SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO? WHY NEBRASKA'S RURAL VETERAN

TEACHERS CHOSE TO REMAIN IN THEIR POSITION

By

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Abstract

Where have all the teachers gone? This is the question that school districts nationwide have been asking in recent years as the country faces a continued shortage of highly qualified K-12 educators. To date, much of the research has focused on the reasons why teachers are leaving the profession and why prospective teachers elect for other vocations altogether. Increased public scrutiny, criticism of public education from politicians, demanding working conditions, lack of financial and/or professional support, and burnout are all common culprits. Yet there remains a core population of, admittedly aging, veteran teachers who have persevered, thus begging the question: "Why did you stay?" This study examines the stories of veteran, rural Nebraska secondary school teachers gathered through semi-structured interviews to answer this question. Analysis of their interview transcripts generated common themes around what teachers themselves attribute to the reason why they stayed when so many others did not. The results offer perspective to current educational administrators, school boards, teacher preparatory schools, and even politicians on what conditions to cultivate to help more teachers answer the question "Should I stay or should I go?" with the former option instead of the latter.

Dedication

To my wife, Andrea:

Words cannot express two things: 1) how deep and enduring my love for you is, and 2) the extent of my gratitude for all of the ways you have supported me and our family over the last many years. You have always been supportive of me pursuing both my professional and academic goals, despite the challenges and extra burden both have placed upon you. You have encouraged me, motivated me, and at times challenged and pushed me to see all of my commitments and responsibilities through. You keep our house running, you manage our family schedule, and you are God's blessing to me as my wife and to our boys as their mother. Thank you and I love you.

To my sons, Daniel and Jacob:

I've been in school pursuing this degree or that degree for your entire lives. I know this has meant time away and nights when dad was unavailable. My hope, however, is that as you grow older and your schedules become even busier, the time spent working on pursuing my education when you were young frees up time to support you in all of your pursuits. You are both exceptionally gifted young men not just in academic aptitude but also in your capacity to love and your character as young men. May God continue to bless you and work through you both to fulfill His purpose for your lives. I love you both and am so proud of you

Acknowledgements

The number of people who have helped and encouraged me along this journey is a testament to how richly blessed I have been. I am grateful to you for your support in helping me achieve this goal and become a better educator and person along the way.

- To Dr. Surface, Dr. Keiser, Dr. Williams, and the rest of the faculty at the University of Nebraska at Omaha's educational leadership department: Thank you for your support and guidance. Your kindness, empathy, and understanding of the challenges and stresses that parents and in-service educators have outside of their graduate responsibilities made pursuing and completing this degree possible while balancing everything.

- To my Norris team: It is my very great privilege to be able to work with and learn from you all. I have had the opportunity to serve an amazing group of students and staff as well as a dedicated community. Thank you for providing a home for my family and I.

- To the educators who consented to participate in my study: Thank you for giving me your time when you already give it to so many others. The work you do is impactful and your stories were inspiring. You are a credit to the profession.

- To my principal friends (you know who you are): Thank you for taking my calls, problem-solving with me when I have one of those "well this is a new one" situations, for the endless group texts, and being my ever-present and always available support network.

- To my doctoral classmates: Matt, Andrew, Monica, Tim. Thank you for your friendship these last many years. The group texts during class, banter about our

respective progress (or lack thereof), encouragement, laughs, and well-checks have made this process enjoyable. I appreciate you all taking me in and allowing me to be an honorary member of PLCS.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Personal Stance, Experience, and Introduction to the Problem

"We could pretty much run our own school," was a common phrase around the

Seggerman family Christmas each year. Admittedly, among my extended family, we had

every subject covered to run a small school. The only thing missing was a principal.

Little did we know at the time, that some twenty years later, yours truly would be

announcing to the family that I had secured my first administrative position.

I grew up practically living at the small, Class D-2 school where my dad taught

science for 24 years before the consolidation with a neighboring town where he taught for

another 20 before retiring a few years ago. I can vividly remember walking from my

various elementary classrooms over the years, through the shared cafeteria, which always

smelled like bread, down the short hallway past the weight room and behind the library to

my dad's classroom. Most of the time, he could be found grading, or planning, or

preparing labs for the next day's science classes. I would sit in the chair at his desk, if he

wasn't already using it, and work on my homework or beg to play games on his

computer. When I got bored, I would walk around the school and explore.

I spent so much time wandering around those hallways that I can still, nearly 30

years later, remember where all of the teachers' classrooms were when I was in

elementary school. Mrs. Talarico was the librarian, and next to the library was Mrs.

Pankoke's "Home Ec" lab. Down the ramp to the gym and around the back side of the

home bleachers was Mr. Tonniges's office. Mrs. Kraus was next on the tour just down the

hall in the band room before jumping into the lowered, two-tier, green-carpeted hangout

area called "The Pit." A lap around the high school classrooms found Mr. Wusk, Mr.

Carlson, Mrs. Votipka, and Mr. Komenda, who taught shop, history, English, and math, respectively. Some of these teachers still taught with my dad until the day he retired.

School was a place of stability. It was the anchor of the community, and for teachers' kids like me, it was where childhood happened. Each of these teachers, among others, had a profound impact on my life. I had always been an academically minded, some might say know-it-all type of kid, but they all helped me grow beyond what I was. When our school consolidated with the neighboring town's, it brought with it new classmates and a whole other staff of teachers–most of whom taught with my dad until he retired.

These people became part of my life because they were part of my dad's life. When my parents socialized, it often involved other teachers. When they planned date nights, it revolved around what activities were going on at school, what extra duties my dad was responsible for, or which high school students were available to watch us. As I grew up, these teachers became my parents away from home. Mr. Rickert taught me how to manage my time–though not altogether successfully–my fault, not his. Mrs. Wewel helped me find my passion for public speaking, which eventually came in pretty handy. Ms. Hatfield, Mr. Barthule, and my dad all helped me grow my love for science. More than that, they all did this for me and hundreds of other students because they loved what they did.

Coming from a family of educators, all of whom worked in small, rural school districts, I was not surprised when, part way through my sophomore year of college, I decided to change my major from pre-med to teaching. Part of it was a deeply seeded conviction in church one day about what my life meant. The other was because I had my

first real opportunity to teach. I had been a part of the honors program at my university and I could contract some of my science classes for honors credit by doing additional research. A professor, Dr. Gardner, took me under his wing and gave me the opportunity to serve as a teaching assistant and teach one of the Introduction to Zoology lab sections. I was given a lab space with 24 undergraduate students hoping to learn from me what I had just discovered the previous school year. I. Was. Hooked. I enjoyed the fulfillment of helping others learn new things. Everyone knows the cliche of the "lightbulb moment," and I came to know and appreciate it too. From that moment on, I knew that I wanted to be a teacher–probably something I had always known–and my dad was not the least bit surprised when I called to tell him.

Fast forward to my senior year as I applied for jobs, I was astonished at how often I never heard back from districts when I submitted my application. I applied for a dozen positions and ultimately landed my first job at a large, Class A school in a metropolitan area. I was told after the interview that I was one of over seventy applicants and the only reason I got an interview was because a colleague of mine had vouched for me.

Over the next seven years of my teaching career, I loved what I did. I had an incredibly supportive department of science teachers. My department head was constantly popping into my classroom, asking how my lessons were going, observing, and giving feedback. The teacher next door, Murray, was two years from retirement during my first year as a teacher. While he liked to make fun of how nervous and obsessive about my lessons I was, he ultimately became my first professional mentor. I learned from him and others how to ask for help, what things that my principal asked me to do I actually had to do, which students and parents–both good and bad–to be aware of,

and how to streamline my grading and planning processes. I gained forty years of teaching knowledge in short, forty-minute professional learning community meetings every Monday morning.

In a school of more than 180 teachers, it was not a big surprise that I did not see my administrators that much. They had a lot of teachers, even more students, and their job to do. My principal came in for the quarterly walkthroughs and scheduled my semesterly observations, but other than that, it was mostly my colleagues. I found that I craved constructive feedback as well as affirmation of what I was working hard on in relatively equal measure. It was not until I invited our building's assistant principal of curriculum and instruction into my classroom that I got that feedback. This woman came in, picked apart my lesson, and gave me the most supportive–albeit direct–feedback I had ever received. She followed up, asked questions, and checked in to see how the implementation of strategies was going. She also connected me with other teachers who could help me, but even more importantly, who *I* could help grow. She coached me along and gave me my first opportunity at instructional leadership.

That trend of opportunities continued. As I sought out new learning experiences in graduate school programs over the following years, I was allowed to lead committees and pilot programs, serve on advisory boards, and represent myself and other teachers, coaches, and sponsors like me in the school improvement process. Then, one day in September of my 7th year of teaching, my principal asked me to come to his office. He let me know that one of my assistant principals was diagnosed with breast cancer and would be taking a long-term medical leave of absence. He went on to explain they were looking for someone to fill her role and invited me to consider it. I interviewed for the

position and was given the opportunity to serve as an interim assistant principal in my own building. Again, I. Was. Hooked. I loved the hustle and bustle of the office, the chance to interact with more students and teachers, and the ability to make an impact–however small at that point–on the learning environment of an entire school. This opportunity, in short, changed my career.

Six months later, I competed against forty-five applicants to become an assistant principal at one of the feeder middle schools to my high school. In this role, I took on the responsibilities of supervising all academic interventions, curriculum and instruction, and professional development. I was astounded in my first semester as an administrator going into other classrooms and seeing the wide variety of skill levels in my teachers. For years I thought that everybody was doing what I was doing. I believed, in my naivete, that teaching came easily to everyone. It was then I had the epiphany that adults were no different than my students: everybody has the space and opportunity to grow and improve.

During this time, I also began to see the impact that the stresses of teaching have on educators. I had teachers come into my office after school and cry for thirty minutes, sharing stories about an interaction with a parent or a colleague. I had teachers who were very successful and talented educators but were feeling weighed down by the burden of helping their peers while attending to their responsibilities. I sat in meetings where well-intentioned and kind-hearted young educators were steamrolled by parents who believed that their children could do no wrong. Any lack of academic progress was to be blamed solely on the teacher. I began to realize that the role of a principal was less about supporting students and more about supporting the adults who work directly with them.

Two years into my career as an administrator, I got a text from a friend. A school on my shortlist of destination districts was looking for a high school principal. I began my application during a district administrative meeting where I sat two seats away from my superintendent–I do not recommend this in hindsight. There were 27 other hats in the ring for my first princicpalship. I assumed the smaller numbers the higher I went was probably a phenomenon to be expected, but I was still ecstatic to have gotten the job.

The role of principal was similar to an assistant principal, aside from the scope of the work, and my first year went pretty smoothly. Then, when hiring season came around, I was tasked with hiring a science teacher. This was my first solo hiring decision, and remembering how competitive it was to land my first science teaching position, I was prepared for a long and tedious selection process. I was astonished that after four weeks of advertising the position, I only had 13 applicants, less than half of the number that had applied for a principalship, a position which required more experience and credentialing. What had happened? Why were there so few candidates? Why now, five years later, would I consider myself lucky to get even half of that number?

I would like to say that things are getting better. On the contrary, this school year, I have begun my hiring process in September for the following year. That is six months earlier than when I started as a principal. I have four open positions, and I am afraid I will not be able to fill them all, even with almost a year to do it.

Problem Statement

Teacher attrition and its contribution to educator shortages presents an increasingly difficult challenge for public schools to overcome. While the teacher shortage problem is a complex and multifaceted problem arising from numerous social,

cultural, and economic factors, teacher attrition is arguably the most crippling and visible result. Over the last thirty years, the number of teachers leaving the profession has consistently accounted for more than two-thirds of the annual demand for teachers nationwide (Sutcher et al., 2016). Indeed, resolving the annual exodus of educators from the profession could essentially close the gap between teacher supply and demand. This is particularly important in light of the fact nationwide teacher preparation programs saw nearly 40% and 30% drops in enrollment and completion, respectively, from 2008-2016 (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). Further, of those students who do make it successfully through a teacher preparation program, nationally 30% of new teachers to a school leave in the first five years and over half of those that leave abandon the profession entirely (Gray et al., 2015). Considering the teacher attrition rate is higher in the United States than in many other developed countries (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), hope remains that the pathology of the present professional crisis can be diagnosed and treated.

While this phenomenon has been studied at the national level for decades, the rate at which the problem has grown has only been exacerbated by the recent political climate. The percentage of teachers nationally who choose to leave the profession has continued to rise with stress, manageability of their workload, and general working conditions cited as primary reasons for attrition (Goldring et al., 2014). Public scrutiny of schools and teachers, increased political hostility, the financial, emotional, and psychological stresses of an economic recession, and a global pandemic have all impacted the decision of teachers to remain in the profession or seek opportunities outside of education.

The lack of school teachers in the state of Nebraska, which historically has enjoyed a very competitive and stable job market, has also impacted schools' ability to adequately staff their teaching positions. At the start of the 2021-2022 school year, statewide, 482 teaching positions were listed by districts as unfilled by a qualified or appropriately endorsed teacher, with an additional 68 positions left completely vacant (Nebraska Department of Education, 2021). This represents a 102% increase in unfilled positions and a 55% increase in vacant positions over the previous school year. The rate at which teaching positions are going unfilled presents a threat to the stability of our schools and the quality of education that our students receive.

Amid the Covid-19 pandemic in particular, many of our existing teachers chose to leave the profession or resign from their current teaching positions. The loss of veteran teachers presents a significant threat to the profession. The experiential and institutional knowledge they carry are critical for shepherding the next generation of educators through the tumultuous first years of teaching. Furthermore, as seniority, or teacher experience, is positively correlated to higher teacher retention rates (Shen, 1997), the loss of experienced teachers over the last few years is particularly alarming and indicative of a continued and potentially accelerating trend in teacher shortages.

As the number of confounding factors for why teachers may leave the profession has increased in the last decade, understanding how teachers overcome them has never been more critical. Prior work in lived experience research on teachers has yielded promising insights about what motivates teacher retention and job satisfaction (Brunetti, 2001; Abdallah, 2009; Inman & Marlow, 2004). At present, however, no such research exists to examine how recent changes to the educational landscape impact the career

decisions of rural Nebraska secondary teachers. Understanding how and why teachers persist in the profession past the first five years, where nearly one in every five teachers leaves the profession (Gray & Taie, 2015), and to what factors they attribute their retention has the potential to inform school leaders to enact policy changes to retain our most effective and experienced teachers as well as shepherd new educators down a path of longevity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study is to discover and describe the factors that Nebraska secondary teachers identify as central to their decision to persist in education for more than ten years.

Central Research Question

What elements of the lived experiences of highly effective, veteran, rural Nebraska secondary teachers positively impact their decision to remain in the teaching profession?

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Fessler and Christensen (1992) suggested the professional development and career cycle of educators was not a linear phenomenon, but one in which teachers move from one phase or stage to another based upon the environmental and personal factors and situations that ebb and flow throughout their professional life (Figure 1). Their work proposed eight distinct stages: Preservice, Induction, Competency Building, Enthusiastic and Growing, Career Frustration, Career Stability, Career Wind-down, and Career Exit. This study sought to understand from successful veteran teachers what environmental,

organizational, and professional contexts influenced their decision to persist through periods of career frustration and contribute to long periods of career stability.

