% of that number accounted for teachers leaving the field entirely, and the other 8% was attributed to teachers leaving their current schools in search of better situations. Following the onset of the pandemic, estimates indicate that the percentage has gone from the typical 16% to roughly 25% of teachers nationwide, indicating an intention to leave the field (Zamarro et al., 2021). Teacher turnover in Title I schools is reported to be up to 50% higher than that, depending on the area of the country, according to the ACSA report. With high turnover rates and a long-standing shortage, maintaining consistently high-quality educational experiences for students becomes challenging, to say the least. To this point, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017), who used data from the National Center for Education Statistics Schools and Staffing Surveys to better understand the teacher attrition issue and make recommendations for policy changes, remind us that "turnover impacts the achievement of all students in a school, not just those with a new teacher, by disrupting school stability, collegial relationships, collaboration, and the accumulation of institutional knowledge" (p. 1). Upon examining some of the literature surrounding teacher attrition, teacher retention, and the factors that impact them, I noted many themes and similarities that emerged. My reasons for considering these issues were multi-faceted. First, I searched for any causal factors that might contribute to teacher attrition, especially in high-needs schools (primarily Title I schools).

Additionally, I wanted to explore reasons some teachers stay in schools despite challenging conditions. I was also looking for mitigating factors that might aid in teacher retention. Finally, I was hoping to preliminarily surmise if there are any gaps in the current research where I might add to the conversation. My ultimate goal in this dissertation was to inform education stakeholders and promote practices and policies that encourage healthy environments for teachers and students. All of the researchers I reviewed stressed the importance of teacher retention in maintaining an overall healthy school climate and increasing the likelihood of positive student outcomes, but I think this topic is summed up best by Simon and Moore Johnson (2015), who have studied this issue for years and are part of the Project on the Next Generation for Teachers at Harvard. They stated, “A pattern of chronic turnover exacts instructional, financial, and organizational costs that destabilize learning communities and directly affect student learning” (para. 14).

I begin this literature review with an examination of the literature regarding who is leaving schools and why. Then, I discuss research that explores who is staying, despite the challenges and the possible reasons for this. Following that, I highlight documented supports, practices, and preparation that have been touted as increasing retention in some settings. In the conclusion, I expand on where I see inlets for my research and implications that I hope can be drawn from my data and findings to inform decisions that might improve retention in my current context.

Who Is Leaving and Why?

One of the patterns that surfaced in my readings on teacher retention issues was that of teacher turnover based on experience and age characteristics. “As expected, teacher age was related to leaving rates, with the youngest and oldest categories of teachers having higher rates

than those who were mid-career" (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. 25). Some researchers call this phenomenon the "U-shaped curve" of teacher attrition. We are losing more teachers at the very beginning of their careers (less than 5 years of experience) and teachers later in their careers (20 or more years of service). Obviously, this is problematic because we are losing the teachers representing the future of American classrooms and the more experienced teachers who could serve as mentors for them. To better understand the issues contributing to this and other attrition/retention considerations, I reviewed publications ranging from 20 years old to the current year, 2023. As noted in several articles, a common misconception was that teachers leave high-needs schools because of the students. Study after study I read, however, debunked this notion.

> Although some have concluded that teachers leave high poverty, high minority schools because they seek to work in whiter, wealthier communities, a growing body of research reveals that measures of the work context contribute much more to teachers' satisfaction and career decisions than do their students' characteristics. (Kraft et al., 2015, p. 4)

As we examine these "work context" concerns, I begin with what some indicate as primary factors contributing to the high teacher attrition rate in schools. Several studies I reviewed referred to administrative pressure, lack of support, and continuity issues as contributing to teachers leaving schools (especially Title I schools) or the field of education in general.

Pressure By Administration

Pressure by administration is a good place to start concerning teacher satisfaction. It is no secret that administrators often face intense pressure themselves to raise test scores in high-poverty schools. That pressure is then transferred to the teachers and, ultimately, the students. This "trickle-down" effect occurs in many aspects of our society, but it is amplified in our

schools due to the heavy reliance on standardized testing as the main indicator of student growth and school/teacher effectiveness. Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) cited the following as contributing to the soaring teacher attrition rate in Arizona's high-poverty schools after analyzing 3 years of retention and working conditions data: substandard reading test scores, low marks on college readiness indicators, and troubling graduation rates. In schools like these, teachers often feel as though they are not making a difference in the lives of students, and this feeling is magnified when administrators and society at large judge them (and their students) by scores alone.

Lack of Support

Teacher dissatisfaction is exacerbated when teachers report that they have inadequate support with managing student behavior, which is crucial if instruction is going to occur that will raise those coveted test scores. From the foundational work of Ingersoll (2001) in the area of teacher turnover to the more recent research, the reports of inadequate support in dealing with student behavior revealed a constant theme. Effectively managing student behavior with positive long-term results is challenging for many educators, and that has been the case for many years. Kraft et al. (2015) state that ongoing issues in dealing with student behavior often stem from, and are perpetuated by, school leaders who view schools as closed systems and do not take into account other aspects of students' lives that may be contributing factors to less desirable behaviors. Those who see schools as closed systems "may focus their attention exclusively on what happens within the school—instruction, assessment, and behavioral expectations that bring immediate rewards and punishments—without being distracted by the personal challenges students face or diverted by efforts to compensate for them" (Kraft et al., 2015, p. 3). Instead, Kraft et al. suggest a more "open system" approach to managing behavior in which students are

seen in the context of their families, communities, neighborhoods, etc. rather than just as members of the school or classroom. This shift in focus or mindset would work best if school leaders advocated it and became part of the overall school culture.

Though important, the "lack of support" teachers report as a problem does not just involve managing behavior. According to some research, support for many teachers might be more in the realm of autonomy to make curriculum and other decisions for their classrooms. The feeling of being unsupported, unvalued, and underutilized for their knowledge and expertise can cause educators to seek other schools or fields where they might be treated more like professionals. This sense of being unappreciated is worsened by administrators who take a summative stance when evaluating teachers rather than a more formative approach. The latter might seem less judgmental and more encouraging, hopefully leading to teachers feeling that they are worth investing in. This shift in attitude could also help guide administrators in assisting teachers in selecting supports and professional development that target their own specific needs and interests rather than the "one size fits all" approach that some schools and school systems currently take.

In their research on leading school-wide improvement in low-performing schools, Cosner and Jones (2016) emphasized the importance of principals assessing teachers' effectiveness using a variety of methods and observational data rather than just relying on test scores. They further advise principals, as instructional leaders, to use this information strategically to discuss improving instructional practices and student outcomes. Teachers need to be treated like professionals and given opportunities to grow and develop as such in meaningful ways. If that doesn't happen, they may leave the teaching profession for other fields. Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) put it plainly, "Thus, if there is another job that pays at least the same as teaching, but has

better working conditions, or results in greater overall satisfaction, the optimal decision of a teacher who is qualified to perform an alternative job would be to accept said alternative job" (para. 8).

This concept of "overall job satisfaction" is worth exploring more deeply. In the realm of teacher "support," some school leaders may interpret this as teachers needing to be told what to do or how to do it. Doris Santoro, a teacher educator and philosopher of education who has spent many years conducting in-depth interviews with experienced teachers and studying resignation letters, has indicated quite the opposite. Through her research and numerous interactions with teachers who left teaching or who feel dissatisfied and frustrated with their work, Santoro (2018) concluded that it is not "teacher burnout" but rather teacher "demoralization" that is at the root of the problem. "Demoralization … means far more than a state of being dispirited or even very depressed. It signals a state in which individuals can no longer access the sources of satisfaction that made their work worthwhile" (p. 49). She argues that what motivates teachers to enter the field in the first place is often a sense of moral obligation and a desire to make a difference societally. When their beliefs, practices, and ways of advocating for their students buck up against mandates and policies, they are left overwhelmed, disheartened, and "demoralized." According to Santoro (2018), "The source of the problem is the dissonance between educators' moral centers and the conditions in which they teach" (p. 43). She writes, "Demoralization is rooted in discouragement and despair out of ongoing value conflicts with pedagogical policies, reform mandates, and school practices" (p. 3).

Additionally, teachers are often led to believe that this sense of dissatisfaction results from a deficiency on their part that more self-care will remedy or that they are doing the "wrong thing" by questioning policies and mandates in the first place. Santoro finds this particularly

problematic given that K-12 teaching is a female-dominated field (over three fourths of the nation's teachers are female). She regrets that this has been a common narrative used on women over the years: "the problem is you, fix yourself" (Santoro, as cited in Potash, 2021, p. 1). She insinuates that these messages would not be acceptable if education were male-dominated, as are many other fields. The sentiment is similar regarding what she calls the "moral blackmail" of teachers who are told that if they care about their students, they will accept the policies and mandates without questioning. "Having to choose between what they know to be helpful to students and what the newest highly paid consultant with 'research-based strategies' and 'evidence-based curricula' is touting is a common problem for teachers" (Santoro, as cited in Potash, 2021, p. 1). She goes on to say that some leaders reject teachers' valid concerns over mandates because they are seen as challenging "rather than viewing teaching as a highly relational practice and respecting teachers' intuition and experience" (Santoro, as cited in Potash, 2021). Santoro (2018) cites a common discourse characterizing teachers who disrupt blind acceptance of mandates as being "resistant to change" and "primarily self-interested" (p. 4) as being particularly harmful. She posits that these attitudes and practices "demoralize" teachers and ultimately cause many to leave the classroom altogether. "Demoralization," again, is in contrast to the common term "burnout" because, as Santoro explains, the latter term puts all the onus on the teachers themselves rather than on the system or on the decisions of the administration. "To say they've burned out is to portray them as weak and exhausted, defeated by the pressure, with little hope for rejuvenation" (Santoro, 2020, p. 28). She holds that it isn't that these teachers have nothing left to give but that they are tired of battling the constant flow of policies and mandates that often go against what they do with and for students daily. "Demoralization can happen in any profession that aspires to contribute to the greater well-being

of the society. If the work cannot be done ethically, then its social value and purpose are compromised" (Santoro, 2020, p. 28). In the field of education, we need to define—or redefine—what teacher support really is, what it looks like, and where the responsibility lies. Constantly forcing mandates on teachers without listening to their legitimate concerns and expertise based on their education and experiences with students does not translate as support.

Lack of Continuity

A final issue contributing to attrition is the lack of continuity. Sometimes, continuity issues can spring from school leaders trying to manage staff and student needs amid turnover rates in high-poverty schools. On many occasions, administrators shuffle teachers around in an attempt to fill in gaps left by teachers who quit. This constant grade level and/or class change can be very unsettling for staff and students alike. It is quite stressful for a teacher to be asked repeatedly to adjust to teaching a different grade level and/or curriculum. Simon and Johnson (2015) refer to this practice as "a waste of human capital" (para. 15) because even effective teachers can become ineffective when they are not staying in a situation long enough to build resources, expertise, and relationships. They go on to express that lack of continuity does not just increase teacher turnover; it is often detrimental to the school climate in general. Teacher turnover itself can become the cause and not just the effect. It leaves people in the school community wondering why teachers do not want to work at that school; sometimes, this makes it difficult for those who stay to develop a healthy rapport with students, coworkers, and the community.

Another issue related to the lack of continuity is student absenteeism. As previously mentioned, teachers are held accountable for student outcomes and test scores. When students are chronically absent from school, it is extremely challenging to build relationships and make

the educational gains that teachers, parents, and administrators alike hope to see. Holding teachers accountable despite factors outside their control and without considering underlying issues can be discouraging and disheartening. Chronic absenteeism can also be linked to two previously mentioned issues contributing to attrition: teachers being criticized for low test scores and teachers feeling unfulfilled or unsuccessful in their role. Cosner and Jones (2016) remind school leaders that it is imperative to look at the causes of issues, such as absenteeism or low test scores, rather than focusing solely on the problems themselves. They emphasize that "analyzing root-cause data that reveal underlying problems impacting current levels of organizational performance and student achievement will be critical areas for attention" (Cosner & Jones, 2016, p. 44). In other words, merely focusing on the problem and not the cause will fail to yield the desired results over the long haul. Student absence issues sometimes stem from a larger school climate concern. If school is a positive and encouraging place to be, more students will want to come, barring factors beyond their control.

Regarding factors beyond students' control (such as parents who are ill or who need help with younger children at home), school and community communication and connections could help mitigate some of the issues. A positive school climate and an overall supportive atmosphere will hopefully lead to families being open about obstacles regarding student attendance and make them more receptive to help from the school and the community. In addition to better student outcomes and experiences, this might have the added benefit of minimizing some of the teacher attrition caused by being held accountable for academic gains when students are chronically absent.

Other Factors Contributing to Attrition

I stated early on that it is a common misconception that teachers leave schools (or education in general) because of the school's demographics or the students themselves. In addition to the three reasons for turnover I have highlighted, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge some of the other factors I uncovered in my research. Among the most reported additional contributing factors to teacher attrition were salary, dealing with bureaucracy, substandard school facilities, lack of resources, overwhelming workload, inadequate teacher preparation, poor leadership, safety concerns, student turnover, overall poor job satisfaction, lack of collegial support, and "negative prestige of teaching" (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018, para. 10).

The idea that salary is the number one contributing factor in teacher attrition is often touted in the media (including social media); however, this was not supported in the research I read. Undoubtedly, it is a consideration in the decision to stay or leave the field, but nothing I read indicates that it is *the* reason or even a top reason for most. I did find that additional contributing factors leading to turnover have emerged since the pandemic. According to Zamarro et al. (2021), who analyzed the survey results of 5,464 teachers regarding their pandemic teaching experiences, teachers are considering leaving the field due to the threat of sickness for themselves and their families, the pressures of keeping the students safe and adhering to ever-changing safety protocols, and the uncertainty surrounding changing teaching methods from in-person to remote or hybrid and back. These challenges and uncertainties add to an already difficult situation for some educators, leaving them to feel like they should walk away altogether.

Exacerbating Factors Contributing to the Teacher Shortage

Richard Ingersoll, a well-known researcher on teacher attrition, reported in 2018 that 44% of teachers in the United States were leaving in their first 5 years. Add to the previously

mentioned issues the challenges of teaching during a global health pandemic, and the problem grows significantly. Something that must be addressed, however, is another issue entirely. We cannot retain teachers who never become teachers. Article after article I read mentioned two issues that are becoming more prominent in the field of education: people who are majoring in education are not necessarily going into the classroom, and fewer and fewer college students are choosing education as a major.

Why are we not attracting students to education as a major and a future career? Of course, the pandemic has taken a toll on many would-be educators. “Few professions have been more upended by the pandemic than teaching, as school districts have vacillated between in-person, remote and hybrid models of learning, leaving teachers concerned for their health and scrambling to do their jobs effectively” (Goldberg, 2021, p. 1). Even though they have not entered the field yet, college students have often felt the effects of this stress on themselves as students, their professors, their classmates, and friends/family members who may be teachers or are in K-12 settings as students. With students already questioning the idea of majoring in education in light of the low pay and lack of prestige, the complications related to the pandemic became an even greater deterrent.

This trend, however, began before the pandemic. According to Goldberg (2021), the number of education degrees granted by U.S. universities dropped significantly between 2006 and 2019. Students with certain skill sets, goals, and predispositions are learning that they can find careers where their talents can be utilized in more lucrative and, unfortunately, more respected ways. According to Goldberg, one college student stated she began questioning her leaning toward education and found that human resources would better fit her. She felt this

would fit her personality and skills, and she would not regret her career choice due to salary and other concerns as she might in education.

Likewise, professionals in other careers quickly snatch up current and potential educators because of desirable characteristics that often translate well in other fields. According to Dill (2022), in a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Teachers' ability to absorb and transmit information quickly, manage stress and multitask are high-demand skills. Classroom instructors are landing sales roles and jobs as instructional coaches, software engineers and behavioral health technicians" (para. 5). College students and educators in the field see other careers as holding more potential for growth opportunities, better pay, and more respect. In education, if teachers don't want to pursue administration, their options for professional growth may be limited. Also, many realize that other careers offer greater flexibility and autonomy, which seem particularly attainable and appealing after so many have worked/studied from home during the pandemic.