A theme that emerged from the research which suggests why some teachers persist and others leave the profession is the concept of resilience. Mansfield et al. (2012) created a four-dimensional framework for defining teacher resilience including: profession-related, emotional, motivational, and social. Resilience has gained notice as a theory for understanding teacher retention due to its impact on mitigating teacher stress, burnout, and subsequent attrition (Castro et al., 2010; Johnson & Down, 2013; Johnson et al., 2014; Mansfield et al., 2012; Mandal & Dhar, 2023). The work-life balance of teachers is highly impacted by their ability to merge together both professional and personal needs, demands, and abilities (Graves & Hasselquist, 2021). The resilience framework proposed by Mansfield et al. (2012) encompasses both personal (emotional, motivational, and social) as well as professional (profession-related) dimensions allowing resilience to be a lens through which to interpret factors impacting teacher attrition and retention. This framework allowed me to analyze and interpret the research found in the literature review process as well as the data obtained through this research study.

Additionally, to increase the efficacy of the educational system as a whole, retention of qualified and highly effective teachers needs to take priority over retention in general. This study did not seek to denigrate lesser experienced educators or teachers who have room for improvement in their craft; however, unashamedly it sought to elicit information that will help to retain quality teachers, which benefit both students and their colleagues. The Nebraska Department of Education (2021) provides a model and

performance standards of effective teachers which will serve to guide the selection of

study participants (Figure 2).
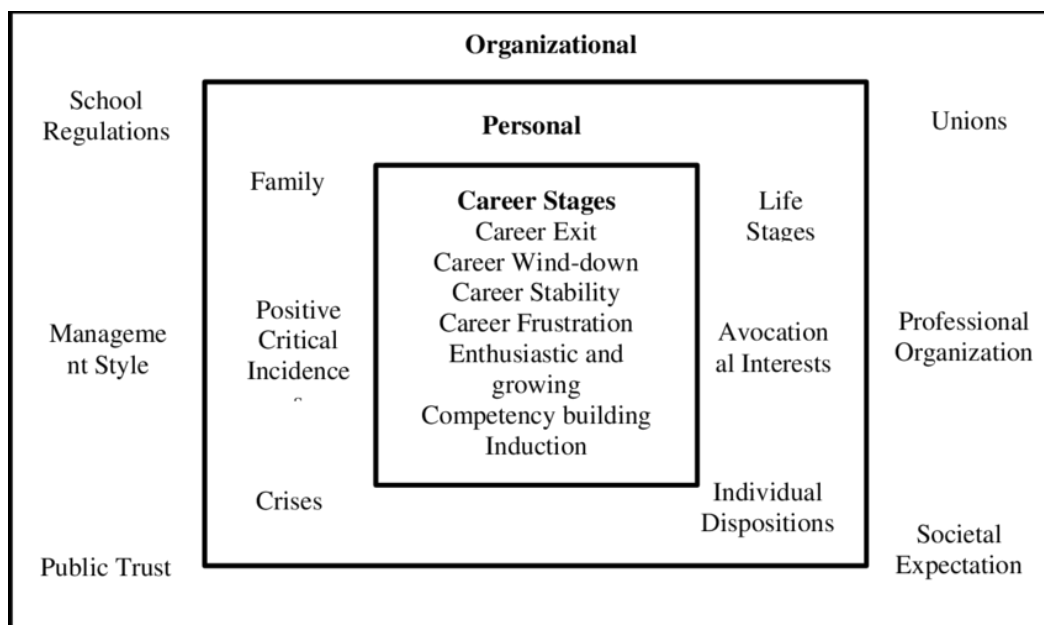
Figure 1. Teacher Career Cycle Model from "The teacher career cycle: Understanding and guiding the professional development of teachers" (Fessler & Christensen, 1992).

Figure 2. Performance Standards for Teachers from Nebraska Department of Education (2021).

Significance of the Study

Understanding the factors that impact veteran teachers' decisions to remain in the profession or leave the field (retention vs attrition) is pivotal to the ongoing stability of our public schools. Historical research (Farber, 1991), professional dialogue, and organizational committee work at the local, state, and regional level places a heavy focus on the identification and study of detrimental factors that cause teacher attrition; however, an opportunity exists to understand the positive relationship between teacher retention and the lived experience of veteran Nebraska teachers. As the baby boomers, who for decades have comprised a large percentage of our teaching workforce, continue to retire, understanding how and why our "new veterans" persist in the field is more important than ever.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature surrounding the central research question, namely, identifying and describing the factors that have previously been identified to impact in-service educators. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology of the present study and the particular qualitative approach used. Information on the participants' selection, the interview process, and methods for obtaining and interpreting data are also discussed. Chapter 4 contains the major themes and findings from the study. Chapter 5 summarizes the study, discusses the implications of what was found on the practicing educator and administrator, and recommends ongoing study on the subject.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Framework and Domains

Chapter 2 of this study investigated the evidence and examples contained in the peer-reviewed and professional literature relating to teacher retention, attrition, and associated factors which influence both phenomena. The initial scope of this chapter focused on existing literature surrounding several main categories of factors that are thought to impact teachers' decisions to stay in or leave their professional position. Previous research in the area of retention and attrition by Hasselquist and Graves (2020) provided an initial framework upon which additional literature was found to explore five broad domains as follows: Professional Relationships; Administrative Factors; Professional Development, Support, & Empowerment; Community Factors; Individual Wellness & Fulfillment.
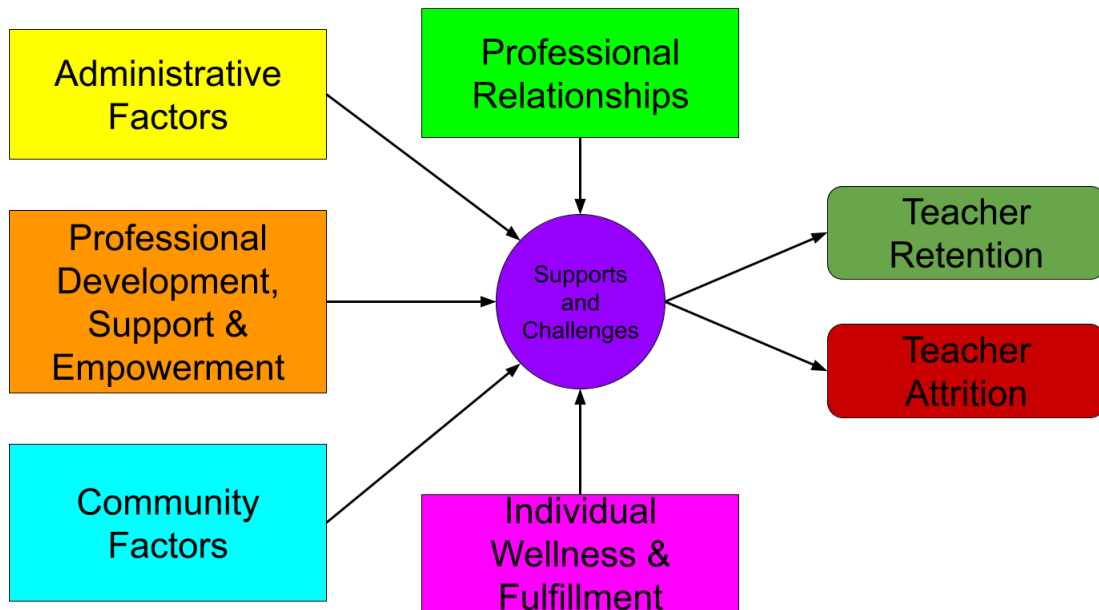
Figure 2.1. Literature framework for the present study.

Figure 2.1 provides a visual framework of these broad categories, which were further divided into subcategories for the review and interpretation of literature before conducting the investigation. Analysis of the interview data and coding themes that emerged in this study were paired with a cyclical process of searching the preliminary literature to contextualize findings and draw conclusions, as well as additional research to aid in the interpretation of factors and phenomena not anticipated in the initial literature review. This continuous positive feedback loop is a natural and important essential part of the qualitative analysis process. New data warrants novel exploration of prior research to continuously build an understanding of and construct meaning in the field narrative study (Saldaña, 2011).

Domain One: Professional Relationships

Integrating into a new workplace is an essential part of the employment process. The degree to which a new employee cultivates and capitalizes on social transactions with their colleagues is vital to the employee's ability to adapt to a new position or organization, find success, and experience longevity in the new role (Ashforth et al., 2007; Bauer et al., 2007). Interestingly, despite the intrinsic nature of teaching as a predominantly interpersonal profession, researchers have suggested that the extent of peer-to-peer social interactions among teachers is markedly less prolific than in other professions (Dreeben, 2005). Indeed, the bell-driven rhythm and walled-off working environment of a school limit the number of opportunities for prolonged and meaningful social interactions throughout the workday. To what extent, then, are social interactions important factors in teacher attrition and retention?

Social Interactions With Colleagues

The social transactions of teachers in the workplace are not uncommon from those of professionals in any other career field. Just as apprentices learn the ins and outs of their craft from experienced masters, new teachers rely upon the wisdom and lessons learned from veteran teachers in order to adjust to their position (Baker-Doyle, 2012). The social interactions between teachers in a school provide the opportunity to tap into the collective knowledge and insights on established acceptable and unacceptable practices of the veteran teaching staff, and subsequently speed up the learning curve by benefiting from the experiences of others (Ashforth et al., 2007; Korte & Lin, 2013). Brass et al. (2004) suggest that well-established social ties to old members of an organization provide new hires with support systems, information channels, additional material or personnel resources, and opportunities through the age-old adage of "it's who you know."

In this context, researchers have shown that, unsurprisingly, teachers learn how to teach–best practices, shortcuts, pedagogy, etc.–by relating to, learning from, and socializing with other teachers in their schools. What's more, the quality of the veteran teachers with whom new teachers network and learn directly impacts their perceived and actual effectiveness in the classroom (Frank et al., 2004; Sun et al., 2017; Parise & Spillane, 2010). The collective knowledge of a school's teaching staff serves as a reservoir of resources for fledgling teachers; thus, retaining quality veteran teachers is paramount to avoiding new teacher attrition. However, simply having an experienced staff is not enough. The extent to which new teachers interact with and learn from veteran teachers indicates their likelihood to remain in their position; specifically, new teachers

who seek assistance from veteran teachers are more likely to return to their teaching position in subsequent years. Furthermore, new teachers who themselves are sought out as a source of ideas are even more likely to persist (Shirrell, 2021). Cultivating an atmosphere of reciprocal relationships and collaboration between new and old teachers is imperative to the former's success.

Professional Networking

The importance of socializing with other teachers also extends beyond the walls and confines of an individual school or district. A growing body of research suggests that some of the most influential ways to help teachers develop applicable pedagogical skills and a passion and motivation to perform well in their profession come from interactions within a professional network of colleagues from other schools (Hofman & Dijkstra, 2010). Organizations and events exist within the professional education community to help facilitate the sharing of knowledge and ideas between teachers. Some, like Educational Service Units, provide professional development opportunities offered to many schools from a geographic area, often encompassing a variety of demographics, resources, and experiences.

Contrary to the perceived efficacy of the historical practice of bringing experts in a particular instructional technique into a school for a one-size-fits-all seminar, teachers themselves believe the opportunity for learning through professional networking to be more advantageous for current and future growth as it offers the possibility of an ongoing exchange of information (Gaikhorst et al., 2015). Specifically, ongoing opportunities for observation of peers and sharing instructional strategies paired with daily application are

believed by many educators to be the most attractive modes of learning (Boyle et al., 2005; Vrieze & van Kuijk, 2004).

This networking approach to professional growth is consistent with the long-established theory of social capital. When educators learn from and exchange ideas with peers, they develop relationships which carry great significant value for present and future exploitation (Gamoran et al., 2005). Investment in building professional networks through which teachers can learn from each other may be one of the most effective ways to strengthen their perceptions of self-efficacy as teachers. Subsequently, increased feelings of self-efficacy are correlated with commitment to one's profession and a decreased rate of attrition (Klassen et al., 2013; Leenheer et al., 2003).

Domain Two: Administrative Factors

Like in many fields of work, the relationship between an employee and their supervisor can be one of the biggest predictors of whether an employee will remain with an organization. Teaching is no different. A teacher's sense of accomplishment, value, and worth to the organization is largely influenced by the support shown to them by their school administrators (Morris, 2006). It is not surprising then that administrative support is positively correlated with the decision of many young teachers to remain in the profession past the first few years (Inman & Marlow, 2004). By contrast, an unsupportive administrative experience for teachers has often revealed itself as a primary reason for them to leave teaching (Walker et al., 2004). While the term "support" can take on many different meanings, here it is broken down into two major areas of administrative behaviors which may impact how supported teachers feel: administrative empowerment and trust, and the administrator's leadership style.

Administrative Empowerment and Trust

One leadership behavior evaluated in the literature is an administrator's leadership-empowering behaviors. The full impact of teacher empowerment is discussed later, however the phenomenon as it relates to administrative habits is discussed here. The authority and responsibilities given to teachers by principals may be seen as empowering or diminishing their efficacy. Such behaviors as providing teachers the opportunity to lead decision making processes, have a say in their working environments, the authority and autonomy to make decisions in their own classrooms and instructional discipline, and avoid micromanaging their work can all promote a sense of empowerment among instructional staff. Davis and Wilson (2000) found the impact of administrators' actions to empower teacher leadership has a direct positive correlation with teacher motivation but no correlation between administrator-empowering behaviors and teacher job satisfaction or stress. Their research suggests principal empowering behaviors increase teacher feelings of efficacy, which, as discussed later, plays a role in teachers' decisions to remain in the profession or not.

More recently, Atik & Celik (2020) demonstrated principals who implement practices to empower their teachers experience a positively correlated effect on teacher psychological empowerment, trust in the school principal, and overall job satisfaction. Employees in any field who have a higher level of trust with their supervisors are more likely to feel secure in their environment, have overall higher levels of job satisfaction, and lower levels of job-related stress. Further, the overall worker performance, perceived ability to complete their job, and reach established performance goals and, subsequently,

the performance of the organization is positively correlated to the level of trust experienced between managers and workers (Akar 2018; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002).

Empowerment, integrity, follow-through, and maintenance of relationships with employees are all principal behavioral attributes that are highly valued by teachers, with trustworthiness being the most important (Robbins et al., 2013). Therefore, school leaders must be intentional about how these factors affect their leadership style. The trust earned through the execution of a particular leadership style can be explained in social exchange theory wherein the investment of the leader, the benefits to the follower, and the ongoing establishment of expectations, promises of reward for meeting those expectations, and follow through by both parties all work together to establish mutual trust (Blau, 1964; Kars & Inandi, 2018). The overall pattern of leadership behaviors that a principal exhibits communicates what traits and performance behaviors are valued, prioritized, and rewarded within the organization. Teachers' trust is subsequently tied to the leadership style of their principal.

Leadership Styles

The study of leadership styles is a well-established practice across multiple industries, including education. Full-Range Leadership Theory (FRLT), based on the theoretical leadership styles of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership, has been applied in educational settings to monitor the impact of principal leadership on teacher professional well-being and performance (Kauts, 2010; Van der Vyver et al., 2020; Van Jaarsveld, 2016). Transformational leadership is characterized by the leader's ability to influence, motivate, inspire, communicate vision, stimulate creativity, and meet followers' needs in order to develop their full potential. Transactional

leaders are ones who clearly articulate expectations, duties, and tasks to complete and subsequently monitor performance and reward followers based on their adherence to established standards. Laissez-faire leaders take no active role in motivating and inspiring followers, nor do they take an active role in assessing and rewarding performance and avoid responsibility for the overall outcomes of the organization (Luo et al., 2013).

Transformational leadership is associated with higher feelings of professional well-being and subsequent job performance. Principals who utilize a transformational approach may expect their teachers to have a higher rate of positive feelings of professional well-being and an overall decrease in levels of stress and burnout (Bono et al., 2007; Hetland et al., 2007; Nielsen et al., 2008). The parallels between successful teachers who inspire, motivate, and take an active role in their students' education and the principal who does the same for their teachers are consistent given the reasons teachers cite for going into the profession: to make a difference and help students reach their potential. However, this success is not just limited to transformational leadership, but is also seen, to a lesser extent, in transactional leadership styles (Van der Vyver et al., 2020). Bass et al. (2003) attempt to explain this phenomenon in that teachers experience a positive emotional effect when they know that their efforts will be rewarded for meeting the performance standards of a transactional leader; however, the lacking motivation from shared values and goals communicated by a transformational leader may be responsible for the relatively smaller positive impact of this leadership style.

Contrasting the previous leadership styles with the Laissez-faire approach, it is immediately apparent that the latter is the least effective. When compared with the former, principals who adopted a "let it be" or "hands-off" approach to the principalship,

their teachers consistently showed signs of lowered professional well-being and a positive correlation with emotional stress and burnout (Hetland et al., 2007; Skogstad et al., 2007). Today's principals would do well to implement these findings and adopt an approach where they take an active role in setting goals, communicating vision, and empowering their employees to perform at their best. Those who choose to take the historically hands-off approach of many principals in the era of the Baby Boomer teaching workforce may find that their present-day workforce will grow disengaged and less likely to remain in their present role or the profession altogether.

Domain Three: Professional Development, Support, and Empowerment

Pre-Service Programming

Training and development of the next generation of teachers is paramount to the sustainability of a professional educator workforce. One of the most critical and formative components of pre-service teacher training is the student teaching field experience. How closely the coursework and clinical applications in teacher education programs mirror the realities of the challenges and opportunities that pre-service educators will eventually face as a first-year teacher is an indicator of teacher success, persistence, and sustainability of the profession (Williams et al., 2016). For example, Freedman and Appleman (2009) found pre-service teachers who received specialized pre-service field experience and coursework in high-poverty, urban schools had a 20% higher retention rate after one year in these schools than those who had no specialized training or field experience.

Longitudinal studies of the effectiveness of clinical experiences in teacher preparation programs demonstrates the importance of a close working relationship

between pre-service and veteran teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). Those programs which focus on clearly defined parameters for teacher candidate feedback and evaluation, similar to those used for professional teacher evaluation, promote deep and meaningful experiences for teachers which help prepare them for the realities of expectations on them after graduation. This preparation, which involves the imparting of veteran knowledge to novice educators through modeling, feedback, co-teaching, and scaffolded responsibility sharing, plays a significant role in building the perceived self-efficacy of pre-service teachers.

The implications of self-efficacy have been discussed previously with regard to in-service teachers; however, the importance of developing self-efficacy during student teaching must also be considered. Pre-service teachers who have developed confidence in their own abilities to carry out the role of their new jobs are more likely to remain in the profession past the first year (Ingersoll and Smith, 2004). Studies conducted on the perceived self-efficacy of pre-service teachers to meet the needs of all students in their classroom was linked to increased interest in and commitment to their profession (Gedzune, 2015). Indeed Klassen et al. (2013) confirm feelings of self-efficacy "provide a protective shield against low commitment and teacher attrition," where occupational commitment is defined as a psychological state related to a worker's attachment to a career. Teachers whose pre-service education and training, including student teaching experiences, has provided them a high level of confidence through rigorous development of skills are subsequently more likely to have high levels of commitment to the profession overall. Conversely, low commitment during the critical period of the

first-year transitioning to a professional teacher is linked to higher attrition rates within the first few years in the classroom (Rots et al., 2007).

The implications for school administrators are clear: providing meaningful, supportive, and rigorous student teaching experiences for pre-service teachers is a professional obligation and necessity to maintain the sustainability of the teaching workforce. Indeed, fostering relationships between veteran teachers and student teachers has the potential to influence the career trajectory of new teachers and reduce the chances of attrition.

New Teacher Induction and Mentoring

With as many as 50% of new teachers leaving the field of education within the first five years, aiding teachers in the transition from their pre-service programming to employment and application of learned skills in the field is an essential component of teacher retention (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). The process of new teacher induction, which can include mentoring as a component, has become increasingly prevalent in America's school districts. To help clarify the difference between these two programs, Ingersoll & Smith (2004) describe induction programs as "not additional training but are designed for those who have already completed basic training," and "refer to a variety of different activities such as classes, workshops, orientations, seminars, and especially, mentoring." While they vary between districts on the specific components, mentoring programs are essentially designed "to provide newcomers with a local guide," typically in the form of a successful, veteran teacher who provides ongoing guidance, coaching, support, and a resource for instructional and institutional knowledge. Mentoring, by and large, has

become the most common and sometimes only form of induction program over the last few decades (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004).

The efficacy of mentoring depends largely on the structure, support, and intentionality of the district implementing it as part of their induction program; however, successful programs typically include factors such as common plan times between mentors/mentees, ongoing professional development for the mentor, pairing a mentee with a mentor in the same field, reciprocal mentor/mentee instructional observations, and most importantly feedback, and intentional regular one-on-one conferences between mentors and mentees (Coronado, 2009; Frels et al., 2013; Kardos & Johnson, 2010; Martin et al., 2016; Jacobson et al., 2020; Sowell, 2017). What was clear from the literature is successful mentoring programs place a higher emphasis on increasing both educators' awareness of instructional pedagogy and effective practices and less of a priority on the mentoring program simply teaching procedural nuances of a particular building (Bubbs et al., 2002; Wong, 2005). In fact, Feiman-Nemser (2012) decries programs solely dedicated to having a "buddy" who helps newcomers meet paperwork deadlines, follow building norms, and attending to the administrative to-do lists of teachers as having a negligible impact on student achievement. In fact, when these functions are the focus of mentoring at the expense of instructional improvement practices, one could argue they actually have a detrimental effect on the students' *potential* learning environment.

While mentoring programs have emerged as a cornerstone of any induction program, from a practical standpoint, an effective induction program should "offer bundles or packages of supports" combining mentoring with systematic professional

development around classroom management, instructional pedagogy, instructional coaching, and, more recently, cultivating self-leadership and guidance skills through the process of self-mentoring (Carr, et al., 2017; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Ovenden-Hope et al., 2018). Schools and administrators would do well to remember that there is no silver bullet, or one-size-fits-all approach to teaching students. So why should it be any different in training our teachers? Teachers, like students, who lack support or investment in their success are more likely to become disengaged in the educational process.

Professional Learning Communities

Many school districts have invested significant time and financial resources into developing opportunities for teaching staff to collaborate with their peers on instructional strategies, implementation of school reform initiatives, analysis of student data, and the process of writing and reviewing curriculum. The term "professional learning community" (PLC) has existed since the late 1990s when DuFour & Eaker (1998) described how educators engaging in PLCs "create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone." The learning process found in the PLC model is consistent with social cognitive theory, wherein the participants develop understanding and engage in ongoing learning by interacting with and responding to the behaviors, ideas, and actions of others (Bandura, 1986).

The practice of engaging in PLCs and their subsequent impact on teacher efficacy is well-documented. Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) define teacher efficacy as a "teacher's belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context." The

body of literature on teacher efficacy, as it relates to collaborative partnerships with peer professionals, supports the continued use and expansion of the professional learning community model. Teachers who have the opportunity to collaborate with their peers, learn from the expertise and experiences of others, and tackle challenges and problem-solving activities as part of a team of professionals have a markedly higher sense of self-efficacy and resilience (Ross, 1994; Morrison et al., 1998); further, new teachers facing adverse conditions such as high poverty, low performance, and unrealistic and unsupported demands from the administration without the support of professional support relationships are more likely to create plans to leave the profession (Dallas, 2006). Conversely, those teachers who experienced collaborative working relationships with their peers showed, in one study, a higher proportion of retention (82% vs 57%) in the first few years of their teaching career (Johnson, 2006).

Healthy professional learning communities provide teachers the opportunity to share instructional strategies and learn from their peers in a regular, ongoing format. Central to the functioning of a professional learning community is the concept of shared decision making based on sound analysis of student performance data and subsequent review and modification of the taught curriculum (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). While the amount of responsibilities and duties that teachers have continues to increase, sharing the burden, streamlining tasks, and creating synergy around common goals can greatly diminish the overall workload and stress that teachers feel.

While professional learning communities, in theory, are certainly beneficial to the learning experience of educators, the actual execution of the model often needs to be more consistent and supported. Multiple studies in the literature indicate that major

barriers to effective professional learning communities include lack of administrative support, insufficient time in teacher's schedules to effectively engage in meaningful dialogue, lack of common planning time, a complete lack of expectations or vague definitions of expectations from administration or the organization, inadequate training on effective implementation, and the absence of coaching and administrative oversight (Dallas, 2006; Whalen et al., 2019). What was meant to be a structured setting for improving teacher skills, student achievement, and implementation of district vision and initiatives has commonly devolved into additional planning time where teachers work independently on typical day-to-day tasks such as grading and other housekeeping tasks. Because professional learning communities are designed to facilitate implementation of instructional strategies and best practices, sub-par implementation misses the mark of helping to reinforce professional learning which directly impacts teacher feelings of efficacy which can lead to attrition (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Dallas, 2006).

Teacher Empowerment and Leadership Opportunities

The perceived ability to affect change, be involved and engaged in decision-making processes, and overall feelings of support from administration to provide leadership to their school, students, and colleagues all contribute to a teacher's feelings of empowerment (Sledge & Morehead, 2006). The literature and common sense confirm that teachers' relative proximity and engagement to various essential school functions increases their potential efficacy in leading initiatives to effect procedural and policy improvements. Conventional wisdom, as asserted by Barth (2001), suggests moving teachers from consumers of organizational policies and practices to producers and creators of the same increases feelings of professional ownership.

When teachers are afforded the opportunity to engage in, lead, and learn from the organizational change process, their professional and personal growth directly impacts their perceived self-efficacy and can lead to additional benefits such as increased job satisfaction, a decrease in institutional isolation, and a commitment to seeing the school succeed due to their increased investment in its performance (Barth, 2001; Bogler & Somech, 2004). Further, teachers who work in an environment that fosters a culture of leadership and encourages them to take ownership of decision-making responsibilities have cited this chance for professional and personal growth as a reason to stay in the profession (Birkeland & Johnson, 2002). Conversely, one study found 52% of teachers who chose to leave the school or profession all cited a lack of involvement in making decisions for the organization as a primary reason for their departure (Abdallah, 2009).

Though leadership empowerment has received much attention in the literature as being a facilitator of teacher retention, there is also evidence to suggest there is a limit to such a benefit. Teachers taking on leadership roles within a school will likely continue assuming additional opportunities to lead (Birkeland & Johnson, 2002). When one of the most common reasons for teachers to leave the profession or move schools is related to burnout and stress from all of the responsibilities they have on their plate, a healthy balance of organizational leadership must be struck to maximize both the positive organizational benefits of teachers taking on leadership roles and positive classroom impacts from an engaged teacher while mitigating potential negative impacts of an overwhelmed teacher (Barth, 2001; Farber, 1991; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000). Interestingly, the fact that an organization allows for teachers to be involved in decision making alone may not be enough to discourage attrition. Ndoye et al. (2010) suggests "teachers need to

feel there is a support system they can rely on and that solving problems at their school is based on a collective approach with identifiable steps" (p. 184). Administrators, therefore, must carefully consider not only the scope of decision-making opportunities and the level of additional workload placed upon its teacher leaders but also the extent to which there are processes of facilitation and support provided to teacher leaders.

Ongoing Professional Development

While the needs of early-stage teachers and support offered by school districts have been enumerated above, it is important to note that the needs and expectations of teachers are not stagnant throughout their careers. Further, the role that professional development plays in expanding a teacher's arsenal of tools, providing direction for their teaching practices, and opening opportunities for career advancement may have a significant role in reducing the number of teachers who leave their role or the profession after their first five years of teaching (Eros, 2011).

As teachers enter the "second stage" of teaching, typically in years three through ten, their priorities, goals, varying career trajectories, and needs both inside and outside of the classroom begin to play a greater role in their decision-making with regard to retention. Professional development offered by schools, both required and optional opportunities, must be considered to ensure the diverse needs of all mid-career educators are being met (Booth et al., 2021; Day & Gu, 2007). Chief among the needs or constraints teachers face is the balance of their professional workload with their personal lives outside of school. Schools offering professional development models that are both sufficiently varied in the content and flexible in their modality of delivery and completion

may have a competitive advantage in reducing teacher attrition throughout all stages of their careers (Coldwell, 2017).

There may need to be more than the availability of varied topics and delivery options of professional development in and of itself to reduce the rate of attrition in educators. Bressman et al. (2018) and Gaikhorst et al. (2015) suggest that for the professional development offerings by a district to be effective, they should be relevant to the skills teachers will need for their given environment or teaching position, as well as provide an opportunity for collaboratively networking with other teachers in similar circumstances. Further, the recent work of Kyndt et al. (2016) confirms what professional development directors have long since known: providing professional development without the context of the teachers' roles and responsibilities and without ongoing support and follow-up in their settings is unlikely to affect long-term change in their performance. When teachers feel unsupported to implement one-and-done or unrelatable professional development, the negative internal feelings with regard to the time spent can outweigh any potential benefit of the experience and further contribute to a sense of disengagement and frustration (Steffy & Wolfe, 2001). Conversely, the importance of providing relevant and applicable professional development with a plan for ongoing implementation support cannot be overstated and has been shown, in some cases, to influence teacher retention positively (Ovenden-Hope et al., 2018).

Domain Four: Community Factors

As this study aims to understand the reasons why rural teachers in Nebraska choose to remain in their position and profession, the literature reviewed here primarily focused on the issues and considerations of rural districts. Rural school districts present

unique challenges and opportunities to educators. Many of these districts have struggled to adequately staff open positions in recent years with studies citing geographic and professional isolation, variety and quantity of responsibilities rural teachers are often tasked with, facility conditions, availability of amenities and entertainment, and lack of anonymity and boundaries between personal and professional life within a smaller community as significant reasons for poor retention rates (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Lazarev et al., 2017). Furthermore, when teachers experience an actual or perceived lack of support from their parents and community coupled with these challenges, the effect can be increased stress and a tendency towards professional burnout (O'Brennan et al., 2017).

Status in the Community

While the trend in teacher attrition has been higher in rural areas, the intangible and often unadvertised benefits of working and living in a smaller community, such as community connections, class sizes, and relationship quality with students have become a greater focus in understanding how to combat teacher retention issues in recent years (Hammer et al., 2005). In listening to teachers recount what they appreciate about rural school districts, the importance, prestige, and respect they receive as prominent members of the community plays a key role in job satisfaction and loyalty to their position (Seelig & McCabe, 2021). Teachers can form relationships with members of the community through their role as an instructor, mentor, coach, or sponsor and subsequently leverage those connections to have a positive and meaningful impact on the district as a whole.

The availability of parents and ability to build longitudinal solid relationships with them cultivates a mutual atmosphere of support. Teachers who collaborate with

parents are more likely to feel both supported and like they are an integral part in the raising of the child. This high level of parental engagement seen frequently in smaller communities may positively impact retention (Berry et al., 2021). All of this contributes to feeling personally valued and seen as significant within their community and bolsters their sense of significance and self-confidence as a difference maker in the lives of others, the last of which is often cited by teachers as the reason why they joined the profession in the first place (Shuls & Maranto, 2014).

Community Partnerships and Support

Perhaps more poignantly than in larger communities, rural teachers find that they can build strong relationships and instructional partnerships with community members, especially businesses. Engaging with local businesses provides the opportunity for instructional support, content, field area expertise available to their students, and financial partnerships to help bridge the gap between budget resources and instructional needs (Clark et al., 2014; Graves & Hasselquist, 2021). Additionally, teachers in smaller schools have increased autonomy and discretion in curricular decisions. While larger districts have to cater to a wider demographic of families and maintain instructional consistency across multiple teachers if not multiple buildings, smaller schools may only have one teacher in a particular discipline. Therefore, while the responsibility and burden of designing curriculum may be more substantial, having greater flexibility on what opportunities, teachable moments, instructional emphases, and overall curriculum is presented to meet the unique needs of their community may positively impact their feelings of importance and subsequent satisfaction in their role (Ballou & Podgursky, 1995; Player, 2015).