A quick Google search yields multiple sources describing how the skills and predispositions of people who typically go into education are coveted in the workforce in other capacities. There are also plentiful online sources instructing teachers and would-be teachers to consider alternatives and offer those alternatives. With the flood of negative press around schooling and the number of avenues for finding alternatives to the classroom, college students are further dissuaded from majoring in education or entering the field. If we do not work to change some of the negatives of going into education, teacher retention will not be the main consideration because there will not be teachers to retain.

Why Do Some Teachers Stay?

With all the emphasis on the teacher shortage in this country and its causes and effects, attention must be paid to those who go into teaching and stay, especially in more challenging environments. What are some characteristics, practices, and policies that can be identified to increase the likelihood of teacher retention? First and foremost, teachers must feel successful and fulfilled in their roles. Often, teachers who feel valued in their schools report a greater sense of success and satisfaction in their jobs than those under-valued in their current context. Burkhauser (2017) looked at 4 years of North Carolina Working Conditions Surveys and concluded that teachers who felt supported and whose accomplishments were acknowledged reported higher job satisfaction and less inclination to leave.

Additionally, teachers who report a strong commitment to the students they serve and their communities feel a sense of satisfaction and belonging. School-specific information communicated during the hiring process may help teachers understand the population they will serve and what will be required to do their jobs before an offer is extended or accepted. Educators who understand the contexts they are entering from the outset and have chosen to work in that school with full knowledge of the requirements and challenges seem to fare better, especially in Title I schools. Simon et al. (2019) took an in-depth look at the hiring practices of six successful high-poverty schools. They concluded that there is a "positive correlation between person-organization or person-job fit and overall satisfaction, effectiveness and plans to stay" (para. 14). Finally, teachers with a strong support system of school leaders and fellow teachers appear to be retained more frequently. Having a network of fellow teachers who can serve as collaborators and advisors seems to be one of the main elements aiding retention, especially with less experienced teachers. Working in challenging environments can be less stressful if teachers

have the needed supports and feel they are part of a collaborative community. Cosner and Jones (2016) suggest a multi-faceted approach to building community that includes "robust opportunities for within-school teacher interactions that support learning from peers" (p. 6), such as staff meetings, team meetings, professional development, peer mentoring/coaching, and voluntary/informal groups. Evidently, teachers who feel supported and connected to their fellow educators report higher levels of job satisfaction and are more likely to stay in their current roles.

What Can Be Done to Improve Teacher Retention?

With increasing rates of turnover and the negative effects of attrition on student achievement and faculty morale, are there any researchers offering us hope and possible ways to mitigate these issues? The good news is, yes, there seem to be some well-documented ways to curb teacher attrition. Fortunately, the factors leading to better teacher retention are as plentiful as why teachers leave. Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) assert that "teachers who felt most supported by school administration and who had positive working relationships with other teachers were more likely to be retained" (para. 19). They go on to state that effective mentoring programs and adequate teacher preparation are also paramount in securing teacher retention, especially in high needs environments.

Two valuable studies provide details about targeted and specific supports for beginning teachers to extend their pre-service training and education once they have entered the field. These supports are particularly important as new teachers have expectations for the level of support they need that are often unmet when transitioning to their classroom roles. These studies provide some insight into mitigating that problem as well. Analyzing SASS (Schools and Staffing Survey) data, Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) "found that receiving an extensive number of combined supports—a mentor, supportive administration, teacher collaboration, a teacher

network, and extra resources—reduced the probability of migrating by 11% and leaving by 12% as compared with no supports" (para. 13). They go on to point out that while extended and combined supports seem to aid in retention of beginning teachers, not all supports are created equal, "the quality of supports likely matters as much, if not more, than the number of supports … being assigned a mentor seems to be better than being assigned no mentor at all; but some kinds of mentors and mentoring are likely to have a stronger impact on retention than others" (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017, para. 65). While they are probably especially critical for beginning teachers, many of the supports mentioned by Ronfeldt and McQueen have been shown to aid in overall teacher retention as well: teacher collaboration, strong teacher networks, support from administration, and adequate resources.

In another study that echoed similar findings and sentiments to those of Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017), researchers went into great detail in highlighting a model for retention that had been particularly successful in one Missouri school district. Shules and Flores (2020) looked at retention data for schools across the state. They interviewed central office administrators in districts with better-than-average teacher retention rates. Shules and Flores indicated that a multi-layered approach to new teacher induction and support has proven very successful in one district. This approach included an intensive 5-day orientation that entailed

> sessions on topics such as instructional best practices, building relationships with students, exploring the district teacher evaluation tool, and much more. The goal is to help new staff feel comfortable, supported, and valued by the district even before setting foot in the classroom. (p. 7)

Another interesting aspect of this district's support plan is a "two-tiered" mentor system in which all first- and second-year teachers are assigned two mentors. First, the new teacher is assigned an

instructional mentor, who is a “master of the assigned curriculum, is there to answer any questions the new teacher may have and to provide valuable insight and expertise on topics such as best practices, lesson design, strategies to engage learners, and classroom management strategies” (p. 7). This teacher, however, may not be a member of the teacher’s home school, so they are assigned a second mentor. This second mentor is a member of the teacher’s home school and serves to familiarize the teacher with the school and assist them in building connections with stakeholders. These two layers of support have proven very beneficial in retaining new teachers in the district. This district also assigns “buddy” teachers to new hires who have three or more years of teaching experience but are new to the district.

Certainly, more intentional and multi-layered supports for beginning teachers are helpful and necessary, but one critical aspect of support that was underscored by Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) and also by Shules and Flores (2020) centered on positive relationships not only among teachers but also between teachers and school leaders. Related to this, I saw good leadership repeatedly mentioned in existing research as one of the leading contributors to producing positive change in teacher retention in general. Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) assert that teachers want leaders who listen to and respect them and provide the needed supports and professional development based on teacher requests. Kraft et al. (2015), who interviewed 95 teachers and administrators in high-poverty, urban schools, echo some similar findings, stating that “coordinated instructional supports, systems to promote order and discipline, socio-emotional supports for students, and efforts to engage parents” (para. 3) promote teacher retention, increase the likelihood of better student outcomes, and contribute to an overall positive school climate. Johnson and Simon (2015) add to these claims by explaining that academic supports for students outside the classroom (including tutoring and mentoring), as well as better teacher supports like

adequate planning opportunities and effective professional cultures (professional learning communities), and access to adequate resources and materials were crucial in retaining teachers, especially those in their first 3 years of teaching. Santoro (as cited in Potash, 2021) adds to the conversation by reiterating the importance of professional communities for teachers but asserts that these should be self-selected based on teachers' needs and interests in many cases.

Additionally, she encourages enhanced roles through teacher leadership positions in the school and the community, wherein teachers might find their voices and have an avenue for real, change-generating activism. This way, they can turn their experiences and knowledge about what works best for their students into student-centered changes. Other studies, such as those by Ingersoll (2001) and Geronime and Whipp (2015), concentrate more on recruiting and hiring the "right" candidates from the outset and increasing the pool of potential candidates through better teacher preparation programs, advantageous pre-service experiences, and promotion of certain skills/predispositions that might result in better experiences for teachers and students in the long run.

Conclusion

Despite the wealth of information available regarding teacher attrition and retention, there is still room for more research, especially in the wake of the pandemic. Moreover, not much of the current research focuses particularly on the context of Title I, rural schools. In my preliminary research, I did not find much about specific teacher characteristics that may contribute to teacher retention. Some studies look at demographic characteristics: "gender, race/ethnicity, years of teaching experience, marital and family status, ability (measured by standardized college entrance or teacher certification exams), qualifications (degree, certification status), and self-efficacy" (Gernomine & Whipp, 2015, para. 7). However, it is the more nuanced

aspects of teachers' skills, predispositions, and motivations that I am interested in, not necessarily the demographic variables that correlate best with retention. Which of those tends to lead to greater job satisfaction and effectiveness in high-needs environments? Which are tractable, and how can we affect those in teacher preparation and support programs? Are there hiring practices that can increase the likelihood of recruiting and retaining the "right" candidates and increase the likelihood of more positive student experiences and improved school climate? Geromine and Whipp (2015) "suggest that any efforts to stop the revolving door and stabilize a strong teaching force in an urban school or school district must also include greater attention and focus on who is coming in the door" (para. 43). I think it is evident that the key is in increasing the likelihood that candidates who will be happy and feel successful in high needs environments will be available, hired, and retained. After all, that is what students deserve—people who want to invest in them daily and are adequately prepared to do so.

CHAPTER III: DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS FOR THE TEACHERS WHO STAYED

My goal in conducting this research was to document factors that may be contributing to teacher attrition at a Title I school situated in an area characterized by the term 'rural poverty' and to offer suggestions and considerations for increased teacher retention in such environments. I asked teachers and former teachers at this school to share their thoughts, experiences, and suggestions through one-on-one interviews, and school leaders to share input from their perspectives in a focus group format. I divided the teachers who participated into two groups: those who have stayed at Moss Street Partnership School for at least 4 years, reporting some sense of satisfaction and success in their roles, and those who left the school. The school leaders represented the current administration at the time of the study, and all reported that they had taught in Title I schools before taking on leadership roles in this school.

The questions I sought to answer revolved around the desire to promote higher teacher retention in what some would consider more challenging environments like Title I schools. My research questions were:

1. What are some commonalities between teachers who have left Moss Street Partnership School and those who have stayed?
2. What policies, practices, interventions, and supports could achieve higher retention rates among teachers in this setting?

This research falls under the practitioner inquiry umbrella of qualitative research, as I am a practitioner (teacher) in the study setting seeking to affect positive changes in schools such as Moss Street. I adhere to a constructivist viewpoint as a researcher. I hope that my participants and I, working together, uncovered some themes that will assist in constructing some concrete suggestions that educators and school leaders in Title I schools might consider for the

betterment of overall school culture, student experiences/outcomes, job satisfaction for teachers, and retention of teachers.

In the remainder of this chapter, I provide a fuller description of the study site and participants, briefly review the data analysis and collection methods, and begin to share some findings from the study. In this chapter, I focus primarily on data from the teachers who stayed at Moss Street Partnership School. In the following chapter, I share the findings of the teachers who left Moss Street, centering on the similarities among those teachers and how their experiences might inform better practices for similar schools in the future. While reviewing the data collected from both sets of teachers, those who stayed and those who left, I intertwine pertinent comments and themes from the leadership group to provide greater context and to highlight points of comparison among the groups. In Chapter V, I discuss relevant themes and specific suggestions for supporting teacher retention given by both groups. I also offer some implications, thoughts, and analyses of the data and proposals for future research, practice, and teacher preparation programs.

Description of the Study Site

As previously mentioned, Moss Street Partnership School is located in an area of North Carolina that has seen a significant economic downturn since many of its major employers closed their facilities long ago. In addition to this, it is a good distance from major cities. It does not realize the benefits of some of the resources of surrounding areas, like major attractions for visitors, close proximity to an airport, or a well-developed public transportation system. Securing gainful employment, healthcare, and the basic necessities can be challenging for some families we serve. As of the 2021–2022 school year, as recorded on the school's enrollment summary, Moss Street served a population of approximately 329 students in kindergarten through fifth

grade. Of that total number, 207 were identified as Black or African American, 42 were Hispanic, 35 were reported to be of two or more races, and 45 were White. There were no reported students of Native American or Asian descent at that time. At the time of the study, Moss Street had a letter grade of an "F" on the North Carolina State Report Card, but the school met expected growth in reading and math in most tested grade levels and exceeded expected growth for science in the 2021–2022 school year. The letter grade is designated by proficiency, not growth, on state testing indicators. This may help to account for the apparent discrepancy in performance. Moss Street receives Title I funds from the federal government due to the high percentage of students from economically disadvantaged households. It is designated a North Carolina low performing school, which is one of the reasons it was afforded the opportunity to become a laboratory school, partnering with The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The intention of this partnership was to bring additional resources and opportunities to the school community. According to The University of North Carolina System (2022), The UNC System Laboratory Schools Initiative "aims to provide enhanced educational programming to students in low-performing schools and to plan demonstration sites for the preparation of future teachers and school administrators" (para. 1).

Description of the Study Participants

I selected the participants in this study using purposeful sampling to identify contributors who might provide information pertinent to answering my research questions. The participants I chose were four previous teachers at Moss Street Partnership School, four current teachers, and three current school leaders. The teachers who left are people who can speak to how they might have been better prepared or supported to have felt more successful in the environment. I think it is important to note that all of the teachers who left pursued opportunities outside of the

classroom following their exit from Moss Street. All the teachers who stayed have been at Moss Street for at least 4 years. The administrators are current members of the school leadership team. I solicited all participants via email, phone call, or in person, depending on the access I had to each at the time of selection. In total, there were 11 participants ranging in age from 35 to 55, and all are female. Seven of the participants are Black, and four are White. All participants have been in the education field for at least 10 years. I assigned pseudonyms to all participants to increase the likelihood of anonymity. Since I named the school, I did not provide specific details about the teachers I interviewed as an added layer of protection of their identity.

A brief introduction of the school leaders involved in the focus group is appropriate here as I interject their thoughts and insights throughout the following sections. Claire, Miranda, and Rhonda each have more than 15 years of experience in education. When discussing their backgrounds, Miranda shared that she had wanted to be a teacher since she was very young, but later, she was inspired to go into a leadership role after encountering a woman in a leadership position who impressed her with “her poise” and “enthusiasm for education.” She stated that this influence made her begin to think “beyond the classroom.” Unlike Miranda, Claire and Rhonda originally planned on different careers outside of education. Claire obtained a degree in another field and went into education as a lateral entry teacher. Rhonda discovered in high school that her intended path would not be as fulfilling as she had hoped, so she applied to a teacher preparation program for college and got a scholarship. She said, “And, I guess the rest is history.” She admits that she did not originally want to pursue an administrative role, but when it came time for her master’s degree, she decided to go that route. “This is the road I think I was meant to be on. I feel like I can do what I want to do in this position … in this capacity. So, I’m glad the roads turned this way.”

Data Analysis and Collection Methods

I started interviewing once I secured the desired number of participants and scheduled to meet with each. Each interview took place one-on-one, either in person or on Zoom, depending on each participant's preference and availability. I used a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A) to conduct each interview, but I allowed the conversation to flow naturally as much as possible, leading to variations in the sequence of questions and topics discussed. In addition to individual teacher interviews, I met collectively with the three school administrators in a focus group. The questions I asked them (Appendix B) were different than the ones posed to teachers; I constructed these questions based on the fact that they are in leadership roles, so they speak to these considerations from different perspectives and experiences.

I recorded all interviews and focus group discussions using Zoom on my laptop or the Otter app on my phone. I then transcribed the recordings and coded for similarities and differences among the responses using spreadsheets to provide an overview of the participants' answers to each question. After coding, I collapsed similar codes into categories, searching for themes that addressed my research questions and agenda. I analyzed the information gathered in the interviews and the focus group conversation using an interpretivist lens, with an emphasis on converging the ideas and experiences shared in a way that might help to promote better teacher retention. Next, I begin sharing the data collected by looking at the input from the teachers who have stayed at Moss Street Partnership School.

Commonalities Among Teachers Who Stayed

I start reporting the findings on the teachers who have stayed by looking at their contributions regarding the positive aspects of their roles, specifically their motivations for going into education, the rewards of being a teacher, and the helpful supports they have received. I

follow this by delving into some challenges they have faced, from lack of support to difficulty maintaining a healthy work/personal life balance. In this section, I also explore their reflections on their own level of preparedness for their current roles and their thoughts on what could better prepare teachers to work in Title I schools like Moss Street. I conclude this section by discussing why they stay in what many would consider a challenging environment.

Motivations

Upon reflecting on their reasons for becoming educators, most participants stated that teachers had inspired them in their own lives, and the example they saw sparked an interest in education as a career. A few shared that they had other teachers in their families, and a couple even mentioned that they came from a "long line" of educators. All contributors indicated an intrinsic motivation to help others as central to their desire to be involved in education. Jana stated this very eloquently:

> I wanted to be part of trying to make just one life better. Maybe you can change one, then they spread it to another, and it just keeps growing. So, if I can't change the world all in one day, maybe I can one child at a time.