Rural Misconceptions

Unfortunately, many of the intricacies and nuances of rural schools and communities are poorly understood by new teachers, especially those who are not the product of a rural school themselves. Of particular importance, then, is a conscientious effort to help pre-service teachers understand the realities of differing school districts, their communities, and the advantages and challenges of each (Tran et al., 2020). By equipping teachers with a realistic understanding of what to expect and experience in a rural school, teacher education programs and school administrators alike can help ensure a good fit between the teacher and the district. The significance of this fit and the realistic understanding of the job at hand is imperative to reducing the attrition of new teachers in our rural schools.

Domain Five: Individual Wellness & Fulfillment

Changing Career Values

Professional and personal goals have changed with each new generation of teachers. The teaching workforce today is different from generations past, namely the Baby Boomers, in their perspective on what defines job satisfaction and career fulfillment and their commitment to remaining in a single profession, let alone a position, for their entire career. Today, our up-and-coming teaching workforce, and workforce in general, is significantly more mobile, has a higher tolerance for fluidity in their career positions, and is hyperfocused on feelings of success, support, and optimal working environments. Johnson (2006) summarized it well:

This next generation of teachers approaches teaching somewhat

tentatively; they will only stay in the classroom if they feel successful and

they are most likely to feel successful if they've received support in their

jobs–specific, ongoing help from colleagues, administrators, and

mentors–and been able to work in conditions that enable good teaching

(p. 12).

Bearing this in mind, school administrators must understand and take steps to ensure

what is valued and necessary for the current workforce to find fulfillment is present and

accounted for in their environment.

Personal/Professional Balance

One of the most cited issues for teachers of all stages of their career cycle is

maintaining a balance between work and home, professional life and personal life

(Mandal & Dhar, 2023; Murray et al., 2011). The aspects of the job, extra duties, and

personal feelings of responsibility to their students all add to the complexity and time

requirements that teachers face. There is a greater tendency for work responsibilities and

tasks to overflow into personal and family time than the other way around, which is a

phenomenon not limited to, but inherently common in education (Crutchfield et al.,

2013). The result is teachers often feeling they have too much on their plate, that their

glass is overflowing, and the margins in their life which allow for hobbies, self-care, and

family begin to disappear.

As teachers progress through the stages of their career, it is typical that they

develop an increased capacity for coping with the time and energy demands of teaching.

Mid-career teachers demonstrate a greater ability to set boundaries and limit the extra

duties, responsibilities, and obligations they commit to (Hasselquist & Graves, 2020). As

relationships, families, and outside commitments change as teachers age, those who

adjust priorities are less likely to experience burnout and instead find greater overall satisfaction in their job. Veteran teachers, who are more capable of seeing the bigger picture, feel less pressure and more acceptance in adjusting these priorities based on positive and negative feedback experienced throughout their career. For example, teachers who receive little recognition for additional time spent on non-required tasks may initially feel disappointed but eventually accept reprioritizing their efforts (Graves & Hasselquist, 2021). While many of these lessons are learned naturally, administrators and school districts should be cognizant of their ability to influence, reward, and have potentially unintended consequences on their teachers' priorities based on their habits, practices, and values.

Financial Implications

As long as there have been teachers, there has been the mantra "I didn't go into education for the money!" Undoubtedly, all who work in education have heard, subscribed to, or secretly resented this sentiment. Whether or not this statement holds universal truth remains to be seen.

On the one hand, higher starting salaries are correlated with a higher percentage of teacher retention among first-year teachers in the United States (NCES, 2015). At the same time, Morris (2006) noted that financial compensation and benefits beyond the sticker price of the salary, such as health and life insurance, leave time, and retirement, to name a few, plays a critical role in industry-leaning career and technical education teachers to remain in the classroom instead of seeking higher-paying jobs in the private sector.

The relatively low frequency of financial compensation being cited as the reason for leaving education suggests the altruistic stereotype of teachers wanting to be difference makers continues to ring true. Graves & Hasselquist (2021) captured this in responses from in-service teachers such as "Actually time for me is more valuable to me than money," and "I've always felt it's a calling, and I don't do it for the money." Most poignantly "You have to have the passion, the will to want to be a teacher more than just wanting to get paid for what you are doing." These sentiments from their study suggest teachers want to be teachers, and compensation is secondary to passion; however, all things being equal, financial implications may be more of a source of competition between school districts than between schools and industry.

Stress and Resilience

Teaching is a stressful and exhausting occupation (Hughes, 2001; Pitsoe, 2013; Jackson & Rothmann, 2005). The schedule, duties, student and parent demands, accountability, ongoing professional development, evaluation processes, classroom management, and of course, providing actual quality instruction all require a great deal of time and energy from teachers. Continuous exposure to a high-stress and demanding work environment has a negative and potentially career-ending impact on teachers (Van der Vyver, 2020). It is unreasonable to expect anyone to become a career educator–one who teaches until reaching retirement eligibility–without having the skills and temperament necessary to adapt and thrive in this sort of professional setting.

Helping teachers develop and cultivate skills such as resiliency, and time management, even at the expense of time spent on instructional strategies, could positively impact the current teacher shortage. When so many educators leave the

profession due to stress-induced burnout, modeling and cultivating resilience may help teachers better adapt to their working conditions, find greater job satisfaction, and increase retention (Mandal & Dhar, 2023). Many teachers emerge from teacher preparation programs with instructional skills and pedagogical knowledge, but resilience and soft skills may be lacking. Those teachers who can self-advocate, problem solve, manage time, responsibilities, and relationships, as well as create time for self-care and manage their overall calendars with work and personal responsibilities are far more likely to persist and remain in the profession than their peers who lack these resilience skills (Castro et al., 2010; Mansfield et al., 2012; Torres et al., 2009). The extent to which school administrators foster these skills and provide professional development on them directly impacts trends in teacher retention and reduces burnout.

Conclusion of Literature Review

The burden of teacher attrition continues to be a growing obstacle for Nebraska's rural public schools. Chapter 2 reviewed the literature associated with factors that have been identified as contributing to teacher attrition and retention. The body of literature reviewed in this chapter served as the basis for this research study. Chapter 3: Methodology, discusses the design and protocols used for selecting subject participants, the interview structure for obtaining data, and an overview of the data analysis process. Chapter 4 presents the themes and findings which emerged from the subject interviews and Chapter 5 expounds upon the implications and applications of this study as well as makes recommendations for ongoing research.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

<u>**Research Design**</u>

In the field of education, specifically the psychology of education, qualitative

research provides an avenue to understand the experiences of individuals and how these

experiences are merged to create meaning. As an individual whose prior research

experience in the field of biology was definitively quantitative in nature, the concept of

qualitative research provided a unique challenge. To compare the two at their most basic

level, Braun and Clark (2013) suggested that qualitative and quantitative research differ

mainly in the fact that the former uses words whereas the latter uses numbers as their data

sources. While qualitative researchers can analyze their data in numerous ways,

quantitative researchers analyze data strictly through statistical tests to verify or refute a

series of mutually exclusive hypotheses.

While null and alternative hypotheses are useful when studying cause-and-effect

relationships between two discrete variables, they are less practical when attempting to

understand how a lifetime of experiences impacts how an individual perceives the world

and influences their decisions. The constructivist worldview suggests that "individuals

seek understanding of the world in which they live," and "develop subjective meanings of

their experiences–meanings directed toward certain objects or things" (Creswell, 2014).

The "objects or things" for this study are understood to be their employment as a

professional educator and the decision to remain in the profession, if not a specific

position, throughout their career. This construction of understanding from lived

experiences is an innately and intimately personal and interpersonal process. Through

interactions with events and their environments, as well as other individuals from whom

they receive feedback, build collective understanding, and share experiences, people interpret life in the context of themselves and others. Qualitative research aims to "achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Role of the Researcher

As an educator and former teacher myself, my own experiences have the potential for framing and contextualizing the experiences of others. Having been brought up in a family of educators, spending the majority of my childhood in schools outside of the regular school hours, and subsequently pursuing my career in education, as the research instrument in this study, it was important for me to draw on my experiences to relate to and elicit additional information from the subjects while also compartmentalizing my experiences insofar as not to influence or introduce a bias in my interpretation of the data. While it is inherently easy for qualitative researchers to allow their own bias to influence the interpretation of their data, there are ways to mitigate this potential. Patton et al. (2003) provide guidance to qualitative researchers and suggest that as long as the researcher is careful to acknowledge and be continuously cognizant of their own experiences and perspectives, they can minimize this influence on their analysis. Additionally, ensuring that the researcher obtains a sufficient quantity of data from a variety of sources can also help with the mitigation of personal bias.

While bias is a potential pitfall for research related to a subject that I am personally connected to, my own interest and expertise on the topic provide me opportunity to help my research subjects expand upon their initial thoughts and stories. Through my ability to relate to their experiences, as an active listener, I was able to

participate with them in the telling of the story by asking the right follow-up questions, validating their perspectives, accurately summarizing their ideas, and immediately getting feedback if my understanding is correct. I created an atmosphere of collegiality where elements of the subject matter are understood to be common ground between the two conversation partners and where less trivial context need not be explained as it would need to be with a lay person.

Because of my experiences and passion related to teacher retention, I have a great sense of duty to accurately and sufficiently collect, analyze, and retell the stories of other educators. My goal was to honor their experiences, professionalism, and wisdom to help influence the actions of others. Through a narrative biographical approach, I served as their advocate, their biographer, and voice to others outside of their classroom.

Qualitative Approach: Narrative Biography

While this study was definitively qualitative, more specifically, the research approach was narrative. I have always been captivated by a good story. When people share stories, they share an account of some event and elements of themselves make their way into the details. To tell a story is to interpret an experience from your perspective; it is a highly personal act. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) said "Researchers who have adopted narrative approaches in particular look at the meaning in stories, arguing that people create themselves and reality through narrative" (p. 226). As an educator, I have witnessed this phenomenon in my students through their work in the classroom, and my staff through instructional coaching and evaluation. Allowing an individual to provide the data for research based upon their selection of essential stories and details naturally creates an environment for deeper insights to be gained.

In order to construct understanding in both qualitative and quantitative research, one must have data. Colyar and Holley (2010) assert that narrative gathered through listening to and recording stories of individuals, their experiences, and their perception of those experiences, provides the data for qualitative researchers to evaluate. However, unlike quantitative research, the data obtained through narrative as a qualitative research method approach is co-created, and the understanding of the source information is co-constructed with the subjects of the research and the researcher themselves. As the subjects recount stories about their life–in this case pivotal moments and experiences that influenced their professional trajectory–the stories themselves, how they are told, interpreted, and reinterpreted is a process shared by the interviewer and the interviewee (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). In order to isolate, unpack, and expand upon a career's worth of experiences, a flexible methodology that allowed for the process of inquiry to evolve as the researcher gained an understanding about the subjects was essential. Narrative approaches are based on this requirement (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The specific narrative approach for this study was biography. As the researcher and interviewer for data collection, I was charged with retelling the participants' stories and constructing knowledge gained through themes and patterns that arose from and between each set of narratives. The biographical narrative approach was suitable for this study because it seeks to examine "personal and social views and values" that the participants held relative to decisions about the trajectory and longevity of their professional careers (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

<u>Purpose Statement</u>

The purpose of this qualitative study was to name and describe, through narrative biography, factors that Nebraska secondary teachers in small rural schools identified as central to the decision to persist in their educational role for more than ten years.

<u>Research Question</u>

As the nation, and specifically Nebraska, continues to plunge deeper into an unprecedented teacher shortage, schools are challenged with retaining qualified and quality teachers. Amid the exodus of teachers from their positions or the profession, there is a growing need to formulate a proactive approach to prevent further educator losses. Understanding the experiences and factors that played an important role in veteran teachers' decisions to stay is essential for replicating these experiences and environments to promote retention. Therefore, the central research question for this study was:

- What elements of the lived experiences of highly effective, veteran, rural Nebraska secondary teachers positively impacted their decision to remain in their teaching positions?

<u>Research Design</u>

Understanding how the lived experiences of numerous educators have impacted their career choices is a complex undertaking requiring openness to where individual experiences will lead the research. Because each individual's experiences are different, though they may share similarities or common themes, the design of the research was structured enough to obtain the data required to answer the research question yet fluid enough to allow for the nuanced differences in experiences to emerge freely. A qualitative design was most appropriate in this scenario because it allowed for a research approach

that was more responsive to the data gathered in real time in the field (Saldaña, 2011). An initial round of subject interviews with subsequent data analysis, additional literature review to contextualize emergent themes, and subsequent follow-up as needed was employed in this study. Appendix A contains the questions which provided the basic outline for these semi-structured interviews .

Data

The data source for this qualitative study was in the form of interview transcripts obtained through semi-structured interviews with veteran secondary teachers in small, Class B (<850 students in grades 9-11), rural Southeast Nebraska high schools. Consistent with Creswell's (2007) recommendation, few participants (n≅5) was the focus of the study as the narrative approach should emphasize individual experiences instead of attempting to understand the stories of a larger sample or entire population.

Selection of Participants

Notification of informed consent was provided to all study participants prior to participation (See Appendix B). Teachers were identified through inquiry surveys sent to the Nebraska State Association of Secondary School Principals Regions I and II administrators of school districts meeting the specified demographics (See Appendix C). These regions represented a combination of rural, urban, and suburban school districts with multiple public and private teacher education colleges within their boundaries; however, the scope of this study focused on the rural districts. Administrator recipients of the inquiry survey identified potential subjects based on the following qualifying criteria: greater than ten years of teaching experience in the same building; successful teaching experience as determined by the local district's evaluation protocols; consistency of

teacher performance with the Nebraska Performance Standards for Teachers; collectively, candidates represented a broad range of discipline focuses, school and district leadership experiences, extracurricular activity involvement, and demographic diversity.

Much consideration was given to exactly which of the initially identified test subjects were selected to be the final participants in the study. Creswell (2012) makes it clear that a qualitative researcher should expend significant effort in identifying whom to study to obtain high-quality data for analysis. The criteria for selection outlined above provided a shortlist of potential candidates. After reviewing the recommended teachers from the administrator inquiry survey, I narrowed the list down to eight finalists who provided a wide variety of experiences based on the school districts, years of service, roles, responsibilities, and leadership experiences the teachers held within their district, and feedback from their administrators on their perceived ability to communicate effectively relative to these experiences. Participants were contacted via their school email address as listed on their district's website (See Appendix D).

Data Collection and Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview protocol was used with each participant. While principal data collection took place in one round of interviews, a preliminary pilot interview was conducted with a small number of participants. This pilot group allowed me to refine the data collection instrument. Interviews took place in a one-on-one setting via video conferencing with audio recorded by the interviewer. Following the interview, the audio recordings were transcribed for analysis. Both recordings and transcriptions were securely stored in digital format with multiple layers of authentication required to ensure confidentiality. Each participant received a copy of the transcript via email and

was given the opportunity to verify and authenticate the accuracy of the transcription. At this time, subjects had the opportunity to clarify, amend, or omit portions of their responses as needed. No such changes were requested by the participants.

Appendix A contains the research tool used for this study. The questions were designed to be specific enough to contain the scope of topics for the stories shared yet broad enough to not limit the participants' ability to interpret and adequately describe their individual experiences relative to the central research question.

<u>Analysis</u>

A categorical analysis of the data gathered through the semi-structured interviews was conducted. Grouping similar observations into definable groups is a hallmark of qualitative analysis. Saldaña (2011) states "Category construction is our best attempt to cluster the most seemingly alike things into the most seemingly appropriate groups. Categorizing is organizing and ordering the vast array of data from a study because it is from these larger and meaning-rich units that we can better grasp the particular features of each one, and the categories' possible interrelationships with one another" (p91-92). Coding and categorizing the data from interview transcripts was the most significant undertaking of this project from which making connections and drawing conclusions could occur. Emerging themes, identified through the application of deductive, inductive, and abductive reasoning, served as the vehicle for new learning (Saldaña, 2011).

Analysis of the interview data provided emerging themes through multiple rounds of coding. These themes were explained and contextualized when paired with a cyclical process of searching and reviewing the literature to draw conclusions. This continuous positive feedback loop is a natural and essential part of the qualitative

analysis process. New data warrants novel exploration of prior research to continuously build an understanding of and construct meaning in the field research (Saldaña, 2011).

<u>Strength of Claims Made</u>

Education is a career that people choose to pursue because of their passion for working with children and helping them grow. The qualitative nature of the study included anecdotal evidence which the participants chose among all their experiences to highlight as critical reasons they remained in the profession. The practical power and application of the research is in understanding how to improve and promote teacher retention in southeastern Nebraska's rural high schools.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The information contained in this chapter is the result of the semi-structured interviews conducted with eight teacher participants as described in Chapter 3: Methodology. The data obtained from the participants was analyzed to identify experiential and philosophical commonalities between them. Subsequent themes that emerged are also summarized and contextualized. Interpretation and recommendations on this information is presented in Chapter 5.

To delineate the information obtained, the findings are presented in 4 parts as described below:

1. Research Context

    a. Restatement of the research question and interview prompts

    b. Selection criteria for participants

2. Profiles of the research participants

3. Summary of themes from participant profiles

4. Themes and subthemes in the data

    a. Theme 1: Relationships, Relationships, Relationships

    b. Theme 2: The Teacher and Their Principal

    c. Theme 3: The Meanings of "Support"

    d. Theme 4: It Takes a Village

    e. Theme 5: Fulfillment

    f. On Resilience

Part 1: Research Context

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to identify and examine, from a positive, non-deficit thinking perspective, why teachers persist in the field of education despite an ongoing teacher shortage. To this end, the primary question this research aimed to answer was:

What elements of the lived experiences of highly effective, veteran, rural Nebraska secondary teachers positively impacted their decision to remain in their teaching positions?

Each of the study participants were given the opportunity to respond to a series of questions and prompts to elicit these perspectives (See Appendix A). The following questions and prompts, in addition to general demographic questions, were included in a semi-structured interview format:

1. Tell me about your experiences, influences, and your own character traits that led you to become a teacher.

2. Share with me about experiences that have led you to stay in the profession/this position for as long as you have.

3. What external factors have influenced your decision to stay?

    a. Elaborate, as needed, on these areas from the literature framework:

        i.   Professional Relationships

        ii. Administrative Factors

        iii. Professional Development, Support, and Empowerment

        iv. Community Factors

      v.   Individual Wellness and Fulfillment

4. Why do you think you have been successful and persistent when others have not?

5. There may be other factors that influence why teachers stay in the profession for as long or longer than you have. What examples from your experience can you share that might illustrate these?

Selection Criteria

For this study, research participants were solicited and selected from a list of potential teachers provided by Southeast Nebraska high school principals from ten rural, Class B high schools. Responses were received from eight of these schools providing a potential candidate pool of fifty-four teachers. These teachers met the criteria of greater than ten years of teaching experience in the same building, successful teaching experience as determined by the local district's evaluation protocols, and consistent teacher performance within the framework of the Nebraska Performance Standards for Teachers. This pool was narrowed to eight final participants who, collectively, represented a broad range of academic disciplines, leadership experiences, and extracurricular activity involvement.

Part 2: Participant Profiles

The teachers selected to participate in this study represent a variety of perspectives, experiences, training levels, and areas of expertise. They were chosen as they each are regarded as highly successful teachers in their respective districts, and their years of experience in education provide them with a veteran perspective on the profession. While there are similarities in the attributes of successful teachers, each participant is a unique individual with their own stories to tell. Certainly, the interview

experience with each was uniquely rich with their own perspectives. These experiences and views on teaching are shaped by the context of each of their life experiences. To provide context of these experiences, the following participant profiles, compiled from their own words during our conversations, share a bit of their story and who they are as educators.

Julie Jones - Participant Profile

Current Position: High School World Language Teacher; World Language Club Sponsor

Years of Teaching Experience: 16

District Traits: High poverty; Minority-majority; Approximately 750 students in grades 9-12.

Julie Jones is a self-proclaimed small-town kid who grew up in an entire family of educators: grandfather, grandmother, mother, and eventually two siblings in addition to her are all educators. Not only are her blood relatives teachers, but she also married a teacher. She explained, "...I think education is just kind of like, in my blood. That's basically the only thing I ever saw myself doing" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024).

Growing up, the educator family members in her life made an impression on her that teaching is a way to make an impact on and better the lives of others. She had the opportunity to attend her grandfather's retirement celebration and witness the impact that his forty-year career in education as a teacher and administrator had on so many lives. Julie also recalls her grandmother's experience having a child with special needs and the frustrations that went along with feeling like the education they received was inadequate. "That kind of drove my grandma to want better special education…so she went back to

school…got her special education degree…and worked for twenty years in special education" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). Her own experience seeing her brother struggle throughout school with behaviors until one teacher invested in him also cemented in her mind that teaching was her calling. "She told us that we were all good, and we can all do good things with our lives" and "Being in her classroom was probably the first time I realized I wanted to be a teacher like that for other kids" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024).

Julie had similar experiences with great teachers throughout high school until finally going to college to become an educator. She described herself as a lifelong learner who always wants to make things better. This mentality has carried through to her professional career where she has not only served children as a teacher, but she also has built systems and invested time in supporting and mentoring new teachers both informally and through formal channels in her district. Julie is a team and program leader in her district and has been involved with "basically any committee you can think of." She has a master's degree in her content area and earned her Educational Leadership degree as well with aspirations to someday become an administrator.

Arthur Davis - Participant Profile

Current Position: High School Physical Education Teacher; Football and Strength Coach

Years of Teaching Experience: 17

District Traits: Middle-upper class majority; Low poverty rate; High rate of extracurricular involvement; Approximately 1,000 students in grades 9-12.

Arthur Davis has spent all seventeen years of his teaching experience, as well as his student teaching, in the same school district. While this was not his original plan for

his teaching career, "fate kind of worked [it all] out" (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). Things being "worked out" is a common theme in Arthur's description of why he became a teacher. He realized in high school that he had a natural inclination towards helping others learn after experiencing meaningful and impactful relationships with his coaches and teachers. Initially planning to teach history or English because he "had a lot of great teachers that made it just fun in those areas," he ultimately ended up in physical education at the recommendation of his college advisors (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). Davis recalls a conversation with his advisor "'This is just more your personality and your strengths.' I'm glad I listened to him" (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024).

Relationships and trusting in those with experience to help you develop as an individual are common threads throughout Arthur's interview. Recalling that his cooperating teacher intentionally invested in helping Arthur find success through sharing tips and tricks learned over the course of their career, it is evident that the importance of coaching others is not just a part of his job description, but a deeply held personal belief and mission. These figures throughout his formative years as an aspiring educator "really set me with the solid foundation launching into kind of who I am now" (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024).

Arthur's focus on building meaningful relationships like those he experienced as a student and young teacher have also helped him establish his place within the larger district community. Appointed to such positions as a member of the Building Leadership Team and Superintendent's Leadership Team, as well as serving as a building representative and contract negotiator for the teachers' union, Arthur continues to focus

on how he can lead by example and coach his peers in professional growth. He is others-focused and continues to dedicate his professional career to mentoring and investing in his students and colleagues.

Scott Perez - Participant Profile

Current Position: High School Special Education Teacher; Track and Football Coach

Years of Teaching Experience: 26

District Traits: Consolidated district of several small rural towns; Moderately low poverty level; Approximately 675 students in grades 9-12.

"I'm pretty easy going" was the first response when Scott was asked about his strengths (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). As a 26-year veteran of the same high school, this would seem like an accurate, if not necessary, character trait for any teacher who has stayed for so long. While he has spent the majority of his life working for the same school, what his positional choice lacks in variety, his day-to-day work more than makes up for. "I thought [teaching] just kind of seemed to be something that would fit my personality in terms of I just kind of like to have something that's a little bit of variety each day" (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024).

Small town, rural communities have always been a part of Scott's life. Growing up as a farm kid in central Nebraska, one of two important influences on his decision to become an educator was his father. While his father was a farmer, he went to school to become a teacher. In his reflections, it was evident that Scott grew up in a home and community that respected teachers. The second influence came during high school with his involvement in FFA. "My interactions with that particular teacher, you know, I kind of appreciated how he was able to do certain things to help mold you," and "I think it's

the holistic approach that I liked…they cared about, like everything about me and not just they were only concerned about math or social studies, it became everything" (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024).

An easy-going personality and appreciation of a holistic, whole-child approach to teaching has served Scott well as a special educator for the better part of three decades. In both the classroom and his role as a coach, it is evident that Scott takes great pride in developing lasting relationships with students and getting to know and understand what strengths and opportunities each individual has and how to motivate them to find success.

Jean Bennett - Participant Profile

Current Position: High School Math Teacher

Years of Teaching Experience: 23

District Traits: Single, small rural city; 50% free and reduced lunch rate; Approximately 600 students in grades 9-12.

"I say there's two types of math teachers: there are math people who teach, and then there are teachers who are ok in math, and I'm definitely the second one" (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). As a teacher at heart and math teacher by trade, Jean has spent the last twenty-three years teaching at three different schools. After spending some time out of state, she came to Nebraska and has spent eight and twelve years respectively in her last and current teaching position. In each position, Jean has found opportunities for growth and professional fulfillment. She shared that over the years "my brain was always working outside of my classroom at the school as a whole" (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). This mindset, to look at the larger picture, has helped Jean to be a key driver in several building and district-level initiatives.

One area that Jean has spent considerable time and energy on is how to improve the overall experience and support systems of new teachers to her building and district. With the encouragement of her administration, she submitted a proposal, was offered the role, and helped overhaul how her school district mentors its incoming teachers to ensure they find success. A perpetual learner, Jean has always "tried to create things at the school," believing that "it means something more when you are a part of something big rather than just your day-to-day struggles…that way you don't get bogged down by the little things" (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). From mentoring programs to school mottos, to leading PLCs, and participating in the continuous school improvement process, Jean has left her mark on each building, but more importantly, each student she has worked with. "I just like being helpful" is perhaps the best way to sum up her approach to teaching and leadership.

Richard Jenkins - Participant Profile

Current Position: High School Science Teacher; Golf, Basketball, and Tennis Coach

Years of Teaching Experience: 23

District Traits: Single, small rural city; Growing diversity; Moderate poverty and approximately 40% free and reduced lunch; Approximately 500 students in grades 9-12.

"You're crazy…there's no way I could be a teacher" may not seem like a promising start, but that was the response Richard gave his college advisor when his plans for sports medicine and athletic training were no longer in line with what he wanted for his life (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). However, more than two decades later, Richard is thriving in his role as a high school teacher and building leader.

The turning point in this pivotal conversation happened when the realization that he could mesh his passion for sports and his interest in medicine and human performance with a professional career in education and coaching. In addition to fulfilling his interests, teaching has also given Richard the opportunity to connect with and make an impact on others, illustrated in his candid reflection "You know, the relationships are basically the most important piece of teaching to me" (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). These relationships include his students in the classroom, his athletes on the field, and also his colleagues down the hallway. It is evident how meaningful working with the same few teachers in his department for the majority of his career has been to Richard.

In addition to his close colleagues, Richard has also built a network of professional contacts across the state through coaching. Advocating for competitive equity for his athletes and serving on various committees to review class designations, Richard continuously seeks opportunities to provide his students and athletes the best opportunities possible. Richard has also made an impact on his school by helping to implement academic interventions, carryout school improvement and strategic planning committee work, and serving in various supervisory and support roles at his school's activities. "Teachers make such an impact on kids and on people that lasts a lifetime, and that's really what I think the best reward I guess is from it" (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024).

Teresa Price - Participant Profile

Current Position: High School Social Studies Teacher; Department Chair; Student Council Sponsor

Years of Teaching Experience: 18

District Traits: Single, small rural city; Large minority population; High poverty rate and nearly 50% free and reduced lunch; Approximately 400 students in grades 9-12.

It is not uncommon for teachers to return to their alma mater to join the teaching staff they learned from as a student. That is the case with Teresa. After graduating from her high school, she went immediately into education and, upon completion of her program, sought a teaching position in her hometown. One of the pulls to return home, and perhaps a small part, by her estimation, of how she got the job, was her aunt and high school English teacher. Teresa credits many of her high school experiences in the classroom to why she wanted to become an educator. "The teachers just seemed like, wow, they have a career that seems really fulfilling," and while she recognized it was not an easy career path "it is something that they just enjoy doing" (T. Price, personal communication, 2024). She wanted to enjoy her career like that.

Enjoy her career, she has. As she took to the classroom, Teresa remembered how the right enthusiasm, demeanor, and approach to teaching by her mentors made even the most boring topics exciting. Her memory recalls teachers who "just made learning fun…and I'm going to get something out of it…I just wanted the same thing" (T. Price, personal communication, 2024). While the first few years were not always easy, Teresa had found that her former teachers had become faithful colleagues. Subsequently, she has grown to be a leader among them. She currently serves as the social studies department chair, a district Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) leadership team member, building leadership team member, and is shepherding future leaders as the Student Council sponsor.

If there is one word that came through regarding Teresa's personality and approach to teaching, it would be "determined." As summed up in this reflection on when she told her mother she was going to be a teacher "I love other people's kids, and so when she asked me if I was sure that I wanted to be a teacher?...It was like, 'Oh, you think I can't do this?' Well, I'm going to show you that I can" (T. Price, personal communication, 2024). Teresa has certainly shown that she can over the last two decades, and continues to seek ways to inspire students to learn and lead others to do the same.

Heather Kelly - Participant Profile

Current Position: High School English Teacher; Academic Coach and Prom Sponsor

Years of Teaching Experience: 16

District Traits: Rural bordering on suburban; Very low poverty, mostly upper middle class; Approximately 1,100 students in grades 9-12.

Heather has been a high school English teacher, coach, and sponsor for the last 16 years in the same district she started out teaching in. She has taught everything from freshman English to Advanced Placement. Outside of the classroom, her involvement and service to school have included junior high volleyball coach, high school volleyball coach, speech coach, prom sponsor, academic coach for struggling students, strategic planning committee, MTSS committee, leadership team, and attendance committee. She recognizes not only the importance of quality instruction but also opportunities for students to be involved, so much so that she recalls "when I first got hired, I couldn't take the job unless I took speech and volleyball. They would pass on me and take somebody else…I had no idea what I was doing, but I did it" (H. Kelly, personal communication,

2024). While she remarks that much has changed, including those expectations on new hires, her commitment to student opportunities remains steadfast.

Like other interview participants, her decision to become an educator was largely based on the experiences she had with her own teachers in high school. Heather remembers,

"When people were asking me, what kind of teacher do you want to be? I said, math or English, which is like opposite ends of the spectrum…so I went back to I had two really good teachers in high school, and my favorite was Mrs. B, and she was my high school English teacher" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024).