Cara shared a similar sentiment; she mentioned that she decided to teach young children because she realized she could "start with kids and then, at least, it can build from the bottom up" to impact society positively. All of the participants indicated a love for kids and a desire to be a positive influence in their lives as motivating factors in pursuing teaching as a career.

For all the participants in this group, the motivation to be educators mostly centered around helping others, but one of the teachers added reasons that were more personally focused. Corrine talked about understanding that teaching might be beneficial to family life as a teacher would likely have the same, or similar, schedule as her own children. She also said that she felt

the field was a good fit for her personality based on career selection assessments she took in college. She added that teaching is a good match for her "intellect, motivations, creativity, and need for something different each day."

Overall, the motivations and desires of the participants in the "stayers" group seem to be in line with a recent Educator Career and Pathway Survey (ECAPS) that states, "We found that teachers are largely driven by altruistic intentions and intrinsic motivation, noting a desire to make a difference in the lives of children and contribute to the greater good of society" (Rorrer et al., 2020, p. 34). The desire to help others and to have a positive impact on their lives was central to this discussion with all of the participants in this group.

Rewards

Similar to the reasons they offered for becoming teachers and their motivations to continue, all participants shared similar thoughts about the rewards of teaching. All respondents in this group mentioned long-term relationships with students and their families as one of their foremost rewards. Corrine retold a scenario that had happened to her on numerous occasions,

> The times that you're at the grocery store and you've had an awful day, and you see a kid you had 10 years ago, and they say, "Oh, I was just with so and so, and we were talking about you. We were talking about our favorite teachers." So, when you run into kids from the past, and they reinforce that you're doing the right thing.

Similarly, all of the teachers mentioned those "light bulb" moments where a student "gets" something they previously struggled to understand as being an extremely rewarding part of teaching. Kristy and Cara both referred to these as "aha" moments. In conjunction with building relationships, each teacher in this group expressed that watching students learn and grow daily is often a driving force behind what they do.

Supports

In addition to their strong motivations for teaching and the rewarding aspects of the role, the teachers who stayed detailed some beneficial supports they received that enabled them to feel more effective and satisfied in their positions. Two of the four teachers in this group said that specific, targeted, and relevant professional development pertinent to their classroom settings was the most beneficial support they received. They mentioned that learning about specific strategies and seeing applicable examples that could be used in the classroom was very helpful and energizing.

Three of the four teachers in this group maintained that supportive teacher teammates were paramount to their success and longevity in the classroom. According to Kristy, some of the greatest supports for her have been "people who were there through those tough transitions we talked about … having people who were going through the same situations and understood what you were going through, having them to talk things through with and bounce ideas off of." Corrine corroborated these thoughts,

> I think teammates are something you couldn't do your job without … teammates that you can run ideas by, or you can share resources with or discuss whatever you need to discuss, just having that camaraderie that we're all in this together.

Rhonda, a member of the leadership focus group, mentioned witnessing this camaraderie firsthand. She said she has noticed that teachers who "built a community amongst themselves" and have that extra layer of support seem to fare better in this setting. She said this seems true even if they are "communities that you don't seek out … like you're kind of forced into these communities by shared experiences."

Kristy and Corrine also mentioned that supportive administrators could make all the difference by "having your back in tough situations," as Kristy put it. Corrine added that the support of other personnel, such as exceptional children teachers, social workers, and guidance counselors, can also have a positive and profound impact on the overall school experience for teachers and students and can help lessen the "lack of support" feeling that some teachers have encountered. A couple of the teachers asserted that assistance provided by auxiliary staff can remind teachers that they are not alone in attempting to provide the very best possible experiences and outcomes for students.

Challenges Reported by the Teachers Who Have Stayed

The teachers in this group have chosen to stay, but they nonetheless have experienced their share of hardships and obstacles along the way. Looking at the challenges they have faced in the classroom may help us glean helpful suggestions for school leaders, teacher educators, and decision-makers moving forward so they can provide the support needed in these challenging settings. Interestingly enough, despite staying, this group was as forthcoming when recounting their challenges as they had been when discussing the positive aspects of their roles. From lack of support in its various iterations to difficulty making their voices heard, the experiences of these teachers will, no doubt, speak to the goal of increasing teacher retention.

Lack of Support from Parents/Guardians

All four teachers in the "stayers" group described "lack of support" for what they are trying to accomplish in the classroom as one of their biggest challenges. Three of the four teachers specifically mentioned how difficult it can be, at times, to secure the support of families/parents, which can create additional challenges for teachers and students. While all the teachers acknowledged that families/parents care about their children and their education,

sometimes bridging the gap between concerns at home and those at school can be challenging. Jana detailed her thoughts on this issue, saying that, in her experience,

> It sometimes stems from parents who don't trust teachers, the school, or maybe the system as a whole. I have encountered some parents who really don't trust the school system. And that makes it harder in the beginning. It's like trying to break down that wall with them to build that relationship. It takes a lot of energy.

Cara mentioned a similar feeling, adding that this concern can encompass both academic and behavioral considerations. "A lot of things that I am teaching here are not what's done at home so that home/school connection isn't always the strongest. So, it's like every morning, you have to start all over." Kristy also spoke about parent support and its importance for the student and the teacher. She talked about how invaluable and helpful it is when parents are engaged and supportive and how detrimental it can be when they may not be able to support in ways that educators would hope to see. She did recognize, however, that this is due to a variety of factors that are not always within parents' or guardians' control.

Lack of Support from Administrators

Regarding "lack of support" as a challenge for these teachers, they all discussed issues outside of parental support that also come into play. Two of them mentioned that even in a school that offers increased teacher autonomy, such as Moss Street, there are still times when mandates and directives are handed down from various levels that they perceive are not in the best interests of their students. This can be frustrating and feel like a lack of support when teachers believe that they have "no voice" in those situations, as Kristy put it, or sometimes feel that school leaders are "not always advocates for teachers," according to Corrine.

Lack of Support in Trying to Maintain Balance

Additionally, two teachers mentioned a lack of support in their attempts to maintain a healthy work/personal life separation and balance, particularly regarding their time and financial resources. Several teachers indicated that the job expectations could not be met during the required 40-hour work week, so they were often conflicted about deciding what to put first, the job or themselves (or their families). Jana also talked about the financial sacrifices many teachers make spending their own money on classroom resources. “You wouldn’t ask a doctor to go buy the materials he needs to do his job or a lawyer.” She went on to propose that she feels this type of treatment is perpetuated because people know that teachers typically have altruistic and other-centered motivation, and that is sometimes used to manipulate them, “They know our heart is making us stay, and so they feel like they can just treat us however they want to.” Failing to do whatever needs to be done for students, no matter the cost to the teacher haunts some educators and becomes a moral dilemma for others.

Lack of Support in Trying to Meet Students’ Needs

Lack of support in the case of three of the four teachers who have stayed also involved the struggle to support their students’ full range of academic, behavioral, physical, social-emotional, and/or mental health needs. They indicated they were sometimes unsuccessful in securing needed supports, services, and resources for students. At times, this was because there was a gap in understanding between teachers in the classroom every day and those in leadership or support positions concerning how significant some of the students’ needs truly are or how challenging it can be for one person (the teacher) to try to meet all of those needs. Cara mentioned her frustration trying to teach a math concept to students when they struggle to read word problems. She expressed how difficult it can be to teach one thing when other problems

constantly encroach. The issues become compounding and can be overwhelming to teachers. Teachers have limited time and capacity to work with students one-on-one when they require remedial attention across multiple academic areas. On this topic, Corrine posited that this disparity is sometimes, in her mind, the result of school leaders becoming "too far removed from when they were teachers."

It is worthwhile to note that the lack of support that my participants described encompassed many facets, from lack of home support to school-based concerns like trying to maintain their own personal boundaries while still meeting the needs of their students. All of them expressed that meeting students' needs was first and foremost for them, and being unable to do it well daily was often the cause of undue stress.

Level of Preparation to Meet the Challenges of a Title I Environment

When discussing their level of preparedness to serve in a Title I setting such as Moss Street, teachers expressed different levels of comfort from the start, but most of them agreed that, in this case, experience is the best teacher. Kristy said she was not fully aware of what she would encounter teaching in a Title I environment before doing so. She indicated that she felt prepared for the teaching part of the job, "actually being able to plan and execute lessons." She was not, however, equipped to handle all aspects of the role, especially the classroom management part. In addition, she talked about being surprised by the amount of paperwork and extra time that actually went into teaching.

Jana, on the other hand, did not go through a traditional undergraduate teacher preparation program, but she said she felt more prepared for the classroom, especially in a Title I environment, than many of her colleagues. She attributes this to the fact that she plunged into the

classroom with little “textbook” knowledge, so she indicated that she did not have preconceived ideas about what it should or should not be:

> So, I think the program that I went through threw me into it but didn’t let me sink. They gave me the support I needed, and I was able to kind of do things more from what I saw the kids needed. The college of education teacher, I didn’t have that and didn’t feel I needed to go by a textbook. Like I didn’t; I didn’t know those things, so I was going off of reality, what was there. Like many student teachers, they’re coming into the classroom. They get it a little bit, but they’re going off of what they read in a book, right? I went off of just straight what I had in front of me. I was on my own.

Because of her background, Jana believes strongly that the best preparation for a teacher in any setting is experience. She feels that she is more flexible and adaptable as an educator because she did not learn to rely on “textbook” knowledge or specific programs for her expertise. Instead, she was given general tools, suggestions, and support and “thrown in” to make it work. And for her, that was the best preparation.

Interestingly, I saw a correlation between what these teachers mentioned when discussing their level of preparedness and how those in school leadership positions may perceive this. Reflecting on the characteristics that they think are important for teachers to possess to feel successful in Title I schools, Claire explicitly stated that it is confidence; in her opinion, “confidence in your ability to manage your classroom, facilitate instruction, and build relationships with students and their families.” Undoubtedly, some of the confidence she notices in some teachers is due to their prior experience, training, and overall preparedness. Having a background and skill set already established to pull from may help an educator exude confidence in their role.

Like the other teachers in this group, Cara concurred that experience is the best preparation for any teacher, especially in more challenging environments. Unlike Jana, Cara went through a traditional teacher preparation program. However, like Jana, she was somewhat "thrown into" her early classroom experience because her supervising teacher had a family emergency during her student teaching experience. This left Cara with less than the typical amount of support during a practicum, but she felt that this actually left her better prepared in the long run because she had to figure things out while in the classroom on her own. Corrine's experience corroborated this, and she indicated that she was somewhat prepared for a high-needs environment simply because she had various experiences before coming to Moss Street. She added that she did not feel she could have been as successful here as a less experienced teacher. Corrine stated that she was mainly unprepared for meeting the students' needs. She further stated that having more "specific training on social-emotional needs and behavior management, not regular classroom management, but more psychological" would have been helpful. She believes that some of the students she has worked with had unmet emotional needs, and what she saw were most likely the "behavioral expressions" of those needs. She felt that more awareness and training in this area and more support in meeting those needs would have benefited her and the students.

Preparation Through the Hiring Process

As far as the hiring process, Kristy said that she actually went into the process at Moss Street with some fallacious, preconceived ideas based on the "talk" she heard around the community. She happily discovered that the rumors and the reality were truly quite different:

> I also think I had some misinformed ideas because I feel like people talk a lot of negative speaking on schools such as this, and then you get into it. Then you say, "Oh, it's not what people think it is." The kids deserve to be taught and loved and cared about.

Three of the four teachers in this group agreed that they felt unprepared for what they would encounter daily in the classroom during the hiring process. Looking back, Corrine relayed that more prior information regarding "[awareness] of the needs … and expectations being set realistically" would have been beneficial. In response to my prompting, "Before you were hired in this environment, did you feel like you were prepared as far as what to expect, what challenges you might face?" Jana's response was very direct and telling: "Not really, no … I feel like it was painted very beautifully. It seemed like cupcakes and rainbows." She went on to say that she felt like what she was told to expect and what she actually encountered were far apart, leaving her feeling like she had to "build it from the ground up" to provide the educational experiences she wanted for all her students.

When conversing about their level of preparedness for this setting, all of the teachers in this group said that they really were not fully prepared, but they all discussed how the experiences they had before coming to Moss Street aided them because they had some resources and experience to pull from. They indicated that these environments would be even more challenging for those who are early in their teaching careers. As far as being prepared for what they would encounter in the classroom during the hiring process, they all indicated that they did not have a complete picture of what the school was like when they were interviewing. They felt that more transparency in that regard may not have changed their decision to work at Moss Street, but it may have helped them to set their expectations more realistically and to prepare accordingly. Despite the inherent challenges, all four teachers chose to stay at Moss Street

Partnership School and feel they have succeeded in their current roles. Next, I examine their reasons for staying, which may speak further to promoting better teacher retention in similar settings in the future.

Why They Stay

As mentioned previously, three of the four in the "stayers" group said that teaching was what they always really wanted to do, and they never seriously considered anything else as a career path. Additionally, Kristy and Corrine reiterated that they felt they had made a long-term commitment to the field and wanted to continue impacting others as they had over the years. Kirsty put it this way,

> You know, I have a lot of time invested in it. There's been a lot of blood, sweat, and tears invested in this. So, just wanting to see something through and hoping that I can continue to make a difference along the way.

Corrine had similar reasons for staying and added that she did not want to feel like she had given up. She did not want to lose "everything (she) had put in." She also characterized herself as stubborn and said, "I never thought of myself as a quitter. I didn't want to fail. I knew I could do it even though there's a lot of self-sacrifice."

Rhonda, a member of the leadership team, spoke about comments she has heard from teachers who stay in challenging schools, they "feel a deep commitment to either the school or the community … or, 'I went to this kind of school when I was a kid' or had some type of personal pull to do the work long term." This seems consistent with what some of the teacher participants indicated. Rhonda also felt that some teachers' attitudes are centered around an "if I don't, who will?" mentality when filling a need in Title I schools.

Jana and Cara discussed the impact of high teacher attrition rates on the students they have witnessed over the years; the thoughts they shared seem consistent with what Rhonda was noticing. Jana said that she feels some of the anger and distrust she has experienced from students (and sometimes families) has been the direct result of teachers leaving in the past,

> A lot of people leaving, other colleagues leaving … I have noticed what happens. Some kids that were so excited now, all of a sudden, have bad attitudes. Now, they're fighting back and getting in fights. Now, they don't want to do their work. And, like I said before, it's all about relationships. And when a kid in that environment is constantly seeing someone leave them, they don't trust people. And if you don't trust somebody, you're not going to care about what they care about for you.

Jana went on to talk about the weight of the responsibility she feels because of this issue. She stays, in large part, because she doesn't want to be yet another person who leaves these children,

> I mean, number one is the kids. Just knowing that I may be the only positive for them at that moment, and that's something that weighs on me … because I feel like I would really let them down if I leave.

Cara expressed a similar feeling when she discussed the importance of creating a sense of stability for the students. "There's so much change in their lives that having that consistency, even though it's only 8 hours a day, it's still consistency. They know that somebody is going to be there every day." Based on our conversations, the teachers I interviewed who have stayed in the classroom in this Title I environment did so out of a commitment to the field of education, to themselves as educators, and most importantly, to the students and their families.

Claire, a leadership focus group participant, spoke about teacher turnover, what may have contributed to it in her mind, and what made some stay. She started by discussing part of the

vision and mission of the lab school, which was "to do things differently, but in a way that empowered teachers, administrators, students, and families." However, she conceded that no one really "recognize(d) how challenging that would be." She talked about disillusionment and the disparity between the vision and the reality that several of the teachers addressed as well,

> We had this illusion of this thing, but once the kids got there, I used to say that the kids didn't get the memo that we were doing things differently. You know, then I think that was difficult for all of us, especially the teachers who were with the kids every single day.

She said that what she thinks motivates some to stay amid the changes and challenges is their commitment to a common goal to make this "different" thing work. She said, "I believe that they are still here because they want to see that (vision) come to fruition. They want to see this thing through." She concluded her thoughts with other contributing characteristics for those who have stayed,

> I think those who are still here … overcame challenges. I think that there are some challenges that some people feel like they have not experienced before. And, they know how … maybe not to fix it but to navigate it … All of that is to say those who are still here want to see it through and have learned to navigate.