With the goal of adopting some of Mrs. B's habits, such as high expectations and low tolerance for behavior issues, Heather has followed in her footsteps by continually finding novel ways to make learning fun and interesting. Perhaps most importantly, Heather values the feeling her teachers gave her in that they desired for her to be successful, knew they cared about her, and wanted her to have the opportunity to reach her full potential.

Throughout her interview, it is evident that Heather has achieved many of these goals for herself as a teacher. This is perhaps best illustrated in her discussion on what she loves about teaching:

"I love what I do…I can have kids come back to me when they're in college and they can say, 'College is so easy because I took your class.' And they hate[d] me at the time. But then I think that's one of the biggest things that I love seeing is that what I do with them here kind of prepares

them for those next steps. And that fills my cup every year" (H. Kelly,

personal communication, 2024).

Peter Nelson - Participant Profile

Current Position: High School Social Studies Teacher; Striv (Broadcasting) Sponsor

Years of Teaching Experience: 28

District Traits: Consolidated district, rural and some suburban; Low diversity; Low

poverty; Approximately 700 students in grades 9-12.

Peter has been an educator for just shy of three decades. He has taught in multiple

school districts and carries a variety of experiences and perspectives as a result. It is

worth noting that in his current position he has completed six years of service. However,

in a previous district he spent eleven years in the same building and position. While the

parameters of participation were for ten years of service in their current position, Peter

was selected to be included because of his unique experiences. Further, as he discussed in

his interview, he only left the positions in his previous districts either for career

advancement, coaching, or because of his wife's career placement. Never did he choose

to leave because of factors at the previous school.

The grandson of a teacher-turned-administrator, teaching was something that

Peter always wanted to pursue. Seeing the impact that teachers had on him, and the

impact that his grandfather made over the course of his career inspired him to follow in

his footsteps. Possessing a strong desire to build relationships with students and to help

them find ways to be successful, Peter not only engaged in teaching but also coaching to

accomplish this goal. At the start of his career, he was a multisport coach, taking on

teams for all three athletic seasons throughout the school year. Having a family has

changed his priorities over the years. Now Peter is involved in youth sports with his own children and has given up coaching at the high school level. However, he still remains active in the athletic programs by sponsoring the school's broadcast team which provides live coverage of events. Regardless of the role "It's about just wanting to be around kids and make a difference…you know, see kids succeed" (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024).

Throughout Peter's narrative, the pride that he takes in his work, in supporting students, building relationships, and helping them find success was present throughout. One of his proudest moments happened this year:

> "...at graduation, [the principal] wanted to have the staff read the names of the graduates as they're coming across the stage to get their diplomas. They had the seniors vote on it, and, you know, I was honored that they picked me as one of the four to read names… Just seeing those kids walk across the stage and having, you know, a good chunk of them in class over the last four years, makes you think, 'hey, it's worthwhile' because there's a lot of days in this day and age and I'm sure you guys go through it too that you wonder if it is worth it because it gets difficult" (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024).

Peter illustrated time and time again that he finds great joy in what he does, and all the work that goes into teaching is "worth it."

Part 3: Profile Themes

The participant profiles enumerated above provide a brief snapshot of who each of the professionals are who were interviewed for this research. While the scope of the

research questions focused on why they choose to stay in the field of education, who they are, why they became educators, and their view on what is important as a professional all provided potential context for understanding their subsequent retention decisions. Throughout all of the profiles, three themes emerged:

1. These individuals were often inspired to become educators due to the influence of teachers or mentors they had as a student.

2. Teachers were motivated to enter the profession by a desire to have an impact on individuals and the future.

3. Relationships were driving factors to become teachers or were an important part of their philosophy and motivations as professionals.

These themes may not be surprising given the altruistic nature of the teaching profession; nevertheless, they confirm the presuppositions and experiential perceptions of educators that I hold as the researcher. These themes should not in and of themselves and without further support from the interview data be construed as reasons for remaining in the profession, but rather shed light on and frame who our research participants are. Understanding the subject of any investigation provides the opportunity to pick up on nuances in responses and, subsequently, be better prepared to accurately interpret their narratives.

Part 4: Themes and subthemes in the data.

Theme 1: Relationships, Relationships, Relationships

The students come first

The relationships teachers build with their students are at the heart of what sustains them in their profession. These connections go beyond simply engaging with

young learners: they become the lifeline that carries teachers through the highs and lows of their work. Educators shared deeply personal reflections on how these relationships not only impacted their students but also gave meaning to their own lives, making the profession of teaching incomparable to any other.

For Julie, the small, everyday interactions with students often provide a lifeline during moments of burnout. She described how even a simple gesture—like a student stopping by her room just to hang out during her planning period—can shift her perspective. As she recounted a particular interaction with a student, she lamented how busy her day had become and the precious few moments of her planning period had all been accounted for in her plan for the day (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). However, as the story unfolded, she admitted that while she may initially have felt inconvenienced, this moment, and others like it, remind her why she became a teacher. "Sometimes it's those little things that fill your cup just enough to get through when your well-being is down," Julie shared, and this sentiment proved on this occasion to be just as meaningful and true for the student as for herself (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). She further reflected on a conversation with a colleague who had transitioned to teaching from a career in the private sector. This colleague, despite facing tough days in the classroom, found fulfillment in building relationships with students–something she realized was not possible in her previous career. "Even on the worst day in education, we still get to make relationships with kids every day that matter," Julie explained (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). It was a stark reminder that teaching, for all its challenges, offers an unmatched sense of purpose. She recalled one particularly difficult day for her colleague when she asked, "'Do you want to go back to insurance?' And she

said, 'Never!'" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). This poignant realization became a longstanding joke with her colleagues and they would often quip on a particularly tough day "Well, at least I'm not selling insurance!" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024)

Arthur echoed this sentiment, expressing that the best part of his day is seeing and interacting with students. For him, these connections are intentional and personal. Whether it is a fist bump, a kind word, or asking about an event in a student's life, Arthur prioritizes making sure each student feels valued. "I want to make sure I've invested enough dialogue in that student where they believe I've built them up," he said (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). This investment creates a strong foundation, allowing him to later redirect or correct students when needed, knowing that trust and respect are already established. Arthur also shared how each class brings a unique energy, keeping his work fresh and engaging. "I never get bored," he explained. "It's crazy how much they have their own personality" (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). For Arthur, the students' individuality is not only a source of professional fulfillment but also a source of personal joy.

Richard emphasized how much he values the relationships he has built with his students and athletes, describing them as his favorite part of the job. For him, these connections go beyond the classroom or field: they bring a sense of rejuvenation and perspective. "It makes you feel a little bit younger when you're hanging around younger people," he joked (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). This sense of shared energy and connection reminds him of the meaningful role he plays in his students' lives, both as a teacher and as a mentor.

For Heather, the ability to build relationships with students is her greatest strength and something she takes immense pride in. She believes that trust and connection form the foundation for learning, making her role as a relationship-builder central to her success as an educator. "If you can build a relationship with that kid, the learning comes so easy for them, and teaching is so easy," she explained (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). Heather vividly recalled one class in particular with whom she had a very strong connection. As an advanced placement teacher, she had a group of students who noticed just how passionate she was about her work. This translated into a special relationship where the students appreciated her passion and, because of it, wanted to be pushed to go deeper and learn more. She recalled that the students were "okay with getting a B in a class that they're used to getting A's in just because they know that what we're doing in here will be beneficial for them no matter where they go" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). This level of trust and dedication to each other between students and teachers, while not present in every class, was a common thread among the study participants. Heather goes on to share that the depth of this mutual trust and commitment to learning together culminated in a tangible reminder of the impact she had on their lives at the conclusion of the course. "My AP kids brought me flowers on the last day, like each one of them brought me a stem. They just kept coming through the door and adding to this vase they had brought…these kids are really what makes my bucket full" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). The impact of the relationships with students on this teacher are undeniable and, in this case, even tangible.

Peter also highlighted the reciprocal nature of his interactions with students. On days when his energy was low or he was questioning his purpose, it was the students who

reignited his passion for teaching. "Even if I'm not in a great mood, it seems like they can always pick me up," he shared (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). Peter pointed out that students often do not realize how much their energy and enthusiasm affect teachers. He recounted how listening to students share their stories—whether about sports, work, or other aspects of their lives—helps him reconnect with the reason he teaches. "It makes me realize why I do it. I enjoy being around high school kids, watching them learn, and just hearing their stories" (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). For Peter, and others, this has been an ongoing theme in his career and a large part of why he continues to stay in education when so many others have left the profession.

For these educators, relationships with students are more than a professional responsibility—they are the essence of what makes teaching meaningful. Through their stories, it is evident that they see themselves not only as instructors but as trusted mentors, confidants, and sources of stability in their students' lives. The joy of seeing a student light up with understanding, sharing in their triumphs, or even just being a safe space for them to talk is what keeps them coming back each year.

Despite the challenges of the profession, these relationships remind teachers that their work matters in ways that go far beyond lesson plans and test scores. As Julie put it, "We get to impact the people who are going to be the future of our country every single day" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). For Julie and the others, the opportunity to shape lives, one relationship at a time, is what sets teaching apart from any other career opportunity they have had or could have pursued. In those moments of connection, teachers find not only their purpose but also their passion, sustaining them through even the most difficult days.

Students now and then

For many teachers, the bonds they form with their students and their families go far beyond the classroom. These long-term relationships are deeply meaningful, creating a sense of community and fulfillment that keeps educators rooted in the profession for years, even decades. Participants describe these enduring connections as both a source of pride and an ongoing reminder of the impact they have on the lives of their students.

For Julie, the joy of maintaining connections with students well after they leave her classroom is an incentive for her to provide the best learning environment that she can. "That long-term relationship with kids that are, you know, eight, nine years out of school, and they still message me or talk to me," she says, are a source of pride and motivation (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). Julie shared a story of one former student who spent a year in Spain, performing service work, and frequently reached out to her about the lessons they had learned in her class years earlier. "They'd tell me how those lessons were helping them in Spain. That's the stuff that really sticks with you" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). This was a deeply personal reflection for Julie, as she shared that this was one of the first times that she felt she belonged in the classroom, that what she was doing actually made a lasting difference. It was not just about what she was doing for her current students, it was about how she was impacting people and investing in relationships that could span years or potentially a lifetime.

For Julie, the connections extended to families as well. After teaching for 15 years in the same community, she has watched siblings graduate in succession and built relationships with parents over the years. She recalled one family with seven children, whose youngest recently graduated. The mother expressed how strange it would be not to

see her so often. Julie reassured her, "We'll see each other in the community, at the store, wherever" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). These close-knit ties highlight the profound role teachers play not just in education but in the social fabric of their communities. "Being part of a community that has those close ties—it means a lot," Julie says (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024).

Heather emphasizes the rewards of seeing her students thrive long after they have left her classroom. She often hears from students in college who tell her how her class prepared them for the rigors of higher education, even if they didn't always appreciate it at the time. "They hate me at the time," she jokes, "but then they come back and say, 'College is so easy because I took your class.' That fills my cup every year" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). Beyond the academic rewards, Heather values the trust and rapport she has built within her school. "I've built a reputation here, and that feels hard to leave. The kids know me, and they know what to expect" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024).

Peter shares a similar sentiment, describing the joy of seeing former students at graduation parties or other community events years after they have left his classroom. "You make your way to graduation parties and see graduates from two, three, four years ago. They come back, talk to you, and share how things are going" (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). His appreciation just at the fact that they still desired to have a relationship with him, that they cared and were excited to see him, proves to be a huge motivator for Peter's life work. These moments provide a unique sense of continuity and a reminder that the connections teachers build often have a lasting impact.

These long-term relationships serve as a powerful motivator for these teachers, reminding them of the meaningful and enduring role they play in shaping lives. For many, it is not just about teaching a lesson—it is about becoming a trusted mentor, a guide, and a cherished part of the community fabric. It is this enduring connection that makes the teaching profession so unique, inspiring educators to stay despite its challenges, and reinforcing why they chose this path in the first place. Peter best captures this idea on behalf of all of the participants when he said, "you get to be pretty tight with these people over the years, and you know, you hear maybe the difference they're making in the lives of kids, and then it makes you think that maybe you're making a difference in the lives of the kids *you're* around each day," and that is what makes this work worth doing (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024).

Comrades in arms

The relationships teachers build with their colleagues emerged as one of the most influential factors, and certainly the topic they spoke most passionately about, as driving their commitment to stay in education. Time and again, the participants emphasized how the support, camaraderie, and shared purpose among their peers have helped them weather the challenges of the profession and find joy in their work.

For many, these relationships provide a vital outlet for venting frustrations and finding solutions. As Arthur explained, "We have staff members in the building that, if I'm going to vent, I'm either looking for you to come back with, 'Here's one or two options,' or I'm going to vent, get this off my chest, and then I'm going to roll up my sleeves and find something to do" (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). This sense of having a trusted network to lean on fosters resilience and a problem-solving mindset,

both essential qualities for long-term success in education. But perhaps more importantly, for Arthur, he values not only the ability to find solace and commiseration with his fellow teachers, but to be the person that others seek out when they are in need of support. A reciprocal relationship of being the supporter and the supported emerged as a commonality amongst all of the participants.

The sense of community among colleagues is not just a nicety but a necessity. Without a supportive group of colleagues, teaching can feel isolating. Scott put it succinctly "It can't just be a job. You have to have a kind of a sense of community amongst your peers, your staff" (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). This community becomes a lifeline, especially in difficult times. Scott reflected on the early days of his career where without the support of his colleagues he was seriously doubting his decision to be a teacher. He shared about "questioning whether or not I've done the right thing…is it sustainable" (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). He sought solace and reassurance from the teachers around him who provided the support and encouragement to keep at it.

Similarly, Richard shared how the members of his department, where most teachers have worked together for over 20 years, rallied to support one another when one colleague faced significant health challenges. "We all kind of covered [for them], peeked in on the subs, and whatever [was needed]," he recalled, illustrating the deep commitment to each other and the teamwork that sustains educators through personal and professional hardships (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). Over the course of the last several years, Richard shared more than one instance where colleagues had to be gone for extended periods of time. In his department they had a shared sense of responsibility to

their students first, and out of that, a resolve to support each other, even when it added to their own workload. "I really liked that approach. That we all kind of wanted to pitch in and help out…to make sure the students were getting what they needed…you know, everybody doing their part. That's huge to me" (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024).

Scott and Richard are not the only teachers who depended on the unwavering support of their colleagues; in fact, some have cited it as life-changing. Teresa, who faced the diagnosis of a chronic form of cancer early in her career, described the outpouring of care from her coworkers "I can't really describe how it felt, just knowing that I'm supported at school. I know I have a job when I get back, and there were some tough days where teachers just said, 'Teresa, you need to go home.'" (T. Price, personal communication, 2024). These acts of kindness and understanding reinforce that teachers are part of a larger family, not just a workplace, and often this family is their biggest source of strength and encouragement.

For Heather, her colleagues have been the foundation of her career. "My coworkers, my colleagues are the ones that have kept me going the most" she said (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). When asked to reflect on what might have happened if she did not have this network, she admitted, "I probably would have gotten out. It would have been very hard for me to choose to stay" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). Her sentiment, shared by others, underscores how crucial these connections are, not just for enduring tough days but for finding fulfillment in the work.

Beyond personal support, collaboration among teachers fuels professional growth and enhances the educational experience for students. Heather expressed the value of

working together "We've talked a lot about, in this district, that we want more collaboration with each other. We have great teachers. We just feel like we're all kind of separated and not really able to work with one another and build our crafts together" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). This drive for collaboration reflects a shared desire among teachers to continually improve and innovate, drawing inspiration and ideas in addition to support from their peers.