Contributors to Effectiveness in a Title I School

As I discussed in the previous section, those who stay have their reasons for doing so, but what characteristics or behaviors could they identify that enabled them and some of their colleagues to feel satisfied and successful in roles that so many have abandoned? All could pinpoint some behaviors and traits that seemingly allow them to manage and thrive in the environment. I begin by looking at behaviors the participants identified as leading to greater

satisfaction and increased effectiveness, things one must be willing to do, especially in high-needs environments. Then, I highlight some of the personal characteristics or attributes that the participants noted in themselves and others that may be beneficial for one to possess.

First, Cara talked about being willing to "go with the flow some days and understand that sometimes things aren't gonna go right, and you just have to try again tomorrow." On those days when things aren't going right, she talked about the importance of knowing who your "team" is and being willing to seek out and accept help from others. "In this environment, I think about our teams and how well they work together. You have your co-teachers; you plan together and problem-solve together. I think that's the biggest thing." She added that guidance counselors, social workers, and other staff members are part of a teacher's team in addressing the needs of the students daily, and she reiterated the importance of teachers feeling like they have help in meeting all the demands. In her experience, teachers have to be willing to be vulnerable enough to ask for help—and then accept it when it is given.

Similarly, Jana spoke about being willing to be a part of a support system for others, including coworkers, students, and families. She said that, in her mind, it is important to check in on people and to put in the time and effort it takes to really build relationships. She posits that part of this is letting people know you are available and encouraging them whenever possible. She also mentioned going the extra mile, "I know there's a lot of stuff that I don't have to do, but I do it anyway." She feels that, to some degree, her satisfaction and success have come from her dedication, as evidenced by the time and effort she puts into teaching and into the people she encounters through teaching. Like Jana, Kristy shared that being willing to put in the time and effort to build relationships, bridge gaps, deepen understanding, and have experience in the field have been the keys to her success and fulfillment in her role. Jana and Kristy both talked about

the intentionality of building relationships and how a willingness to invest energy and time into doing so can make all the difference.

For Corrine, the attributes that can contribute to effectiveness in challenging school environments are not so much behaviors but the personal characteristics one possesses. She holds that no one can "teach" you or train you to work effectively in these scenarios; instead, it is more of an innate response or a combination of personality traits that make one predisposed to performing well,

> I think on a basic level you could give people verbiage to say in reaction to certain behaviors. However, if you don't naturally have what it takes to be able to draw that, to be able to use those … you would not make it. It's internal. No one could teach you how to react. They could give you the words, but then you can't remember in the heat of the moment what those words were.

So, what are those characteristics, in Corrine's opinion? She believes one needs a calm and patient personality, which she concedes she did not always possess,

> Because you have to have patience, and I never could have done this as an earlier teacher, not in the way I do it now. The calmness and the attitude with which I approach everything that happens with students, I didn't have it before I came here. I didn't need it. My natural teaching ability was enough. Here, you need more, and if you don't have that calmness and that patience, you can't do it.

The other teachers in this group also alluded to personality traits that they feel they have or see in others that have contributed to their longevity in the classroom in this setting. For Cara, it is "adaptability" and not getting upset when things change or do not go as planned. Kristy shared a similar opinion talking more than once during our interview about the need for flexibility amid

frequent changes. She and Cara also corroborated what Corrine mentioned—that they felt their years of experience had helped bring out, or maybe more fully develop, underlying characteristics they already possessed. For Kristy, an empathetic nature is advantageous. Jana labeled the favorable traits she identifies in herself and others as being "hospitable" and "caring." She went into detail about how these translate into building strong relationships that all teachers described as critical. She relayed that this is not only important with students, but positive relationships with colleagues and families also make the overall experience better for all stakeholders.

For the school leaders in the focus group, the attributes that lend themselves to a greater sense of success for teachers in Title I settings differed from what the teachers indicated, but I found them interesting. Upon careful contemplation, however, I could identify some correlations with the teacher's sentiments. Rhonda, a member of the school leadership team, indicated that "realistic expectations" were important for educators in this setting; she went on to detail more of her thoughts:

> I think when you go into any field, but especially into education, we've sold people a pipe dream that every day is going to feel great, and you're going to be the champion of the world. And, the kids are going to be singing and dancing and like, that's not what this is. And, the disillusionment is hard, and the actual work is in shifting from what I thought I was going to be doing every day to what I'm actually doing every day. And that's a big shift.

For Miranda, another school leader, an important characteristic for teachers is honesty, but not honesty in just any context,

> It’s really important that teachers are honest about their fears and have a willingness to work through them. An example of that is having a conversation with a parent because of what you’ve heard about this parent and a previous experience with another teacher. Now, you believe it’s going to be your experience. So, there has to be a willingness to break down barriers.

Throughout my investigation of teacher retention and attrition issues, I have regularly contemplated whether we can train teachers to function more effectively in various situations or if success comes down to issues that are not easily tractable, like basic personality traits and intrinsic characteristics. This part of the interviews spoke to that not fully, of course, but impactfully. While most would agree that training, education, and experience are salient factors that can contribute to teacher success, do the underlying attributes of the person supersede all of that? If so, this has implications for teacher training and recruiting, and I will revisit this query in the final chapter.

CHAPTER IV: DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS FOR THE TEACHERS WHO LEFT

In this chapter, I examine the conversations with the teachers who left the school. I present them in the same order as the "stayers" group except for the last topic: positive aspects of their teaching experience in a Title I school (motivations, rewards, and supports), challenges they faced, level of preparedness for the setting, and finally, why they left. Similar to the last chapter, I blend in comments from the leadership's focus group and make appropriate points of comparison between the two groups of teachers. Following this examination, I end this chapter by discussing some suggestions for promoting teacher retention shared by both groups of teachers—those who left and those who stayed.

Motivations, Rewards, and Supports

Motivations

Reasons shared for becoming teachers were very similar among all the participants in this study, both those who left and those who stayed. This group mentioned that they, like the other group, had seen the impact of teachers in their own lives or the lives of others and wanted to have a similar role in helping people reach their full potential. Two participants went into greater detail about their motivations when discussing the influence they hoped to have on others. Jayden had previously thought about going into politics as a career, but she changed paths when she had a revelation:

> You know, I kind of thought I can advocate for kids this way too. The kind of (political agenda) I wanted to pursue was child advocacy, but I could do it in this way too. So, it just kind of made sense to me … something that came very naturally and held true to some of the things that I really wanted to promote, which in the education of children was easy.

Like Jayden, Sherene considered another career originally, healthcare. She knew she wanted to help people in some capacity, but ultimately decided that education was a better fit. “I can help people learn and grow, and I really liked helping younger people learn and grow. And, I wanted to impact people to the point of empowerment, and that's literally what it’s been for me ever since.”

Like the other group, some teachers who left specified more personal reasons that originally led them to education as a career. Jayden mentioned that teaching looked like a good fit for her personality because she wanted to ensure that she picked a career with enough variety so that she “wouldn’t get bored.” Pam and Sherene indicated that the role’s actual teaching aspect fits their personalities well. Pam said she is energized by “thinking of new ways to explain things” and engaging students in real-world applications of their knowledge. Sherene admitted that much of her strength and motivation as an educator was based on feeling effective due to the learning and growth she had seen occur among her students.

The motivations for becoming educators were similar among the participants in both groups. In fact, the only subtle difference that I detected between the two groups was that two of the four teachers who have stayed at Moss Street indicated that they truly did not know what else they would do if they did contemplate leaving teaching. They said that they never seriously considered jobs outside of teaching in some capacity. This was not the case with the four teachers who left Moss Street. As previously mentioned, two of the four in this group had initially considered different careers, and all four had left classroom teaching positions altogether at the time of the study.

Rewards

Again, reminiscent of the "stayers" group, teachers who left the classroom recounted similar rewards during their teaching tenure. Patricia talked about her impact on students and their lives, describing her relationships with kids, her joy in watching them grow and find success, and her satisfaction with "being able to be there for them to offer guidance and support even in their rough times." Jayden spoke about how watching students learn and grow was a very validating experience for her,

> We think about gaps being closed or academic gains for children, watching the light bulb go off, and they go, "Oh, I got it!" Those are the natural things that happen every single day in the classroom that give you that "Oh, this is why I'm here" feeling.

Pam realized that she had a special knack for teaching, taking "mundane" learning tasks and making them fun by helping kids see the "real-life applications" of their learning. Sherene also acknowledged that "hearing words of gratitude" from students, their families, and coworkers gave her a deep sense of personal satisfaction and validation. Like their motivations for becoming teachers, the rewarding aspects of teaching were similar between the two groups, but ultimately, this wasn't enough to retain some of them in the profession. I explore the reasons for that later in this section, but before getting into challenges, I think it's worthwhile to look at the supports this group felt were advantageous while they were in the classroom.

Supports

Much like the group that stayed, the teachers who left reported that the support of coworkers, specifically other teachers, was key to feeling successful in their day-to-day lives in the classroom. Patricia discussed previous scenarios when coworkers had helped to manage student behaviors and how that made a huge difference not only for her but also for the

educational experiences of the other students. Pam spoke at length about what a difference having teammates (teachers) she could "count on, that shared and were willing to brainstorm together" made for her personally. She also said having common planning time with those coworkers and using that time to locate and share resources was extremely beneficial. Additionally, Pam shared that having a co-teacher (sometimes an exceptional children's teacher) in the room focused on providing extra support allowed her to meet more of her students' needs.

Supportive personnel outside other teachers could also be school leaders, like the local administrators. Jayden and Sherene spent several minutes detailing their thoughts on the importance of the right kind of leadership to create a healthy and encouraging environment for staff and students alike. According to Jayden,

> I think leadership is a telltale sign of what the support may look like in a building, and as much as we don't always want to put that type of pressure on the administrative leader in the building, it really is a trickle-down effect. The leadership create the culture and the climate of a building. If the climate is set for a supportive environment for teachers, then you feel supported. You feel supported in classroom management with behavior issues you might have, and you have curriculum support where you might be weak in an area. A good leader knows how to partner me with someone I can collaborate well with. We can put our heads together and figure out the best practices to execute in the classroom. For me, the best supports can come from good leadership in the building.

Sherene added to this idea, stating that school leaders who are effective and supportive create a strong vision for the school and clearly communicate the "structures, systems, and processes" in place to help everyone move toward that goal.

Rhonda, a member of the leadership team, talked at length about the kind of support she sensed in the building. She described how the positive school culture and lack of hierarchy ("not administration versus teachers," as she put it) that had been achieved at Moss Street has been through building a strong sense of community. She went on to explain how this has been attainable in her mind,

> We've done a good job of building a community of coworkers, not "we've got all the answers, and y'all have got to figure it out." I do think that's been very intentional, and I think it partially comes from not having all the answers. Like this, we are doing something different, you know, we really are. I know, you know, we all read the brochure, we all got the speech, but walking in this every day is not what we walked out of. So, it does take a new lens and a new willingness to try something different.

In addition to the support of coworkers to assist in doing the work at hand, the teachers who left also spoke about how helpful self-selected professional development opportunities specific to their needs, interests, and classroom situations were in their last setting. Sherene specifically communicated how supported she felt when she was allowed to choose the professional development opportunities that she wanted to attend, rather than the "one size fits all" approach used in some schools and school systems,

> But, I will say there was an openness if there was something I felt like I needed if it was interest or in terms of sharpening my skills in the field, there was an openness to that; that was a layer of support for sure.

Pam took the discussion of support a step further and talked about the increased teacher autonomy at Moss Street, not only regarding selecting professional development but in other areas as well:

> I would say that having autonomy is really supportive, like being able to make decisions for my classroom that I felt were best. When that was given, it was really empowering. It was good because I was the one that knew my kids the best. I was the one in my classroom, and being trusted to make the decisions and doing what was best for my students, I think that was really empowering.

As I noted earlier, there was no marked difference between the responses of the groups of stayers and leavers when talking about the most significant forms of support they had received as teachers in their last setting. I did note that the two groups seemed to prioritize the significance of the supports differently, but the two groups did mirror each other's thoughts and offerings to a great extent; the support of coworkers (other teachers), administrators, and the auxiliary staff was on the top of the list in both groups. Members of both groups also mentioned the importance of self-selected and relevant professional development opportunities. The group who left teaching added comments about the benefits of increased access to technology-based resources and spoke in greater detail about teacher autonomy. I will also add that two participants in the second group spent some time delineating what supportive leadership looks like for them.

Challenges Those Who Left Faced

Similar to the teachers who stayed, three of the four teachers who left also cited "lack of support" as one of their biggest obstacles. Two of the four talked about the lack of home support and the difficulties this can create in the classroom. Like those who mentioned this in the other group, Jayden was careful to acknowledge that this issue is not because of a lack of concern or consideration on the part of families,

> It wasn't that the parents didn't want to help. Sometimes, they just lacked the know-how of what to do. Parents didn't always have the kind of backdrop to give them the perspective of what education should be like for their kid.

I found it noteworthy that this was the top challenge mentioned by a couple of the participants in both groups.

Additionally, reflecting some similar experiences to the "stayers" group, the teachers who left the classroom talked about a lack of support in balancing home/work life obligations, and a couple indicated that they believed unnecessary or redundant tasks could have been taken off their plates to have alleviated some of the stress and exhaustion they felt. Like the "stayers" group, two from this group mentioned having to spend inordinate amounts of their own money securing classroom resources. Pam admitted that while the technology resources offered were appreciable and many curriculum resources were provided, she could not always secure the resources she preferred to use without spending her own money.

Another notable similarity between both groups regarding challenges that fall under the "lack of support" heading was meeting students' needs. Sherene, one of the participants who left a teaching position, described her difficulties very succinctly,

> I think a lot of the challenge for me came from students' needs and just the reality of time and what could really be accomplished. I think sometimes there were unrealistic expectations in terms of how to meet students' needs … and knowing the depths of those needs. It's hard when the scope just isn't broad enough.

All teachers who left shared similar feelings that the stayers discussed—trying to get those in auxiliary positions to fully understand that the breadth and depth of their students' full range of needs was a tall order. For some, it was a deal breaker.

Challenges They Faced and How The Two Groups Differed

The biggest difference regarding challenges faced between the two groups came when discussing behavior. While the stayers group did mention student behavior as a challenge, this issue came up much more regularly in interviews with the teachers who left. While all acknowledged, to some extent, that the behavior challenges often originated from some unmet need—academic, psychological, physical, social-emotional, or otherwise—these behavior issues seemed to have more of an impact on the long-term career decisions for a couple of the teachers who left. Two of the four teachers who left indicated that managing challenging behavior while still trying to meet the students' educational (and other) needs was one of the top factors in their decision to leave the classroom. Pam put it this way: "Behavior was just the biggest (challenge), unfortunately, and I think all of those things combined to make the behavior worse: sometimes lack of motivation, lack of parent involvement, and lack of resources to meet the needs." The feeling of a lack of support from home and school was sometimes an issue for both groups, but managing student behavior was the biggest challenge for at least two of the four teachers who left classroom positions.

Level of Preparation to Meet the Challenges Among the Teachers Who Left

While the teachers who left and those who stayed sometimes had similar experiences, those who left did not feel as prepared to meet the challenges of a Title I student population. Their prior experiences and training were sometimes insufficient, while others discussed feeling uncertain during the hiring process, particularly unsure of whether they were getting a full and realistic picture of the school.

Prior Experience and Training

As with many of the other teachers interviewed, Jayden went into her last teaching position at Moss Street with some previous experience and knowledge that assisted her in working in what some would consider a more challenging environment: “Because I taught (previously), I learned the kinds of things that helped to build bridges. I think that’s really me as a person, too, to build bridges. No one taught me how to do that.” Her comments mirrored closely what Corrine (from the other group) talked about when she said that some people inherently know how to adapt and respond in demanding situations. Concerning her formal preparation for working in a Title I environment, Jayden had this to say:

> No, you don’t get prepared. There is not a bridge between theory and practice. I think they hit on both, but in the academic world when you’re in college in those undergrad programs, or even graduate studies for that matter, you tend to live in this land of theory. Nobody tells you what it looks like, feels or sounds like actually in practice every single day. So, the answer is “no,” not even through your student teaching. Is student teaching helping you get prepared? I mean, if you land a good (supervising) teacher who can help you learn your style, then it becomes a successful experience. But even through a student teaching experience, if you don’t have someone who kind of helps you and supports you through the process, then you still don’t know what this looks like day to day when you get your own job.

Again, Jayden’s comments brought to mind what some participants in the other group mentioned about formal training as helpful, but experience and strong mentors/coworkers are equally as important, if not more so, in a Title I environment. Jayden went on to recount how her

own prior experience helped her in a high-needs environment, but she also details how not everyone has that level of experience and the consequences of that:

> I think by the time I got to my most recent (teaching position), I had some years in the game. So, I think that's what made me confident to say, "Yes, I belong here. Yes, I want to be here." It gave me some challenging circumstances, and I guess I wasn't afraid because of my experience. It's different for someone who graduates fresh out of school and doesn't have that perspective of what this could be like. It is just real on-the-job training; you have to pull what resources you can, but some of it you learn in real-time with the kids. But those who don't have any experience struggle unless they have a really good mentor. Or, they're on a great team that has some veterans who don't mind sharing or teachers with some systems in place that they can share. Otherwise, it is really tough, which is why the revolving door is what it is. Sometimes new teachers don't find themselves in supportive environments, so they're not confident. I didn't walk into my last teaching experience with a lack of confidence simply because I had experience.

Like most of the others interviewed, Pam talked about experience as the best preparation for teaching in general, but especially in schools that may be considered high-needs environments. She talked about how her undergraduate teacher preparation program and her experience before working at Moss Street had readied her for the "academic" parts of teaching and developing effective teaching methods, but they fell short when it came to learning to balance the behavior, social-emotional needs, academic needs, and expectations in her last setting. Pam had a very practical suggestion for helping to mitigate some of the issues associated with adjusting to teaching in impacted schools. She felt that, in addition to specific training about varied classroom management techniques, new hires should be afforded time with "master

teachers"—those who have been effective in the environment. In her mind, being able to watch them in the classroom could be instrumental in helping the new teachers develop the necessary skill set to be successful.

Preparation Through the Hiring Process

Participants' experiences with the hiring process varied. Patricia, for example, expressed that she wished there had been more openness during the hiring process, "more realistic, like, 'these are our students' [presuming the hiring team could say a bit more about the challenges that students in their school face]." She added that "positivity is great, but it would have been nice to have a more realistic idea" of what the day-to-day would be like. She also had a very pragmatic suggestion that might have made the hiring process seem more genuine, "to have a teacher involved in the interview," someone who could "realistically share" their experiences in the setting.

Sherene was the other participant who talked at length about the hiring process and had some targeted suggestions to potentially increase the likelihood of securing "right fit" candidates for Title I classroom positions. First, she mentioned the need for transparency and honesty, "I feel like some things that were shared in the interview process didn't correlate with the reality; so, the narrative was one thing, but the reality wasn't that." She also detailed how she felt that some of the premises foundational to the school sounded in line with her desires but did not always translate well into practice. Her example was the emphasis on teacher autonomy, which was very attractive to her. Once working in the setting, however, she said, "It was hard for me to wrap my mind around the structure or lack thereof." She suggested that school leaders sharing what they are hoping to accomplish and then specifying what that looks like (in practice) in their minds would be helpful for both parties. She ended her discussion about hiring by reiterating the

importance of full honesty, "I also think that it's important for any school, Title I or any school, to be very clear about the clients that they serve, so the people that are being recruited … need to be very clear."

Contributing Factors in Their Decision to Leave

The teachers who left the classroom went into education for very similar reasons to the teachers who stayed. In fact, up to this point, the similarities between the two groups of teachers far outweighed the differences. So, why did this group ultimately choose to change paths? For all of them, other opportunities arose, whether they were still within the education system (but outside the classroom) or outside of education entirely. But, if one pursues a change in position, usually there are contributing factors that play into that decision. In this section, I explore some of these considerations as shared by the participants who left Moss Street.

Three of the four who left the classroom cited reasons for leaving that revolved around the workload involved in teaching and trying to maintain a healthy life balance given the ever-increasing requirements. According to Jayden, the toll on a teacher can be very high when trying to strike this balance,

> Mental health can begin to play into it [struggles and the decisions to leave]. The checklists don't get any shorter, especially when you're working in schools that are highly impacted, and there are very challenging needs to be met. The laundry list of things to do gets longer and longer.

Patricia's statements were very much in line with this when she said that there was always "more and more workload. There was just always more and more to do." Pam shared similar feelings and added that she wanted to spend more time with her family and often found herself having to

choose between her family and her job. So ultimately, she had to make the decision that was best for her family, and that was stepping out of the classroom.

The school leaders acknowledged that a lack of work-life balance could be an issue for teachers. Rhonda spoke to this topic, offering her advice:

> One thing I can think of is keeping a healthy distance from the work. You are able to put up parameters and boundaries and some level of space. I mean, teaching is very all-consuming, but at some time throughout the week, or month, or year … you can step away enough to not let it be all-consuming.

The impact of the time required outside of the work week to do the job well was exacerbated for some by the lack of flexibility in the schedule itself. Many people envy teachers' schedules and talk about the time off they have over the summer or during the holidays. However, when school is in session, there is little flexibility. Most of the teachers I interviewed have children of their own and spoke about the difficulties in making and keeping doctor's appointments for themselves and their kids or just trying to be present for their children in general. For Pam, the cost of teaching was just too high,

> I really want to be present for my own kids. As you know, as a teacher, finding a substitute and making sub plans is hard. And, I want to be able to attend field trips and awards days and not be at school until 5:30 every afternoon.

Similar statements were asserted by other participants explaining how they felt that their own families had suffered in some ways because of their career choice.

Although all four teachers in this group admitted that managing student behavior was an issue at Moss Street, two directly stated that this was their main consideration in deciding to

leave the classroom. I greatly appreciated Pam's openness and vulnerability in sharing the extent of the issue for her and its ramifications:

> It was behavior. Especially the last year I taught, you know, I could work around things. I could use my own money. I could work with the resources. But, I just felt so disheartened at feeling like I had taught for (many) years; I thought I had good classroom management, and I had seen good success. But the last couple of years, I felt like nothing I did was working, feeling like just feeling defeated. And the amount of "you would not believe" behaviors that were happening. And, I often felt that the way I would have handled them was not always supported.

Claire, one of the school leaders, acknowledged that she knew some teachers felt this way regarding their experiences,

> Thinking of those who left the education field … when I think about those that I know who shared that they were leaving education altogether, and I think about their experience … I believe that maybe they could not see how what they were doing was working. So, they became overwhelmed, for lack of a better word, not feeling successful. I think teachers want to do it right, and when you don't always have that green line, blue line, those quantitative numbers to tell you it's right, you just feel like maybe it's not.

She went on to recount how she concluded that this experience was not exclusive to this setting:

> I don't believe that it was just a Moss Street experience that made them feel that way because if it was just their Moss Street experience, then they may have transitioned to a traditional district rather than leaving the profession altogether. I think, you know, coming from wherever they had come from and then being at Moss Street, it just kind of

added to their overall feelings about education. So, I didn't perceive it as Moss Street; I perceived it as education burnout.

Patricia also listed managing student behavior as a main contributing factor in her decision to leave teaching. She, like Pam, expressed the feeling of sometimes being alone in trying to meet the demands of actually teaching the students while managing some of the more challenging behaviors:

> It just seemed like there was more focus on data and on the nit-picky ins and outs of things as opposed to being able to focus on important things like behavior. Then ultimately, the behavior of some students and the lack of support in dealing with it at times just became overwhelming. It was overwhelming without the support of having someone to try to work out those problems with you.

At this juncture, I feel it is useful to highlight a few of the reasons the school leaders gave as contributing to teacher attrition in the setting as a point of contrast. Claire concluded that the "different" way of doing things at Moss Street that she talked about at length just wasn't a good fit for everyone:

> When I think about those who left Moss Street to go to other districts, primarily our partner district [the university partner is in a different district than where the school is located], I tend to believe that it was just the frustration from the challenges and things not being like you had always experienced them … because it wasn't what you were used to. And, change is hard. And, I think it's harder when you're experienced at something, and you know it that way, and it's almost like relearning. I think it's harder. And so, I think those people who left us and went to other districts … just were uncomfortable with that.

Miranda, another participant in the leadership focus group, contributed that she felt that some teachers might have originally been drawn to Moss Street because of an increase in pay and then realized that it wasn't a good fit for them,

> I'm thinking some of the draw. I'm sure for this school for teachers is the financial aspect of it. Depending on what districts they were coming from and the incentives that exist for teachers, when they see that they can make 5 or 10%, or I don't know a thousand more than they were, but then we get in and realize, you know sometimes money isn't worth I don't want to say the "trouble"; it isn't "trouble." I mean, in all jobs you're gonna experience challenges, but feeling like you can't handle it or it's not like what you left. So, this leads to them wanting to leave.

Rhonda, another leadership focus group participant, mentioned that attitudes toward career goals in society have shifted over the years: "You know, it's not even a millennial thing, but we're not in a place anymore of getting hired in your first job and staying for 30 years and retiring. That's not what this is anymore." She felt that a certain amount of attrition is just commonplace in today's world and is to be expected. Like the increase in pay that Miranda talked about, Rhonda brought up the access to educational opportunities that lab schools afford their employees as being an asset, but it could also be contributing to the attrition rate; in her opinion,

> Some people could have also come in with the expectation that I'm gonna get this UNCG thing on my resumé. I'm going to get my two-year master's program, and then I'm gonna go on to the next thing. So, it could have been an intentional reason that wasn't like a direct reflection on the kids or the school or anything like that. It was just that this was their plan when they came into the position.

Although the leaders' reasons for teacher attrition in the setting did not align with what the selected teacher participants indicated, I think their insight and perspectives helped to give a deeper understanding of the issue from different angles. I also believe that examining the disparities in their responses highlights the need for more open communication between teachers and school leaders. An environment and an avenue in which teachers feel more comfortable transparently sharing their reasons for leaving could help to mitigate future attrition issues. In light of the considerations mentioned by the teacher participants, I would like to mention that all four who left ultimately found roles that were a better fit for them, their lifestyles, their goals, and/or their families going forward. For some, this was within the educational arena, and for others, it was not. Regardless of why they left or stayed, all participants shared practical suggestions for improving teacher retention in Title I environments like Moss Street, detailed in the following section.

What Could Better Support Teacher Retention?

Based on their experiences, both the teachers who left and those who stayed shared ideas that could support better teacher retention. I share these suggestions in three subsections: scheduling, managing behavior, and awareness of students' needs.

Scheduling

For Jayden, leaving a classroom position afforded her a more flexible schedule, making balancing her work life and family more attainable. She talked about the struggle to balance competing demands and how taxing it can be for a mother to try to address the needs of her own children while meeting the expectations of her as a teacher at school, especially in a fixed time frame. She made it clear that the main reason she left teaching was the inflexibility of a teacher's schedule and how that created strain for her in trying to meet the needs of her own family. She

stated that it was not the demands of teaching itself that made her leave, “As far as teaching is concerned, I mean you feel the weight, right, you feel the weight and the responsibility of teaching, but that wasn’t what drove me or that wasn’t what pushed me into another area.” Having the backup of a pool of available substitutes or even auxiliary staff at the school who can step in to assist when teachers need to come a little late, leave early, or leave for an appointment and return on occasion (rather than having to take a full day off and make plans for a substitute) might help lessen the burden that teachers feel in trying to meet the demands of home and school. Teaching is unlike many jobs with built-in flexibility or even a “lunch hour” when they can attend to personal matters. While this is just one aspect of why teachers leave, it is important. Keeping a balance between home and school obligations was an issue brought up repeatedly by participants in both groups, and feeling like they can take time off easily when necessary could be an essential part of striking this balance.

Managing Behavior and Feeling Heard

While family demands were an issue for most participants, they were not always the central concern regarding attrition. For example, Pam also talked about wanting to prioritize her family and being free to attend field trips and school functions with her own kids, but ultimately, other factors weighed more heavily into her decision to leave the classroom. Ultimately, it was the strain of managing behavior and feeling unsupported in doing so which was affecting her teaching, and that took too much of a toll on her personally:

> The way (some) were handling behaviors was clearly not working, but there was nothing I could do about it. It was policy; you just had to go with it. And when I cried pretty much every day (for months), I knew that was the last year I could do it. Yeh, enough’s enough.

Her advice to school leaders is direct and to the point:

> But, I would say to the people in charge, listen to the teachers. I know you all had high hopes for this behavior plan, but clearly, it's not working. Can you listen to the people who are actually dealing with it … in the classroom, the ones who see how it's affecting kids and the teachers?

She also talked about the excessive demands of teaching and how she felt she had to give too much of herself and her time to do it well, which was a detriment to the other areas of her life, "I was never not a 110% teacher, and that took away from my life, being a wife, mother, and friend everything. And I'm not going to do that to myself."

Although managing student behavior was not the foremost concern for most of the "stayers," it was mentioned, and to Pam's other point, creating an acceptable quality of life through a healthy balance between work and personal life again came up again as an issue. Also, several teachers in both groups echoed her feeling that she was not always listened to as a teacher.

Patricia's experience and decisions sounded very similar to Pam's, and they corroborated some of the same points. Ultimately, these issues also led her to seek opportunities outside the classroom. Like Pam, she struggled with managing behavior and all the other demands and expectations of teaching while feeling like she was not always supported in meaningful and effective ways. In response to the question regarding what could have impacted her decision to leave the classroom differently, she replied,

> Feeling heard by administrators and support staff … feeling like they really hear the struggles and that they're actively trying to solve the problems with me. I felt like they

> could have been putting things in place to solve those problems with me. I felt like that could have been a game-changer for me.

Awareness of the Needs

Unlike most others, Sherene left teaching primarily for an opportunity better aligned with her long-term professional goals. However, she did have some concerns at Moss Street that may have hastened her departure from teaching. She talked at length about the extent of the academic needs she encountered and how challenging it was to meet those needs when some foundational pieces may have been missing. “When you don’t have the foundation, you can’t just start building, right?” She went on to speak about how it seems simplistic to just start filling in some of those educational gaps, but it can actually be quite difficult given the number of students needing a variety of interventions while trying to continue with the grade level curriculum so that students don’t fall behind. Again, those in leadership and auxiliary positions really listening to teachers’ concerns could help mitigate some of this, ultimately benefiting students and ensuring better outcomes for them. Sherene’s comments were reminiscent of concerns expressed by both groups regarding the lack of capacity to deal with the plethora of students’ needs—academic and otherwise—and how overwhelming and disheartening this can be for teachers. I quoted Sherene previously in referring to this issue as “the scope just isn’t broad enough.”

Summary

Effectively addressing the myriad needs of the students was one of the biggest challenges discussed by the study participants. Teachers want to do a good job and prioritize providing the best possible experiences for students, but they need help. They cannot be the only ones noticing or addressing students’ needs and should not shoulder all the ownership for doing so. They need to have well-developed supports in place to assist them in maintaining a healthier work/life

balance by being able to take off when necessary and by having unnecessary tasks taken off their plates. Realistic expectations can develop when teachers, school leaders, auxiliary staff, students, and families are honest with one another about what is happening in and out of the classroom. The bottom line from my conversations is that teachers want to be heard and have their efforts taken seriously. They want to know that they are not in this alone and that decisions being made reflect some of the concerns and considerations they, as the ones with the students daily, have brought to the table. Every teacher I interviewed mentioned this in one way or another. I appreciated the authenticity and vulnerability reflected in my conversations with these participants, and I appreciate that they took the time to share their experiences and opinions. In the next and final chapter, I pair my findings with the literature and theory, sharing further summative thoughts, additional relevant themes, and more pragmatic suggestions for improving teacher retention.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

As is widely reported in the literature and the news, teacher attrition has been and continues to be one of the biggest threats to providing quality educational experiences for all students in this country. The onset of Covid worsened an already concerning trend in America's schools. A study conducted in 2021 by *Education Week* "found that as of March, 54 percent of teachers polled indicated they have considered leaving the classroom in the next two years. This number marks a 20-percent increase from surveys prior to the pandemic" (Barnes, 2021, para. 2). The known effects of teacher attrition on students, schools, communities, and our country at large cannot be dismissed. According to well-known researchers in this area Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017),

> Teachers are the number one in-school influence on student achievement. Research finds that high rates of turnover harm student achievement. In high-turnover schools, the inexperienced and underqualified teachers often hired to fill empty spots also have a negative impact on student learning. Financially, the report estimates that each teacher who leaves, on average, can cost as much as $20,000 in an urban district.