The role of these relationships goes beyond mere survival in that they enrich the teaching experience. Peter pointed out that the bonds formed with colleagues, alongside those with students and administrators, are integral to retaining teachers. "Now you see a lot of people just bailing on this profession early on, and part of it is how you build relationships with people—not just students, but colleagues, administrators" (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). In a profession where burnout and turnover are pressing concerns, the relationships teachers form with their peers serve as a powerful anchor. They remind educators that they are not alone, that their work matters, and that their challenges are shared. These bonds transform schools into communities where teachers feel valued, supported, and inspired to stay—not just for the students, but for each other.

Mentors and mentees

Specific types of relationships also emerged as being particularly important for the study participants. As discussed in Chapter 2, mentorship plays a pivotal role in a teacher's journey, especially in the formative years of their career. Mentors provide not only practical guidance but also emotional support and a sense of belonging in an often challenging profession. The following reflections from the participants underscore how

transformative these relationships can be, not only in shaping individual careers but in fostering a broader culture of retention and growth within the education system.

For Scott, having mentors when he started teaching was instrumental to his success. "I was lucky enough to have a couple pretty good mentors when I got there" he shared (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). These mentors, some of whom had been teaching for 20 years and others who were just slightly older, offered invaluable insights. This somewhat parental camaraderie gave him a model to emulate and to help him understand his role in education, both as a teacher and as a colleague to others. Reflecting on one of his most influential mentors, a fellow coach, Scott described him as someone who defied the "status quo teacher" mold yet was universally approachable. "He was kind of one of those guys that really anybody on staff could go talk to," Scott noted, adding that this example inspired him to serve a similar role for others now that he is a more experienced educator (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). The importance of a mentor who was approachable, someone who he could be open and honest with without the fear of judgment, is what made this relationship, and others like it, so important for this young educator.

Jean echoed this sentiment, emphasizing how mentoring younger teachers and providing a safe, judgement-free collegial relationship not only strengthens individuals but also fortifies the school community as a whole, suggesting that the mentoring relationship is just as beneficial for the mentors as it is the mentees. She described the difficulty of considering leaving a teaching position at her school because of the relationships she had cultivated, particularly with younger colleagues. "Being able to be an influence, working with people, and being able to work together—all levels of people

in the building work together to do something bigger for the school," she explained, was the fuel that stoked her fire and passion for teaching (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). For Jean, mentoring is about creating a supportive environment where new teachers can thrive. "Mentoring doesn't mean telling them what to do but just being able to let them be vulnerable... and giving them the support and praise when needed and the tough talks when needed" (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). These tough talks are also an opportunity for the veteran teacher to grow as a leader, again pointing to the mutual benefit of teachers on both sides of the mentoring relationship.

Heather's experience with her mentor during her student teaching highlights the profound personal and professional impact such relationships can have. She recalled how her mentor's boundless energy and enthusiasm for teaching inspired her. "She rubbed off on me—a lot of her drive and passion," Heather said (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). When Heather was overwhelmed and unsure as she prepared to graduate and start her first teaching job, her mentor provided reassurance. "She was the one person that I reached out to, and she's like, 'You can do this. You've got it all. Just kind of roll with it.'" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). Though they have not maintained frequent contact, Heather credits this mentor with shaping how she approaches her career today, saying her impact was "a lot bigger than I probably ever told her" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024).

The collective experiences of these educators illustrate the ripple effect of strong mentorship. Mentors do not just help new teachers navigate the day-to-day challenges of the classroom; rather, they instill confidence, model best practices, and demonstrate what it means to be part of a supportive professional community. This dynamic, as Jean points

out, is crucial to attracting and retaining passionate teachers. When mentorship thrives, so does the profession, creating a cycle of growth, support, and excellence that benefits educators and students alike. (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024)

The "Teacher Bestie"

The importance of deep, lasting friendships among colleagues emerges as a cornerstone of professional resilience and satisfaction in teaching. These relationships, often referred to as "teacher besties" or close-knit peer groups, offer an invaluable support system that helps educators navigate the challenges of the profession. Teachers consistently cite these bonds as not only a source of strength but also a key reason they continue to thrive in their careers.

For example, Julie highlighted the essential nature of having a "teacher bestie" who acts as a confidant and supporter on tough days. She reflected on relying on her closest colleague, particularly during challenging times, stating, "I think every teacher has their teacher bestie... You've got the person you go to when it's like, how do we do this every day?" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). Julie's candid acknowledgment of the emotional and logistical support this relationship provides underscored the profound role these friendships play in sustaining teachers. In the context of her interview, Julie shared that the seasonal changes of responsibilities in her life, as well as her husband's life as he is also a teacher and coach, can bring challenges that not everyone will understand; however, having a best friend who has walked in your shoes, who has dealt with "that one student," or gets that some days in teaching are just challenging provides a source of support and encouragement that her non-educator friends just can't quite match. (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024)

Jean offered a deeply personal perspective on the importance of connection in the workplace when she recounted the compassion and solidarity she experienced during a difficult health challenge. She shared, "I had very early breast cancer that rocked my world, and my principal came to my room and he cried with me" (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). This moment, both professional and personal, illustrates how strong, empathetic relationships can create an environment where teachers feel truly supported, not just as professionals but as human beings. While this individual was currently her principal, they started out as "teacher besties" and had a longstanding relationship prior to one of them moving into administration.

These deep relationships are also built on shared experiences and years of working together. Richard noted the tight bonds within his department, where several teachers have collaborated for decades. Reflecting on how they navigated a colleague's extended health-related challenges, he shared, "We all kind of covered for them, peeked in on the subs, and did whatever was needed" (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). This mutual commitment exemplifies the depth of camaraderie that develops over time and the willingness of colleagues to step in for one another. Indeed, Richard shared that these people who he spent his working hours with had become close friends and extended family–people who you would do just about anything for and not just any old work acquaintance.

For the participants, these connections extended beyond the classroom and school walls, forming lifelong friendships. Heather's experience most vividly captured this phenomenon as she described a group of ten colleagues who formed a close bond early in their careers and have maintained it ever since. "There's ten of us girls that pretty much

started when I was year four…and we have been close ever since" because, as she shared, they have spent the years "leaning on [each other] for advice, being in the same positions, with the same kids, and knowing each other's situation…we've kind of worked with each other to build a foundation of understanding and trust" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). These relationships, rooted in shared experiences and collaboration, evolved into enduring friendships that offered both professional and personal support. Even after members of this group moved away from the school they all taught in, they still remained close. "Even this summer, we're planning a girls trip to the Niobrara!" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). These relationships have continued, for Heather, to be a source of professional support and guidance as well as lifelong friendships.

Peter provided another example of a lasting friendship forged through teaching. Recalling his years working with a colleague who is now a principal, he shared, "he and I taught together for a lot of years…and developed a really strong friendship and we're still really good friends to this day…and I miss being in the same building as him" (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). Peter reflected on how these relationships endured beyond the workplace, enriched by shared history and mutual understanding, and continue to serve as a source of support and encouragement for him to remain in education.

In an often demanding and isolating profession, these close relationships create a sense of belonging and community that keeps teachers grounded. Whether through leaning on a teacher bestie during a busy coaching season, standing by colleagues through health crises, or maintaining friendships long after colleagues have moved on,

these bonds serve as lifelines. They remind educators that they are not alone, fostering the kind of support that helps them persevere and find joy in their work.

Professional networks

Professional relationships that extend beyond a teacher's immediate department or building provide a lifeline of support, collaboration, inspiration, and, often, a neutral or fresh perspective. To the participants, these networks often formed over years of shared experiences and challenges and are invaluable not only for professional growth but also for maintaining a sense of connection to the larger educational community. Participants shared how these relationships have shaped their work, renewed their motivation, and enriched their personal lives.

Julie reflected on the evolution of her understanding of professional relationships, particularly how young teachers might initially overlook their importance. "You're kind of in your own head" she explains, "as newer teachers focus heavily on managing classrooms and building relationships with students." But with hindsight, she stressed, "I think it's so, so important to have strong professional relationships" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). For her, these connections offered a perspective and resourcefulness that can only come from stepping outside the isolation of one's own experience.

Arthur further illustrated the power of a professional circle of contacts. He described a group of five coaches who regularly exchanged ideas and provided constructive feedback. "We're constantly calling, challenging, and pushing each other," Arthur shares, noting how this dynamic has filled a void he experienced earlier in his career (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). The immediacy of modern

communication allows him to access this group's insights and support whenever needed. "It's not something I'm always seeking out, but it's there at my fingertips," he says, underscoring how these external networks have become integral to his practice (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024).

Richard emphasized how these connections transcend the professional sphere, often evolving into lifelong friendships. Reflecting on relationships he has built through teaching and coaching, Richard said, "You have your school buddies, but I think some of the relationships that were built in the fire last a little bit longer and are stronger" (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). For Richard, the bonds with a wider network of teachers provide more than just camaraderie—they are a source of continual learning and encouragement.

Heather highlighted the importance of collaboration across departments and schools, lamenting that teachers often feel isolated despite being surrounded by talented colleagues. "We've talked a lot about how we want more collaboration with each other," she explains (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). By "utilizing each other" and building their crafts together, teachers can create stronger educational outcomes while fostering a sense of shared purpose. Through professional development opportunities, conferences, and even social media, teachers are finding new ways to connect with and explore their professional networks.

Peter elaborated on the unique connection forged in the education world, from coaching to administration. He described these relationships with others, both in and outside his school, as opportunities to share "battle stories and war stories," bouncing ideas off one another and reflecting on their collective impact (P. Nelson, personal

communication, 2024). His reflection underscores how these professional networks serve as a source of inspiration, a repository of new ideas, and a touchstone for the meaningful work educators do. For Peter in particular, these networks of relationships are enduring. He recalled a friendship with a former colleague with whom he has ongoing, regular communication where they share ideas, emphasizing how such connections persist even when professional paths diverge (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). These friendships are a testament to the lasting impact of shared experiences and mutual respect.

In a field where collaboration is essential but often siloed, maintaining professional relationships across different contexts brings balance, perspective, and growth. These networks remind educators that they are part of a larger community, offering encouragement, feedback, and camaraderie that can sustain them through the unique challenges of teaching. By stepping outside their immediate circles and engaging with peers across the profession, teachers find not just support but inspiration to continue their work with renewed purpose and passion.

Theme 2: The Teacher and Their Principal

A relational principal

The relationship between teachers and administrators can profoundly impact teacher retention and job satisfaction, a sentiment echoed consistently among the interviewees who feel valued, supported, and personally connected to their school leadership. Participants from various schools shared experiences of principals who recognized their challenges, celebrated their personal milestones, and supported them through difficult

times. By doing so, they established a work environment that transcends professional expectations and becomes an integral part of their lives.

Arthur emphasized how seeing and being seen by his principal affects his morale. "Where I appreciate our admin is…I believe I have a relationship with them, and they have a relationship with me. It's not one of those where I never see him" (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). He went on to recount various memories of times when his principal would stop by his room to see how his family was, spend extra time helping him solve problems for his classroom, and showing a genuine interest in the progress he was making as a professional instead of an employee. This type of regular, personable interaction, for Arthur, built a sense of connection and mutual understanding, something these teachers identified as vital in fostering a positive school culture where teachers feel genuinely acknowledged.

For Scott, the support of his principal strengthened his resolve to stay in the profession. Reflecting on his leadership journey, Scott attributed his growth to his administrators, who as both colleagues and friends shaped his role within the school. "He was a very good relationship principal, good leader…probably the time when I started becoming more of a leader in the school," he shared, happened as a direct result of personal, meaningful interactions with his building principal (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). Through this relationship, Scott learned that having an open dialogue with administrators and being invited to share his opinion were as powerful as formal leadership roles. As he noted, "Just to know that my opinion is valued matters, not merely as an employee, but as a valued colleague and friend" (S. Perez, personal

communication, 2024). His experience demonstrates that principals can cultivate loyalty simply by listening and showing they value their staff and their input.

Jean underscored the importance of trust and empathy from principals during personal challenges, a vital component of why she stayed with her school. "I had administrators keep me there…I have always had a good relationship with all of my administrators, a close relationship where I can walk in and say, I have an idea, and they'll sit and listen" (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). Jean's story took a deeply personal turn a few years ago when she was diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer and her principal went above and beyond. "My principal came to my room, and he cried with me, and that was huge for me," she recalls (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). Such responses demonstrate to staff that their administrators care about their well-being beyond their professional roles, building a culture of empathy and mutual support.

Teachers also emphasized how formative these relationships can be during the early years of their careers. Teresa recounted how her principal, who at the time was a fellow teacher and her first "teacher neighbor," guided her through difficult times. "I was a young, 23-year-old girl…and I cried a lot my first year, and he was just really the one who brought me back down, saying, 'You're going to be fine. Everything is going to be okay'" (T. Price, personal communication, 2024). For Teresa, her principal's simple but profound and consistent reassurance was enough to keep her grounded and committed during an uncertain start to her career. Throughout her interview, she shared that this same sentiment continued into his tenure as principal and gained him widespread respect from her colleagues.

Julie's experience in a small district, where the personal connection with her superintendent and principal has endured for years, made her feel genuinely valued. "Our former superintendent still lives in town…He always would say things like, 'Oh Julie, the girl who has her permanent honeymoon at [our town] Public Schools,' because I literally got married and came to school two days later!" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). Her administrators recounted and recalled this as well as other pieces of information about her personal life over the years, which for her created a sense of being known as a person, not just a teacher, and is an essential part of what makes her feel she belongs. Her administrators' support extended far beyond friendly banter, especially in times of personal crises. During a series of traumatic events, including the suicide of her best friend's brother and the stillbirth of her first child, her principal demonstrated unwavering support, even arranging for coverage without requiring her to prepare for the disruption. "My principal just was like, go, we got it covered. Don't worry about anything while you're gone. Let us know when you can get back. Those types of experiences where, like, you just felt overwhelming support and knew that things were going to be okay," are what Julie remembers and values most about her relationship with her principal (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). This compassionate response from her administrator reminded her that she was part of a supportive community, not just an employee.

The significance of administrators building relationships with their teachers is also deeply felt in the family-like connections Richard has formed over the years with his principals. Having worked with multiple administrators and taught their children, he recognized that these relationships enhanced his commitment to his students and the

district. "The superintendent we have now was the principal here…he knows the community; he knows the teachers…and he has a vested interest" (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). Richard, among others, shared that this feeling of being known enhanced their sense of being valued and respected as individuals. Further, Richard's involvement as a coach and the less structured interactions with his administrative team that these opportunities afforded strengthened his ties with administrators across the district and added a layer of camaraderie and mutual respect that makes his work more rewarding.

These experiences collectively highlighted the profound impact that thoughtful, relationship-oriented administrators can have on teachers. When school leaders see and support teachers as whole individuals, not just members of staff, it fosters an environment where teachers want to stay, contribute, and feel a genuine sense of belonging. In times of triumph and challenge, the strength of these relationships can be the foundation that sustains teachers, creating a professional culture rooted in empathy, understanding, and an unspoken commitment to each other's well-being.

The voices that matter

In the world of education, where challenges evolve and expectations continuously rise, teachers repeatedly highlighted principals who listen, value their input, and actively consider their professional opinions as a non-negotiable. Arthur shared, "I'm not afraid to tell our administration…this is an issue right now, and we really need to figure out how to collectively solve it" (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). His confidence stems from knowing that when he speaks up, his voice is heard. "I know it's not falling on deaf

ears," he added, emphasizing the importance of leadership that not only listens, but responds (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024).

This sentiment was echoed by Scott, who reflected on how meaningful it is when administration seeks teacher input, even outside of formal leadership roles. "Just to know that my opinion is valued matters," he shared, "if you sit down with them, and they listen to you, and they take to heart some of it, I think that's good. I mean, that's the most important to me" (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). For Scott, it was not about the titles or the recognition of having the idea or even being the one to carry out the suggestion, it was about having a seat at the table and seeing that your presence there is important to those leading the building.