The monetary costs, educational ramifications, and negative social capital associated with high rates of teacher attrition have been widely reported, especially in areas that have been historically underserved, and this problem is overdue for targeted interventions. My knowledge of the negative consequences of teacher attrition and a desire to contribute positively toward promoting higher teacher retention, especially in Title I schools, led me to conduct this study. Jana, one of the teacher participants in this study, summarized the repercussions of teacher attrition that she has seen first-hand:

> When they (students) come to school, they get the opportunity to build relationships and talk to people and be heard. And if we're constantly leaving them, then they're just going to be angry. And, everyone is going to bear that anger, and it's just going to keep building up … and, they're never going to trust people.

The cost of disregarding this issue is just too high. Bringing voices and experiences to this critical conversation will hopefully shed some light on possibilities for improved teacher retention and better student experiences, especially in schools and communities that have often been ignored.

I conducted this qualitative study in a Title I laboratory school in a rural North Carolina school district. The participants were teachers who have taught at the school or who currently teach at the school and school leaders. Their input and conversations contributed to answering my research questions surrounding motivating factors that informed their decisions to stay or to leave the Moss Street Partnership School and what might better promote teacher retention in similar environments. To speak to potential contributing factors impacting teacher retention and teacher attrition at Moss Street Partnership School, I centered this study around the following questions:

1. What are some commonalities among teachers who have left Moss Street Partnership School and among those who have stayed?
2. What policies, practices, interventions, and supports could achieve higher retention rates among teachers in this setting?
    a) What pre-service, recruitment, and hiring practices could ensure a better fit between the school and potential candidates for teaching positions?

b) What are some predictors of turnover that could be identified and mitigated early on?

c) What characteristics of those who stay might be tractable/transferable through preparation, experiences, and supports?

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss how the study participants' input helped me answer my research questions. In the next two sections, I address the research questions directly and discuss some of the implications of the findings. I then revisit the theories that helped guide my interpretations and take a closer look at demoralization and how it played out in my study. I also offer additional recommendations for schools based on the suggestions and experiences of the teachers and school leaders who contributed to this dialogue. In conjunction with proposals for school leadership, I incorporate suggestions for teacher preparation programs since Moss Street was a laboratory school run by The University of North Carolina at Greensboro and has served as a training site for graduate and undergraduate students pursuing degrees in education or related fields. I follow this with recommendations for future research, and I conclude this chapter with my final thoughts and reflections.

Research Question 1 Discussion and Implications

As I reflected on my first research question regarding the commonalities among those who have stayed at Moss Street and those who have left, I identified the two most relevant themes for those seeking to curb teacher attrition: lack of support and barriers to creating a healthy balance. First, I review the main challenges teachers faced along with improvements that could be made, and I follow that with a look at what was done "right" at Moss Street Partnership School. After those discussions, I shift my focus to the second research question, recording ways to potentially achieve better teacher retention in settings similar to Moss Street. Here I also

discuss some possible predictors of turnover and mitigating factors. In this section, I also consider the implications for hiring and teacher preparation that the data reveals.

Commonalities Among Teachers—Challenges Faced

There were two main challenges faced by teachers in this study. First, I discuss the perceived lack of support to do their jobs well on two different dimensions—from homes and the community, and among staff and with leadership. Second, I discuss the difficulty in maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

Lack of Support from Homes and Community

“Many participants mentioned “lack of support” in several respects as a primary challenge in this Title I elementary school environment. Most commonly, teachers spoke about a disconnect between home and school at times during their tenure at Moss Street. Jana stated that she attributed this lack of trust between the guardians (and maybe the community at large) and the school to negative associations among people in the community with the educational system. She discussed how this distrust between families and the school system (probably due to previous negative experiences) impacts the student, the teacher, and the school culture. She mentioned how challenging it can be to “break down that wall” (built by low prioritization of their children) to create relationships with the students and families. She added that it “takes a lot of energy, but it’s worth it.” Jayden also spoke at length about this issue, but she was careful to acknowledge that she did not attribute this disconnect to a lack of concern on the part of the guardians. Like the others who talked about this, she believes that the school staff has a part to play in repairing any damage from the past and seeking to create improved relationships and connections in the future. I think it is also important to acknowledge that support from families can and should look different in different settings. Various avenues and outlets for that

involvement must be intentionally put into place. In the section on what has been done right at Moss Street, I take a closer look at some recently implemented practices that have positively impacted this area.

Lack of Support Among Staff and With Leadership

Like the intentionality of building relationships between the families and school staff, energy and focus need to go into building relationships within the school building itself. Another central theme among the teachers' responses concerning challenges they faced stemmed from a lack of support they felt from the administration and auxiliary staff at times. Most commonly, the teachers talked about feeling overwhelmed trying to meet the extensive needs of the students on their own and the difficulty in securing needed supports for students. Previously, I mentioned that Corrine, one of the teacher participants, broached this issue, saying that she believes challenges sometimes come from administrators being "too far removed from when they were teachers." Patricia conveyed her feeling that, at times, she just was not "being heard" when expressing problems or concerns in the classroom. Several participants also discussed their struggles in trying to convey the full scope of the needs to auxiliary staff and school leaders. School leaders (and auxiliary staff) spending significant amounts of time in classrooms, not in a teacher observation capacity as is often seen, but observing the students, the needs, the constraints, and the overall learning environment might help them to better assess how to assist teachers in meeting students' needs. It could also increase their awareness of the range of needs teachers are trying to manage.

Based on the comments by both groups of teachers, it seems clear that the needed support for educators and students alike won't be gained without open lines of communication among all parties. This need for good communication reminds me of a common mantra often echoed in

Moss Street staff meetings and training sessions, “assume good intentions.” In talking with the school leadership and the teachers, I sensed that sometimes there is a tendency (amid the day-to-day challenges) to lose sight of the shared goal of ensuring the best outcomes for students. School staff need to remember they are all on the same team, working to provide quality educational experiences for the students. With that in mind, trust and communication are critical. Concerning soliciting help meeting students’ needs, Corrine said this:

> Being trusted and believed … we are not trying to “get rid of a problem”; we are trying to help kids solve problems. This is so they don’t keep repeating them. And when they can become better able to manage their behaviors, we can get to the teaching part.

It seems that if everyone involved could “assume good intentions” regarding others’ motivations, commit to the common goal of seeking educational opportunity and wellness for the students, and actively listen to one another’s concerns and constraints, these attitudes and behaviors might go a long way toward building the kind of relationships among the staff that will allow them to better serve students and translate into positive outcomes for them. That is the ultimate goal, after all.

Barriers to Creating a Healthy Balance

Another theme involving challenges teachers faced was the difficulty in maintaining a healthy work/life balance. This emerged in my discussions with both sets of teachers and with school leaders as well. Many participants detailed issues related to feeling unable to meet the needs of their families while trying to meet the demands of school, being frustrated by the excessive requirements of time to do the job well (in addition to the limitations of the schedule itself), and being challenged by the monetary (and sometimes emotional and physical) costs of their positions. Interestingly, however, the responses of the school leaders regarding the issue of

work-life balance were also very telling and revealed that they have a keen awareness of the stress induced by this daily juggling act. Rhonda was the first school leader to approach this, saying that what she feels enables some teachers to continue in classroom positions is that they create “a healthy distance from the work” by creating “parameters and some boundaries, some level of space” to avoid teaching becoming “all-consuming.” Claire, another administrator, weighed in on this topic as well, acknowledging the struggle she sees many teachers face. She talked about some reading she has done detailing how certain school systems around the country have come up with an interesting possible solution:

> There are school systems, boards, that have adopted 4-day weeks (for students), and I think that is something that could be attractive. Of course, the days would be longer, but you think about your staff … most work those long days anyway … then having that fifth day to regroup.

She went on to specify that, in this plan, teachers would essentially get the fifth day each week as a workday to get caught up on paperwork, grading, preparing lessons, etc. She indicated that she would support this schedule change to help teachers maintain a healthier balance by not having so much work to do during their personal time. It is noteworthy that the issue of balance was not only brought up by almost all of the educators, but all of the school leaders recognized it as a primary concern as well.

What Has Gone Right at Moss Street Partnership School

Thoughtful contemplation often yields critiques and corrections, but I feel that reflecting on many of the positive aspects of teachers’ experiences at Moss Street Partnership School is equally worthwhile. These accolades might serve as a valuable resource for school communities seeking to improve teacher satisfaction and retention. First, the intentionality of creating and

preserving common planning time for teachers on the same grade levels at Moss Street was noted by several teachers as being a very beneficial support. Efforts were made on the part of the administration to minimize disruptions to this scheduled time, and extra planning time was afforded to teachers at least once a quarter for the past couple of years. This commitment to giving teachers the time they need to complete paperwork, plan, and collaborate with their grade level cohort spoke volumes to teachers about administrators' awareness of the job's demands.

Another intentional decision of leadership acknowledged by most of the teachers was the commitment to increased teacher autonomy. Although some teachers felt that something got lost in the translation of this initiative, most recognized that a deliberate effort was made to allow the teachers more flexibility and more control over decisions related to running their classrooms and provide them some opportunities for input in schoolwide decisions. This was especially evident concerning a lack of a "set" curriculum or required programs and materials for instruction. Many teachers appreciated this acknowledgment of their professionalism and expertise in their areas. Claire, a member of the leadership team, discussed the intentionality of this decision: "For me, I feel like we treat teachers like professionals. We're not big brother … like we have all the answers, and teachers have none of the answers. So, I am really proud of our approach to professionalism." She went on to explain the impact she hoped that this approach would have on teachers: "I hope that teachers feel when they have time to stop and think and reflect on it … I hope they feel that their voices are important in that they are treated as proficient professionals, and that is very intentional."

Another notable positive that several teachers put forth was the access to self-selected professional development and coursework toward advanced degrees. It is becoming increasingly common in many school districts for teachers to be involved in mandated training and

professional development each year, leaving little time for pursuing classes that may actually be of interest to that individual teacher or might help them address specific classroom needs. This "one size fits all" approach to professional development has become commonplace unfortunately, and is not only detrimental in some cases, but it also can serve to deprofessionalize the field of education further. Fortunately, the leaders at Moss Street are aware of the implications of this practice, and while some common training has been required of staff, there was also general support for teachers to seek out development opportunities specific to their situation and interests. Being a lab school run by a university has also given teachers access to classes and advanced degrees that might have been otherwise difficult to acquire. Better-educated and equipped teachers who feel respected not only as instructors but also as lifelong learners set a good example for students and allow teachers to gain knowledge that they can utilize to better serve the students in their classrooms.

Some other advantageous resources and support provided at Moss Street that the teachers mentioned included access to up-to-date technology, an inclusion model to support students with Individualized Education Plans, and increased student support staff like a dedicated guidance counselor, a full-time social worker, and a school nurse. While it has still been challenging to meet all of the needs of the students, most teachers concede that not every school has the advantage of full-time support staff dedicated to one school like Moss Street does. In addition to these supports, every teacher mentioned the importance of the connections and support system they had built with other teachers. In that regard, Moss Street truly is a close-knit community.

Finally, the previously mentioned concern about the disconnect between the community and the school, which has sometimes been interpreted as a "lack of support," has come to the attention of many stakeholders at Moss Street. As a member of the Moss Street community

myself, I can say that over the past couple of years, I have seen time, effort, and energy put into remediating this issue, and it seemed to make a marked difference in strengthening school and community relationships. Increased opportunities for families and community members to participate in school activities, including assemblies, celebrations, civic work, career fairs, etc., have helped to build lasting bonds between the community, the families, the students, and the staff. Watching this shift has truly been one of the highlights of my time at Moss Street, and other teachers shared similar sentiments.

Research Question 2 Discussion and Implications

In this section, I answer my second research question directly, with subsections that correlate with each of the three sub-questions: pre-service, recruitment, and hiring practices to increase teacher retention, general recommendations for promoting retention, predictors of turnover, and characteristics of those who stay and feel successful in Title I schools. As a reference, I include my second research question being answered in this section,

2. What policies, practices, interventions, and supports could achieve higher retention rates among teachers in this setting?
    a) What pre-service, recruitment, and hiring practices could ensure a better fit between the school and potential candidates for teaching positions?
    b) What are some predictors of turnover that could be identified and mitigated early on?
    c) What characteristics of those who stay might be tractable/transferable through preparation, experiences, and supports?

Pre-Service, Recruitment, and Hiring Practices to Increase Teacher Retention and Recommendations for School Leaders

Hiring Practices

While I have already offered several recommendations for curbing teacher attrition, here I reiterate a few key points and add a few targeted suggestions I have not yet discussed in depth. I begin with the hiring process, as that is where the experience with a school begins for most teachers. In addition to spending some time in the school and community before being hired, having a teacher on the hiring committee to relay their experiences and answer questions would be beneficial and was actually proposed by one of the teacher participants in this study, Patricia. A related recommendation came from Pam, another teacher participant, about having new teachers (and potential new hires in general) actually watch or “shadow” educators (“master teachers”) working with students in the environment. Doing so might give them a better sense of the actual work and what it entails and help them develop tools and a skill set they might employ in their own classroom.

In contrast to the hiring realm, the opposite end of the spectrum occurs when teachers resign. A couple of the teacher participants insinuated that few people knew their real reasons for leaving because they were concerned about burning bridges or because no one had directly asked them. Even Claire, one of the school leaders, indicated that she sometimes felt that she did not really know why teachers decided to leave because she did not always ask because she felt like they may not be transparent about their actual reasons because of her position. Having a third party conduct exit interviews anonymously and report back to administrators once or twice a year (to increase anonymity) could yield some helpful and pertinent information that might lead to better retention in the future.

Recruitment and Pre-Service Experiences

Here, I would like to back up for a moment to an issue that comes into play before the hiring process and mention a critical aspect of the teacher retention conversation, recruitment. Miranda, one of the school leader participants, spoke in depth about her fears for the future of education:

> Retaining teachers is definitely a big problem, but we first have to have people who want to become teachers because the field of education is dying. The experiences we have had help to chart what we decide we want to do in the future. And, sometimes, the experiences children have in schools caused them to want to do anything but go into teaching because of their own experiences. That's why it is so important that we are trying to help teachers teach differently because we need more to go into it. But another reason why people don't want to go into the profession like they used to is because, you know, money drives things. Teaching salaries aren't competitive. And, I think it's bigger than what we can do with education … the profession of education needs to be supported by those outside of it. From the political side of things or from a community stance, people often want to throw money at problems, but we also need more human capital. We need more community members coming in to help schools … not just people walking around observing, but actually being in it. Yes, money is good, but we also need to increase the human resources within the community.

Much of what she said resonates with what I read in the literature and what was alluded to by the teacher participants. While money alone was not a significant consideration for most participants regarding their decision to go into education or whether or not to stay in it, low salaries indicate the overall deprofessionalization of the field. Paying teachers more speaks loudly and clearly that

they are valued for the education and expertise required to do their jobs well. I believe the generation of students going into post-secondary education and those in college currently have different pay and professional treatment expectations. Especially post-Covid, students entering universities have a heightened awareness of the plethora of jobs offering more flexibility and better work/life balance than in previous years. If we, as educators and as a country, hope to attract college students to the teaching field, some considerations must be addressed to do so effectively. Teacher pay, the inflexibility of the schedule, the excessive demands of the job, the lack of professionalism, and the need for more avenues for upward mobility are just some of the areas that need immediate attention if we, as an educational community, have any hope of recruiting promising professionals into the field. Without these needed adjustments, retention of teachers will not be the foremost concern because there simply will not be teachers to retain.

Recommendations for School Leaders

The main recommendation that repeatedly resounded through the teacher voices was for educational leaders simply to listen. They need to create the space, time, and climate in which teachers feel they can share their concerns personally, professionally, and regarding students' needs. As Patricia mentioned, daily check-ins with teachers to gauge how things are going would speak volumes about a leader's commitment to the school community as a whole, including the instructional staff. It would also allow teachers to feel like they have help and support in gaining needed services and support for students. Teachers want to be seen and heard as experts in their field and those who spend significant amounts of time with students. They want to be acknowledged and addressed when advocating for students, not brushed aside. I sensed frustration from some educators who indicated they knew what students needed but sometimes had trouble getting the right people on board to make it happen.

Part of listening, too, is hearing teachers when they say that they are struggling to maintain a balance in their lives. Administrators can often assist in striking this balance by taking things off teachers' plates. Teachers who are overwhelmed and exhausted will not ultimately provide the best experiences for students, and they are often the ones who are mistakenly identified as "burnt out" when the issues leading to that could have been mitigated early on. Teachers, however, often do not have the autonomy to refuse to attend a meeting, complete certain paperwork in an unrealistic time frame, or help run a school function. School leaders need to step in when they see that a teacher is inundated with tasks that may be taking away from their primary job of serving students and may be pushing that teacher out the door.

Predictors of Turnover

In light of these previously mentioned considerations, are there ways to predict and possibly mitigate teacher turnover before they actually leave? In analyzing my findings, I identified three broad predictors of teacher turnover: lack of experience, unrealistic expectations (sometimes related to a "poor fit" for the teacher in that environment), and a suboptimal climate and culture.

Lack of Experience. All of the teacher participants recognized that their own experience (or lack thereof) contributed in some way, positively or negatively, to how they felt about their time in this Title I school. Corrine went so far as to say that she did not feel that she would have been effective at all in the setting as a beginning teacher, and several of the other teachers conceded similar feelings. However, for teachers to gain needed experience in high-needs schools, they must be hired and work in them for some time. How, then, can we, as an educational community, make these early classroom experiences more constructive and less frustrating for teachers just starting in their careers, especially if they choose to serve in Title I

schools? Going back to the conversations with the educators, most mentioned that pre-service internships and student teaching in Title I schools, with a deliberate extra layer of support from a supervising teacher and the university, is a huge step in the right direction. Several of the teacher participants mentioned that they were placed in schools very dissimilar to Moss Street for their pre-service training and practicums. Intentional placements and coordinated support before entering a classroom of their own could better prepare teachers for various scenarios they might encounter.

Once hired, beginning teachers could benefit from a multi-layered approach to support similar to the one I mentioned in the literature review as promising in some districts nationwide. Reviewing the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) results, Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) "found that receiving an extensive number of combined supports—a mentor, supportive administration, teacher collaboration, a teacher network, and extra resources—reduced the probability of migrating by 11% and leaving by 12% as compared with no supports" (para. 13). Also looking at beginning teacher support and retention, Shules and Flores (2020) indicated that a multi-layered approach to inducting beginning teachers has been successful in one district and includes professional development on instructional best practices, how to build relationships with students, learning about the teacher evaluation tool, etc. These specific areas may be of interest to new teachers who are sometimes struggling to balance classroom management and instruction while being concerned about what is expected of them by the administration. This same school system uses a "two-tiered" mentor system in which all first- and second-year teachers are paired with not only one but two mentors. The first is an instructional mentor, a "master teacher" with a strong background in and knowledge of the assigned curriculum. This teacher mentor provides instructional and curriculum-based support, such as help with lesson planning, creating

assessments, and instructional practices. The second mentor is a member of the teacher's home school but is not necessarily someone who teaches the same curriculum as the mentee. This teacher serves to help the new teacher become acclimated with the school's policies, procedures, and people, helping the new teacher navigate the environment. These extra layers of support have proven beneficial in retaining new teachers in the district where they are employed. Intentionality, thought, and time need to go into preparing supports for new teachers, especially in more challenging settings. As was mentioned with more experienced teachers, school leaders need to be available and receptive to teacher feedback to make necessary adjustments. As with more experienced teachers, listening to them would go a long way toward identifying and providing what is required for them to feel better equipped to serve students.

Unrealistic Expectations/Poor Fit. Most of the teacher participants alluded to the fact that they felt unaware of the true nature of the challenges they might face working in their last (or current) setting. According to Patricia, "During the hiring process, I don't feel that there was a lot of preparation for the realistic 'these are our students.' This is where it was more like focusing on all the positives and filling the school." The school leaders acknowledged the disconnect they have sometimes seen as well between expectations and reality, "And I think that disillusionment is hard, and the actual work is in shifting from what I thought I was going to be doing every day to what I'm actually doing every day," according to Rhonda. An important side note is that all three school leaders acknowledged that having meaningful connections to the community the school serves is a critical element in the satisfaction and longevity of the educators in the building; teachers newer to the district and area face more challenges building these communal connections. This being said, a transparent discussion with prospective teachers during the hiring process detailing the students served in the space and the expectations of those

teachers by school leadership would be preferable in helping to ensure a better fit from the outset.

Additionally, prospective teachers spending some time in the classrooms and in the community before committing to teaching in the school might help ensure that they are aware, prepared, and intentional in their decision to work in the environment with a better understanding of the needs and expectations. Educators who understand the environment they are entering and have chosen to serve that community with full knowledge of the requirements and challenges are often more content and more satisfied. Simon et al. (2019) looked at the hiring practices of six high-poverty schools. They concluded that there is a "positive correlation between person-organization or person-job fit and overall satisfaction, effectiveness and plans to stay" (para. 14).

Poor Climate/Culture. While some of the predictors of turnover might be directly related to the individual teacher, some can be attributed more to the school as a whole. Teachers who cannot find the support they need due to a poor climate or an overall school culture that does not facilitate strong relationships among its stakeholders can sometimes be the root of the problem. As with many aspects of institutional organizations, this often has implications for a top-down flow. Shules and Flores (2020) posited that positive relationships among teachers and between teachers and school leaders are critical for teacher effectiveness and retention. Strong leadership is mentioned repeatedly in the literature as one of the main contributors to having a positive impact on teacher retention in general. Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) found that teachers want leaders who listen to and respect them and provide required supports and professional development based on teacher requests. This finding was corroborated in the conversations I had with teachers. Interestingly, Miranda, one of the school leaders, shared these thoughts on the climate and culture of a school,

> Climate can wax and wane … it can change depending on who is in the building at the time. Whereas, culture is more ingrained and well-established. There's a culture here that is about treating people as professionals while having high standards for all. It's the idea that we are all learners. In addition to that, let's make it fun.

Both of the other school leaders weighed in with their thoughts on climate and culture, revealing the importance of administration in setting the tone for a school community. According to Rhonda,

> About climate and culture, [I read] an article that talks about principals; teachers don't leave schools, they leave principals. So, that speaks to what's the culture of the school? How is the culture being maintained? [Is it] positive or negative? And what does that do for teachers because burnout is real? You know, if I can leave this place from being miserable and go here and be o.k., then I'm going to leave.

Claire, another administrator, talked about her own experience leaving a school as a teacher because the leadership style and climate that resulted were not a good fit for her. She indicated that this experience informed her thoughts on attrition now that she is a leader,

> When people don't want to be here, then maybe it's best [they leave] because it could be this is not what's best for their mental health. At the end of the day, these are jobs. This is not who we are as people.

She talked about the importance of school leaders being intentional and consistent in their commitment to the school community's goals and respecting people's decisions to stay or to go depending on what is important for them to feel satisfied and happy. She also acknowledged that while school leaders set the tone for many of the decisions in a school, they cannot control everything, nor can they please everyone.

Based on this information, what are some implications for school leaders? First and foremost, they need to remember that establishing a healthy and supportive climate and culture starts with them as leaders. School administrators often set the stage for prioritizing and goal-setting within the school community, but they should do so with the staff's input and with the overall impacts on the stakeholders in mind. When it comes to the climate and culture of a school, a top-down approach is often the order. School leaders should keep in mind that leadership starts with them. While they may not be able to control every aspect of the school, they can do much to set the tone and promote an overall positive culture that will have implications for the staff, students, and the community.

Characteristics of Teachers Who Have Stayed

With all this discussion surrounding ways to curb teacher attrition, it was valuable to examine the experiences of those who have stayed at Moss Street Partnership School and to assess what we might learn from the characteristics that have been identified in them. I asked the group of teachers who stayed and the school leaders to identify characteristics that they felt contributed to the success and longevity of some educators in Title I schools like Moss Street. It was partly my goal to try to identify these characteristics as they might inform hiring "right fit" candidates for such positions. Additionally, I wanted to examine the likelihood of some of these characteristics being tractable and, thus, might inform suggestions for teacher training and support. The answers to this question could also speak to my research question about predictors of turnover that might be mitigated early on. For the teachers who stayed, their reasons varied. Kristy indicated she felt that her ability to build relationships, show empathy for others, and nurture students beyond the academic realm had played a significant part in her feelings of success in her role. Jana also mentioned her ability to build relationships and added that being

caring, hospitable, and willing to put in extra effort were key to her feelings of satisfaction. While Kristy and Jana had similar responses, Cara differed slightly, saying that adaptability and a willingness to seek out and accept help had been paramount for her. Corrine's response was that being "stubborn," "determined," and "not wanting to fail" were motivating for her personally and professionally. She also stated that being patient, calm, and able to think/act well under pressure have also proven effective for her in this setting.

The school leaders weighed in on the characteristics leading to success and longevity. For Claire, first and foremost, it is confidence that enables teachers to be effective in highly impacted schools. "I think a teacher has to be confident in (their) ability to manage the classroom, facilitate instruction, and build relationships with students and their families. So, the confidence piece is huge." Miranda added that a vulnerability to fears, a willingness to ask for help, and a desire to break down barriers are all critical for educators. Rhonda mentioned that in her experience, successful and fulfilled teachers have often built a "community amongst themselves" and seem to fare better, as do those who have a strong sense of commitment to the school and the community. All three leaders in the focus group agreed that teachers with a strong support system and a dedication to work in a particular school community seem happier and more likely to stay.

Once I identified the characteristics that lead to job satisfaction and longevity for the participants, I wondered what the teachers believed contributed to their ability to cultivate these traits and behaviors. All of the teachers in this group discussed experience and its role in helping them develop or enhance these characteristics in themselves. They all conveyed that they believe experience in Title I environments is the best way to feel prepared and confident and to be more effective in working with students. Administrators also mentioned this confidence as being one

of the most important characteristics for teachers to possess, and I perceive that this confidence may be due, in large part, to the experience that the teachers spoke about at length. This has implications for teacher training and beginning teacher support as well. Well-thought-out, structured, and supported early experiences in Title I schools could go a long way in preparing teachers to serve in Title I schools for years to come. Having strong mentors and co-teachers during practicum experiences and in the early days in the classroom might better equip teachers for their roles.

Additionally, intentionally placing pre-service teachers in Title I schools while they have the added layer of support might assist them in building that confidence that school leaders mentioned while helping them to develop a beneficial skill set. Pam, one of the teachers, also talked about pre-service and beginning teachers being allowed to watch teachers who have found useful techniques in working with students and how that might help the new teachers glean useful strategies they could employ. A couple of the teacher participants also mentioned having co-teachers in the classroom to work alongside less experienced teachers or those needing extra support as a possible intervention to help curb attrition.

Finally, one common characteristic teachers and school leaders mentioned that might aid retention is the ability to build strong relationships. This repeatedly occurred concerning relationships with students, caregivers, the community, the school staff, and the administration. Undoubtedly, part of the onus is on teachers to forge these bonds, but there are also ways that school leaders can intentionally support building these relationships. For example, they can make it more likely that these relationships develop by facilitating opportunities for staff to engage with one another through social and team-building activities and by carefully grouping teachers on grade levels or with common planning times to make sure every teacher has coworkers who

can help to support them. They might also positively impact by pairing mentors and mentees together strategically. The multi-layered, intentional support system I reviewed earlier in this chapter and detailed by researchers Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) could be utilized to support even more experienced teachers who are new to a school as a way of helping them acclimate to their new setting. For experienced and novice teachers alike, Cosner and Jones (2016) suggest a multi-faceted approach to building community that includes "robust opportunities for within-school teacher interactions that support learning from peers," such as staff meetings, team meetings, professional development, peer mentoring/coaching, and voluntary/informal groups (p. 6). Evidently, teachers who feel supported and connected to their fellow educators report higher levels of job satisfaction and are more likely to stay in their current roles.

Additionally, school leaders can assist by encouraging interactions between the school and the community/homes and by providing more opportunities for community involvement in the school. Finally, relationships often start with communication and active listening. Administrators who take the time to have conversations with teachers regularly to ensure that the lines of communication stay open would benefit both parties. Patricia, one of the teacher participants, suggested daily "check-ins" by administrators, especially for new teachers. She said this extra layer of support could have made a difference for her in her own personal experience: "feeling heard by the administrators and the support staff, feeling like they hear the struggles, and they are actively trying to solve those problems with me. I felt like that could have been a game changer for me."

Revisiting Theories and Demoralization

As I come to the end of this study, it is useful to revisit the theories that informed me at the initial stages of this study and influenced my interpretation and presentation of the data

collected. I drew from two theoretical frameworks, Invitational Theory, and Human Relations Theory. "Invitational Theory seeks to explain phenomena and provide a means of intentionally summoning people to realize their relatively boundless potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor … to address the entire global nature of human existence and opportunity" (Purkey & Novak, 2015, p. 1). This theory speaks to the potential for teachers to be effective and feel satisfied in their roles if they are in supportive and encouraging environments, hopefully translating into teachers creating similar environments for their students. As I noted in Chapter I, according to Purkey and Novak (2015), the five basic tenets of the Invitational Theory are:

- People are able, valuable, and responsible, and should be treated accordingly.
- Educating should be a collaborative, cooperative activity.
- The process is the product in the making.
- People possess untapped potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor.
- This potential can best be realized by places, policies, programs, and processes specifically designed to invite development and by people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others, personally and professionally. (p. 1)

The conversations that occurred during the interviews and the focus group corroborated the principles of this theory. Most educators would agree with the first tenet of this theory regarding the value and capabilities of students, but what I feel was brought to light through this study and my conversations with both the teachers who stayed and those who left is the importance of teachers feeling like valuable, capable members of the school community. Feeling unheard and unseen can negate their positive impact on the school and the students.

The second tenet of this theory emphasizes the collaborative and cooperative nature of education. Collaboration between students and teachers is central to education. However,

reiterated in the voices of the participants was the reminder that teachers not only need to be able to collaborate with other teachers, but they need to feel they are part of a team that includes equally involved partners in administration, auxiliary staff, and community members. As asserted previously, this could help mitigate some of the lack of support sentiments shared by teachers.

The third tenet of the theory, "the process is the product in the making," particularly resonated with me as an educator. Depending on the level one teaches, educators do not always get to see students reach their ultimate goals, especially those involving college and career aspirations. Educators are in the business of helping students along the journey to meet their educational goals that will hopefully lead to fulfilling career and life paths. Remembering that the process is important makes what educators do every day in the classroom less trivial if taken into the context of the whole student and their life experiences. According to the old Chinese proverb, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." What a kindergarten teacher does is as important as someone guiding students through doctoral research. As Jana, one teacher participant, so eloquently stated,

> I enjoy working with kids. And I know [they're] the future. And so, I want to be part of trying to make just one life better. You can change one, then they spread it to another, and it keeps growing. So, if I can't change the world all in one day, [maybe I can] one child at a time.

Teachers need to be reminded that what they do every day impacts society and is worthwhile and meaningful, even if they are not seeing the seeds they have planted come to fruition. Keeping this in mind could help assure teachers of the significance of their roles and contributions,

regardless of their subject or level. It could also help to lessen the deprofessionalization of education.

Finally, Invitational Theory says that "people possess untapped potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor" and "this potential can best be realized by places, policies, programs, and processes specifically designed to invite development and by people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others" (Purkey & Novak, 2015, p. 1). The input of the participants in this study definitely spoke to the potential that students, educators, administrators, and school communities can reach with intentionality and thought behind providing needed supports and by careful instillation of policies and programs to support the overall goals of the school community and to promote a positive and nurturing environment for all members of the community.

To complement Invitational Theory, I utilized Human Relations Theory to examine the data I gathered throughout this process. This theory focuses on how leadership and administration can structure organizational support to place more "emphasis on employee motivation and job satisfaction" (Nasib, 2018, para. 1). Nasib (2018) describes the primary importance of the human side of organizations rather than focusing solely on productivity and performance. In this time of standardized test scores being seen as primary indicators of teacher effectiveness, returning to the human relationships inherent in our field is important. Seeing teachers as people with their own needs, desires, and motivations helps make them feel more understood and valued, potentially leading to better retention. In conducting this study, I learned about some specific practices that make teachers feel more valued and fulfilled, such as being supported in managing student behavior, having a say in school-based decisions, being placed on a carefully curated team, being afforded time to work as a team, and having some autonomy and

flexibility in day-to-day tasks and professional development options as well. Informed by this theory, I sought to document factors/practices that might increase a sense of fulfillment and security for teachers. Human Relations Theory aligns with my beliefs about the role of leadership in helping to create positive school cultures, which in turn can create positive experiences for students, which is of prime importance to their success.

Revisiting Demoralization

Reflecting on theories and concepts that lent an overarching structure to my consideration and deliberation when looking at the data, I was influenced by the idea of demoralization and how it contributes to my understanding of the experiences of teachers, as well as how others view them. As I reviewed the data from my study, I was curious if there was any evidence of demoralization among the participants in this study. As a reminder, demoralization, according to Santoro (2018), "occurs when pedagogical policies and school practices threaten the ideals and values, the moral center, teachers bring to their work—things that cannot be remedied by resilience" (p. 5). Although subtle in some cases, I saw hints of demoralization reflected in the experiences of the study participants, even though I do not think this was the central reason for attrition in this school.

First, I address the term "burnout" as Santoro (2018) discusses it in depth in her writing and research, noting that she sees it as somewhat problematic. She said this about a teacher she interviewed, "Burnout is a common explanation for why experienced teachers are dissatisfied with their work. Undoubtedly, burnout is a problem that needs to be addressed … However, for many experienced educators like Lee, burnout does not capture the moral source of their dissatisfaction" (p. 43). Further troubling, she indicates that the term "burnout" insinuates that a teacher is used up in a sense and has nothing left to give. She uses the analogy of a candle with

limited wick and wax. This is how Santoro described another teacher whose experiences she chronicled:

> If it is never snuffed, the candle will burn out. Teachers burn out, presumably because they do not ever take time to themselves by blowing out the candle of their teacher selves. As a result, they have no more resources [wick or wax] to offer their students and colleagues. Yet, Lisa still had plenty to offer her students and colleagues; she had not been extinguished prematurely. (p. 6)

This unflattering and inaccurate picture bothered Santoro, and it caused me to pause and reflect. Labeling teachers as "burnt out" implies that they are past their expiration date, no longer useful. Additionally, it puts the onus of the problem on the teacher, as if the teacher created the problem by not taking care of herself. This mentality releases anyone (or any institution or system) from any responsibility that may have contributed to the teacher feeling like they must leave the classroom. It neither addresses the systemic problems in education nor the excessive demands on teachers, which are often out of their control. Interestingly, in the focus group with school leaders, "burnout" was mentioned twice regarding reasons teachers might be leaving.

While I think the fact that the administrators brought up burnout is partly due to a misunderstanding of the term, I still feel it is worthwhile to point out that a couple of the teachers did leave for what I consider to be moral reasons. They could not provide the students with adequate educational opportunities because of constraints over which they had no control, like the inability to secure needed supports for students, lack of capacity to remediate educational concerns across multiple subject areas that would require one-on-one regular interventions, or difficulty maintaining conducive (for learning) student behavior given the protocols put in place. Were they tired? Yes, but I would not label them as "burnt out." They were tired of advocating

for themselves and for students and feeling like their pleas for help were fruitless in many cases. This is the essence of demoralization, to my understanding. It is not that these teachers had nothing left to give, but it is more of "a state in which individuals can no longer access the sources of satisfaction that made their work worthwhile," according to Santoro (2018, p. 49). I think this is a meaningful distinction that speaks to the issues some teacher participants faced.

Recommendations for Future Research

I began my research after the height of the Covid pandemic had passed, but I feel certain that the participants' experiences were impacted by it in one way or another. That being said, there were very few comments by any of the participants directly related to the pandemic, and very few issues or concerns (if any) could be attributed solely to it. However, as the world changed due to Covid, the education system is no exception. Due to the proximity in time when I began this study, there weren't numerous studies regarding pandemic effects on teachers and education in general yet. I am seeing more and more of these impacts daily, however. I feel that studies focusing more on how we see teacher attrition post-Covid would be very enlightening as the entire world is still reeling from the aftermath and ongoing impacts of this global pandemic. I think a closer look at education and teacher attrition post-pandemic is warranted.

In addition to this, but on a related note, I feel that Covid opened most peoples' eyes to the possibility of rethinking how we had traditionally seen things like shopping, entertainment, and education. As I mentioned in an earlier section on recruitment, I believe generations of would-be educators will seek more flexible career options. A study seeking ways that we might provide more flexibility for teachers and students schedule-wise could benefit both parties. Claire, one of the leadership participants, brought up the practice that some school systems are trying out of having a 4-day week for students, leaving the fifth day for teachers to work.

Another school leader, Rhonda, added that she had seen some school systems implementing year-round schooling to eliminate the long summer break in which families have to find childcare and some learning may be lost according to some indicators. In this model, students typically go to school the same number of days per year but have more frequent (although shorter) breaks throughout the year. Not just time of year alternatives, but also time of day, would be interesting. For example, maybe some students would benefit from an "abbreviated" school day where some of the extras of school, like lunch, recess, etc., are foregone in favor of a shorter day. Also, perhaps being able to offer morning, afternoon, or evening educational options, especially for older students, could allow some to perform at more optimal levels. Research seeking to get ideas and gain feedback about providing more flexible scheduling options to provide better experiences for students and teachers would be valuable.

Finally, as mentioned previously, the pandemic made us reimagine how to do many things in our households and in our classrooms. While many of us were glad when remote (or hybrid) learning came to an end, some found that it actually worked well for them. I have heard this from students, families, and teachers as well. For some, this format fits better into the overall picture of their lives for a variety of reasons. While many have moved on from remote learning and hope to never look back, I feel that it could be compelling to see research regarding ways that it can be effectively implemented for students on various levels. In the end, schooling should be invitational and involve a range of options and possibilities; the more we can provide for students and teachers, the better.

Final Thoughts

When I set out to study teacher retention and teacher attrition in my current setting, it was the direct result of the negative consequences of the latter I saw on students, families, the school,

and the community as a whole. Teacher attrition, unfortunately but not surprisingly, has been and continues to be one of the biggest challenges to providing equitable and quality educational experiences for students across the country. According to a 2021 survey of educators titled "Voices From the Classroom,"

> The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on teaching and learning, especially for our most vulnerable students, and inequities that have existed in our education system long before the pandemic have only become more tragic. Coupled with a national reckoning on racial injustice, BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and people of color] students and educators are facing extensive trauma in this moment, all while support systems and resources have diminished. (p. 1)

Calling the lack of support provided by the education system "trauma" is appropriate in my opinion. Several of the teachers in the study spoke about the lasting impacts of teacher attrition on students they have witnessed over the years, from diminishing their motivation to making them angry and distrustful. Clearly, the effects are even more profound in communities that have been underserved historically and are often in an even more vulnerable situation as a result.

The concert of voices that spoke to these issues at Moss Street Partnership School illuminated the need for better support for teachers so that they are prepared and equipped to provide students with the education they need and deserve, especially in Title I environments. Support of educators starts in the pre-service phase with carefully selected placements and buttressed practicums alongside experienced teachers who serve in a supervisory and mentoring capacity. Professors and mentors who have relevant and recent applicable experience could also serve to guide pre-service teachers through their studies and practical training. Giving teachers a clear picture of what they may encounter in a particular school throughout the hiring process

through transparency from the hiring committee, as well providing opportunities to visit the school and spend time in a classroom would also be beneficial. Upon being hired, teachers being assigned a mentor or being placed on a team of teachers and support personnel who can provide extra support while they get acclimated would be ideal.

Most importantly, I believe, was the recurring sentiment that teachers shared about the need to be heard. They want to feel that they are part of a team in trying to meet students' needs, and that they are not alone. They need help in managing student behavior, securing support for students, and maintaining a healthy balance for themselves. These are just some of the ways the teachers I interviewed stated could have led to a better sense of fulfillment and effectiveness in their roles, and in turn could provide more positive experiences for students.

At the end of my first interview with a teacher, I randomly asked for one word to summarize her experience at Moss Street. The answer was so spontaneous and heartfelt that I asked the question in each subsequent interview. I got answers ranging from "enlightening" to "chaotic." I appreciate the sincerity and vulnerability of each participant, and I hope that I have accurately encapsulated their experiences in a way that might help others in rural Title I environments to attract and retain motivated educators to work with and alongside staff and community stakeholders to ensure that these students receive the educational support, resources, services, and experiences they deserve.

I feel that the suggestions posited by the participants are not only practical but they have the potential to positively impact teacher retention, especially in highly impacted schools. Sadly, I must take a moment to acknowledge that this research will not be utilized as I originally intended. My goal at the outset was to create an action plan to submit to the leadership of Moss Street Partnership School that might be helpful moving forward. Unfortunately, as I neared the

end of my research, we found out that Moss Street Partnership School will no longer be operating as a laboratory school run by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro after this school year. This decision was apparently made, in part, due to the local school district needing the building back to accommodate the growing population of elementary students in the area, though other factors that I am not privy to may have played a role in the decision. While this was difficult on many levels for many people, I still feel that the voices and experiences I shared in this dissertation can benefit others in Title I schools and similar environments to Moss Street.

For me personally, the school closing happened after I had completed all of my data collection and much of my writing. However, this event forced me to make some career decisions that I may not have otherwise made at this time. I saw myself as one of the "in it for the long haul" people who, in spite of the inherent challenges, felt that I had found my home among the staff, students, and community of Moss Street. Quite frankly, I was so disheartened and disillusioned that this school, having shown significant growth and promise over the five years that it was run as a lab school, and becoming increasingly supported by the community, could be dismissed for seemingly logistical reasons; this caused me to rethink my options altogether. Prior to the announcement of the school closing, I saw myself staying at Moss Street but possibly moving into more of a leadership, coaching, or curriculum/support role in the future. As that is no longer on the table, I am currently pursuing opportunities within The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (the institution that formerly ran Moss Street Partnership School). It is my hope that becoming involved in higher education in some capacity might enable me to be part of decisions impacting schools like Moss Street (including other laboratory schools), teacher training, or general advocacy for underserved populations at all levels of education. I am still a big proponent of the laboratory school initiative and hope that this unfortunate turn of

events does not reflect poorly on the concept in general or negate the amazing work that has been done there over the years it was in existence. In addition to the other recommendations for future research, I think a closer look at the Lab School Initiative in North Carolina across the various schools and programs, documenting the experiences and efficacy, would be a worthwhile venture.

On another personal note, when I set out to do this research, almost everyone to whom I mentioned my topic (people within education and outside of it) said that they felt the main reason for such high rates of teacher attrition in this country was the low pay. Although my sample size is admittedly small and was done within a very specific environment and context, I would like to point out that not one teacher mentioned the salary as a deciding factor in their decision to go into education or whether or not to stay in it. They talked about being given autonomy, treated as professionals, and listened to and respected for their thoughts, opinions, and requests, but not one mentioned pay. Alternately, it did come up with the leaders in the focus group. Although a pay increase would indicate that we value teachers as professionals and might attract more newcomers to education, I feel that the low pay mantra often distracts teachers from the real issues causing teachers to leave. In my undergraduate studies, I remember a professor who walked into one of my teaching methods classes and said, "If anyone in this room thinks they are going to make any money in this field, please get up, leave, and change your major immediately." My point is that teachers know going into this that we will not command a high salary, but we commit to doing it anyway. In my experience through this research and in working in schools, teachers do this as work of the heart, and the pay is not the primary factor when they leave the profession.

So, why did I stay? As I mentioned previously, before the closing announcement, I would have considered myself one of the “stayers.” The things that made Moss Street an environment that I felt effective and satisfied in were many of the things mentioned by the participants in the study. I developed the confidence the leadership team talked about from the skill set I had developed over the years through previous experiences, but more importantly, I continued to develop confidence by learning from the students, community, and co-workers at Moss Street over the past 4 years. My experiences are a testament to the strong support system, the “community amongst themselves” that Rhonda mentioned in the focus group as something those who stay had been able to build. As many participants acknowledged, I also benefited from the wealth of professional development and educational opportunities afforded to us as laboratory school employees. As Claire in the leadership group put it, these things helped me “learn to navigate” this environment to the point that I could feel successful and fulfilled. This, combined with a growing commitment to the community (which the leadership team mentioned as being critical), would have kept me at Moss Street if not for the impending closing. While it is very sad for me personally, as it is for all who were involved with Moss Street Partnership School to see it ending, I take pride in knowing the growth in so many areas that took place in that building and within myself as a person. I walk away from this experience as a better educator and person. This community of learners has taught me more than I could have ever imagined.

What I am left to ponder as I conclude this research is what the future of education holds for students all around this country. A concern expressed during the focus group with school leaders was the problem of college students not entering schools of education, but opting for other fields of study. If we don’t begin to make teaching more attractive to newcomers, we won’t be faced with a retention issue because there simply won’t be teachers to retain. If I were to

continue my research along these lines, I believe that I would turn my focus to this concern of recruiting potential educators and also to supporting those who have chosen education as their career and are new to the field. The future of our educational system depends on it.

To conclude, I refer back to the single-word sentiments I requested at the end of the teacher interviews. What would be the one word I would use to summarize my experience following the completion of this dissertation? “Listen.” Teachers want to feel heard and acknowledged. They are in the classrooms every day working with students, and when they ask for assistance, flexibility, or change, it is with creating the best scenario for students in mind. If we do not start to truly listen to educators, a flawed system may become broken beyond repair. If we do listen, we all stand to gain from their experiences, especially the students. After all, that is why this research and supporting teachers is so critical.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

1. What were your reasons for becoming a teacher?
2. What have been (were) some of the most rewarding aspects of your career as a teacher?
3. What have been (were) some of the biggest challenges you (have) faced as a teacher?
4. What have been (were) some of the greatest supports you (have) experienced as an educator?
5. What most impacted your decision to stay in (or leave) the classroom?
6. What could have better prepared you in advance to serve in your current (or former) capacity and setting?
7. Did you feel adequately educated about the challenges of the job through your teacher preparation program and through the hiring process? If so, please describe. If not, what would you suggest?
8. For those who have left- Is there anything that could have caused you to feel more satisfied/fulfilled/supported in your role and may have impacted your decision to leave differently?

   For those who stayed- What has contributed to your effectiveness in your role? What characteristics can you identify in yourself (and others who are able to feel effective in this environment) that might contribute to this satisfaction?
9. For both groups- Reflecting on how you believe teachers could be better prepared and supported to feel more effective and satisfied in their roles in Title I schools like Moss Street, what suggestions do you have for our school leadership to better promote teacher retention?

*The questions will be similar for the teachers who stayed and who left with minor adjustments.

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUP WITH SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

1. What characteristics do you feel are important for teachers to possess in order to feel successful in a Title I environment like ours?
2. What commonalities do you notice among teachers who have stayed at Moss Street for four or more years and seem to have a strong sense of satisfaction and effectiveness in their roles?
3. What commonalities have you noticed among the teachers who have left Moss Street?
4. What reason(s) do most teachers give for leaving Moss Street? For staying?
5. What do you think we do well at Moss Street in the realm of recruiting, hiring, training, supporting, and retaining teachers?
6. What areas do you feel that we could address to improve teacher retention at Moss Street?
7. What practices have you considered (seen elsewhere, heard about, read about) that might improve teacher retention at Moss Street?
8. Are there resources (other schools, school systems, books, experts) that you would consider consulting to assist in improving teacher retention?
9. How much importance do you place on teacher retention as part of an agenda to promote a healthy and positive school climate?

*These may be adjusted pending themes that emerge following the teacher interviews.