The willingness to listen is not just about routine feedback; instead, it is about fostering an environment where innovative ideas can thrive. Jean saw a need in her building for additional support for fledgling teachers. She had seen how many of her younger colleagues were struggling to adapt to the demands of teaching. Jean recalled feeling passionate about helping new teachers succeed, and seeing an opportunity to fill a need, she met with her principal to propose a new mentoring program for young teachers. "I just wrote up a little proposal…and they said, 'Will you present it to all of the admin?'" to which she replied, "Sure!" (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). What followed was a collaborative effort to turn her vision into a reality, a testament to leadership that listened to the voice of others and provided the space for innovation, change, and growth. Richard also emphasized the value teachers place on being part of the process. From school improvement to strategic planning to curriculum development "The feedback that we're able to give and it being valued is really important," he noted

(R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). His involvement in leadership initiatives highlighted how much he perceived that administration trusts and values the expertise of those on the frontlines. He recalled that the actions of his administrators proved that this was not just lip service, but a reflection of deeper respect. "The ownership that we develop because we are part of the process…it just makes you feel like your opinion and your thoughts are important" (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024).

For Heather, a defining moment in her school came when a new principal put forth the opportunity for staff to have a voice they had not had before. After years of poorly timed and executed initiatives left teachers feeling frustrated, a new principal presented an opportunity for teachers to have greater representation in decision-making. "He wanted a leadership team that were teachers that were nominated by other staff members to be on his team…to voice opinions and make decisions for the staff collectively…we never really had that kind of voice before" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). Scott acknowledged a similar sentiment that "we've had like five principals in my time…none of whom seemed to stay long enough to provide an opportunity for staff to voice their thoughts" (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). But the administrators who did provide that opportunity effected a pivotal change, giving teachers an avenue to contribute meaningfully to decision making processes and fostering a collective ownership over the school's direction.

"I do have a hard time when I disagree" (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). Jean recalled that not every interaction with administration was always one where they saw eye to eye. However, having the opportunity to voice her differing opinions and feel heard has played a large role in her decision to stay at her school. "It has kept me

[here]...I have always had a good relationship with all of my administrators, a close relationship where I can walk in and say, 'I have an idea,' and they'll sit and listen" (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). Richard agreed with the importance of healthy dialogue on opposing sides of views when he shared, "[my principal] was always asking me…if I was interested in this and interested in that, and he likes my devil's advocate side, so he always wanted me to take part in conversations because I would always bring up the negative things that could pop up" (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). Here, his administrator proactively engaged Richard in dialogue because he knew that he would present a dissenting opinion. Richard remembered being involved in a school improvement initiative where his membership on the committee was purely because "he knew I was against it…so he wanted me on there because of that" (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). In the end, the devil's advocate became the principal's ally as Richard shared that "I totally flipped my opinion" on the topic being addressed, and in fact became one of the biggest supporters of the initiative and was proud to have been there from the start (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). Richard and Jean's stories were not the only ones. Many of the study participants recounted examples of healthy disagreement and opportunities to share opinions leading to deeper relationships, trust, and respect between the teachers and their administrators. These dialogues ultimately grew into a great sense of value that they brought to their schools.

In each case, whether it was solving problems, driving initiatives, or simply being asked for an opinion, the interviews underscored one powerful truth: when principals genuinely value their teachers' professional input, it cultivates a sense of respect, trust, and shared purpose.

They've got my back

Teachers consistently expressed how the support they received from administrators profoundly impacted their professional growth, satisfaction, and decision to stay in the profession. Several educators shared specific ways in which their administrators fostered a supportive environment, from handling discipline to encouraging personal growth and professional ownership.

Arthur, for example, reflected on the value of having leaders who not only "understand" but are truly "in his corner," likening his interactions with supportive administrators to a partnership rather than a transaction (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). This sense of trust, he says, allows him to focus on his teaching rather than having to "pitch" ideas just to meet the needs of his students (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). For Arthur, knowing that his administrators, with their own experience in physical education and coaching, could empathize with his challenges made all the difference. In a similar vein, Jean credited her long tenure in education to the solid disciplinary support she received, even though discipline issues rarely arose in her career. This was, perhaps most poignantly illustrated while she recounted examples of challenging student and parent issues in her class. "If I didn't get that support, I don't know if I could have stayed" (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). Her experience illustrated the vital role administrators play in creating a safe and stable work environment, especially during times of stress or when teacher autonomy is challenged. Conversely, both Arthur and Jean, along with others, shared examples of how teachers they knew who did not receive the same support for disciplinary measures tended to burn out and were lost to attrition.

The idea of support for teachers was not limited to the narrow field of student discipline. Jean also shared her opinion on administrative support stating, "Support [for] staff, whether it's family, in the classroom, discipline, or any other area, is so important" (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). The idea of administrative support was later validated when she witnessed her principals actively listen and adopt policies to support her and her colleagues, particularly around the need for flexibility and understanding when life circumstances arise. For example, when Jean and her colleagues asked for administration to grant latitude regarding use of leave time, particularly to attend their own students' events, the immediate and inflexible response was later given additional consideration due, in no small part, to the relationships teachers had with administrators and the principals' desire to support their staff (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). She strongly believes that policies should not be overly restrictive due to a few individuals' actions but should be designed to trust and support professionals, something her administrators were wise to uphold.

Richard's story further emphasized how support from administration can empower teachers to bring their personal passions into the classroom. Reflecting on his own journey, he shared that without the freedom and backing he received to integrate resources and experiences he was passionate about into his curriculum he would not have been able to pursue projects that enriched both his teaching and his students' academic experiences (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). This was particularly true when a local organization which supported wildlife conservation provided him the opportunity to integrate their practices into his own classroom. Desiring to explore meaningful experiences for all students, he highlighted his administrators' commitment to inclusivity

and involvement saying, "The investment that our administrators put in us makes you feel like your opinion and your thoughts are important" (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). Further, being part of significant decisions, such as curriculum selection, professional development, or being included in the hiring of new personnel, fosters a sense of ownership and belonging among staff. Richard regarded this as instrumental in cultivating a committed and cohesive team in his school.

Teresa's experiences illustrated the profound impact of administrators' belief in a teacher's potential. She recalled her surprise when her former principal encouraged her to pursue a role for which she felt unqualified. He believed in her enough to support her return to the school and even championed her advancement (T. Price, personal communication, 2024). She said of her experiences with her principal, "You take it as kind of like a badge of honor…he obviously believes I can do this" (T. Price, personal communication, 2024). This trust reinforced her loyalty to the district and strengthened her confidence as an educator. Teresa's sentiments underscored how administrators who see potential in their teachers and express faith in them builds not only a dedicated staff but also a culture of mutual respect and aspiration.

Another testament to the importance of authentic support came from Heather, who described the pivotal role of her mentor and building principal in shaping her journey. Describing him as "the first person that advocated for me to get my administration degree," Heather found in him a guide who both encouraged her professional development and challenged her in meaningful ways (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). Unlike other administrators who simply offered "fluff" or superficial praise, her principal provided constructive feedback that pushed her to reflect

on her teaching practices. He was not just a "yes man," and for Heather, that made all the difference. She explained that unlike previous leaders who promised action without follow-through, this principal was reliable and willing to take action. Knowing he was there to genuinely support and elevate her practice, Heather found herself motivated to continually improve.

In these educators' stories, common threads emerged: administrators who foster trust and who truly invest in their teachers' success not only contribute to a positive school culture but also influence teachers' long-term dedication to their roles. By creating an environment where teachers feel valued, heard, and supported, administrators reinforce the sense of purpose and community that ultimately anchors educators to their schools. This support, whether through disciplinary backing, personal encouragement, or professional development, plays a crucial role in building a stable, resilient, and thriving teaching force.

Trust and transparency

The concept of teachers having a voice in the running of the school is predicated on the idea that the administration shares a mutual trust and respect for professional judgment with their staff. The presence of trusting relationships with organizational leaders allows educators to work confidently and autonomously. Julie described this culture vividly, highlighting that in recent years her new administrators cultivated a positive and trusting work environment. She shared that her school is now "a positive place to work where teachers feel safe to, you know, make the decisions that they need to make daily" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). This shift from the previous administration, which micromanaged teachers and questioned their judgment, has given

teachers the freedom to make necessary academic and behavioral decisions. The value of knowing, as Julie emphasized, "we're going to have the support to make those decisions because we're adults" has created an environment of respect that is palpable for teachers (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). The assurance of support in her decisions, grounded in trust, has made a significant impact on her experience at work.

Many teachers, like Arthur, echoed the value of this trust, finding confidence in their administrators' honesty and transparency. Arthur felt his administrators genuinely listened to his feedback saying, "if I feel like there's something that's not going the right way, I can speak up, and I know my admin is going to listen" (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). Having leaders who are upfront about the feasibility of requests allows teachers like Arthur to see transparency in action because decisions are not made to placate but to serve the best interests of the school. This consistency in communication created a foundation of trust, leaving Arthur and his colleagues with the security of knowing they can advocate for what they need without feeling like they were, as he joked, "pitching things like a used car salesman" (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024).

Richard reiterated that trust is not simply a bonus, or "nice to have," it is essential to a healthy school environment. Having been in his role through different administrative transitions, Richard has experienced firsthand how trust reinforces his commitment to the school. He shared that the administrators he has worked under "have all trusted me with my classroom and with my coaching," fostering an environment where he does not feel like someone is "looking over [his] shoulder" (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). This freedom gives him the confidence to guide his students in the best ways he

sees fit, reinforcing his trust in leadership as well as his investment in the school community. His administrators' trust extended into his daily interactions with principals who frequently stopped by his classroom simply to ask how things are going–an action Richard deeply values as it shows his role and expertise are genuinely respected. He and others indicated that a feeling of trust is critical to job satisfaction and fulfillment in their positions, without which, they would likely not find the sense of loyalty, belonging, and commitment they have experienced.

Richard's commitment to trusting his students and coworkers served as a model of what he and other interviewees like Jean and Heather expect of their principals. "If I don't have trust, I really struggle…I have to trust my athletes. I have to trust my students. I have to trust my coworkers… I knew when [principal] became the boss, I could still trust him and have conversations without having to worry about if he's not sure I'm doing the right things" (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). They all expressed a desire to have the same level of trust and respect from their administration as what they show their own students. "I have an idea and they'll sit and listen" Jean shared, is exactly the trusting and transparent environment that she and the others strive to establish for their students (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). If professional relationships mirror the classroom relationships in schools, the overall culture becomes one of mutually supportive learning without fear of judgment. The ability to voice her opinions openly and receive transparent responses was essential for Jean. Even when disagreements arose, Jean, Arthur, Scott, Richard, Teresa, and Jean all expressed they trust their administrators' intentions, knowing they are grounded in an equitable outcome. Their

experience illustrated how transparent and respectful dialogue allows differences to be managed constructively, creating an atmosphere of both trust and understanding.

In a school culture built on mutual trust, teachers feel seen, valued, and empowered to make decisions in the best interest of their students. This trust goes beyond professional autonomy, weaving into daily interactions and challenges, allowing teachers to rely on their administrators for both support and guidance. The value of this trust can be seen in how these teachers approached their roles with confidence, feeling encouraged to act on their professional judgment and assured that their leaders support them.

Theme 3: The Meanings of "Support"

Throughout the time spent listening and in dialogue with the participants, the concept of support was a universal undertone in each of their stories. Curiously, the idea of support was a difficult term to define from their narratives. In fact, what constituted support seemed to vary from moment to moment, story to story, and context to context. With my curiosity piqued and the stories full of similarities and differences around the subject, I sought in this theme to qualify the various meanings of what it looks like to a teacher to feel "support."

Support is: respectful collaboration

Mutual respect and collaboration are fundamental ideas that make teachers feel valued and inspire them to stay in the profession. Teachers described a culture where respect, tough conversations, and teamwork created an environment where they felt understood, appreciated, and motivated to contribute to the collective success of their schools.

Arthur emphasized the importance of mutual respect in fostering a positive work environment: "At the end of the day, this is the standard we're going to teach by, live by, and interact by," he explained (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). While tough conversations inevitably arise, he suggested they are grounded in shared goals and mutual care. In his experience at his school, the "people who are telling me things I don't want to hear, for the most part, have my best interest in mind" (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). This foundation of trust and respect allowed teachers like Arthur to engage in open dialogue, knowing that everyone is working toward the same objective—making their schools the best they can be. This type of school culture was a typical desire among the participants.

But respectful collaboration is not necessarily just a *byproduct of* culture, it also plays a significant role in *building* this supportive culture. Teachers value colleagues who can help them process challenges and work toward solutions. Arthur shared how his peers supported one another through difficult moments when he recounted, "We have staff members in the building that, if I'm going to vent, I'm either looking for you to come back with one or two options, or I'm venting to get it off my chest, and then I'm rolling up my sleeves to find something to do" (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). This sense of collective problem-solving not only alleviates stress but also reinforces the value of working together to overcome challenges.

For Scott, mutual respect and collaboration go hand-in-hand with mentorship. He reflected on his own experience of having mentors who took the time to guide and support him when he was starting out. "I was lucky enough to have a couple of pretty good mentors," he said, recalling they shared their knowledge and helped him navigate

the early years of teaching (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). Now, as a more experienced educator, Scott sees it as his responsibility to provide that same support to others. He aspires to emulate a former colleague, whom he described as someone who "really anybody on staff could go talk to" explaining that fostering this kind of openness and accessibility is vital for creating a strong sense of community among staff (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024).

A sense of community is essential for teachers to feel supported and stay committed to their roles. "It can't just be a job," Scott emphasized. "You have to have a sense of community amongst your peers, your staff, and those types of things" (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). This shared sense of purpose and belonging is a recurring theme among teachers who feel supported in their work. It is not just about individual relationships but about cultivating an environment where everyone feels invested in each other's success.

Like Scott, mentorship was also a key component of supportive collaboration for Jean. She articulated the importance of mentoring in attracting and retaining young teachers. "Mentoring doesn't mean telling them what to do but letting them be vulnerable," she said (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). She believes that effective mentorship involves teaching new educators to be reflective without fear of judgment, providing both encouragement and honest feedback when needed. Jean's perspective highlights how mutual respect between mentors and mentees fosters growth and builds trust, creating a supportive professional environment.

All of these reflections illustrate how mutual respect and teamwork among teachers contribute to a culture of support that extends beyond individual classrooms.

Whether through open conversations, mentorship, or simply working together to solve problems, teachers thrive when they know they are part of a community that values their contributions and respects their professional and personal growth. This culture not only helps teachers navigate the challenges of their work but also inspires them to remain dedicated to their students and their schools.

Support is: everyone's responsibility

While we often think of support coming from within the school itself, creating an environment where educators feel valued, connected, and inspired by the larger community is often equally as important. For many teachers, the relationships they build among parents, families, and local supporters provide a sense of belonging that reinforces their commitment to their work and their schools.

Julie reflected on how her community consistently rallied together, not just for the students but for one another. She shared a vivid example from a state soccer game in 2019, where she expected to see mostly the families of the players in attendance. Instead, the entire community showed up to cheer on the team. "Our community was all there, cheering on those boys," she said, adding that this level of support is not limited to sports but extends across events and achievements. "We show up for each other," Julie explained, emphasizing the pride and unity that comes with being part of such a community (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024).

For teachers like Julie, the connections with families deepen this sense of belonging. Having taught for 15 years, she has built relationships with multiple generations of students within the same family. She shared the bittersweet moment of seeing the youngest of seven siblings graduate and the mother expressing how much she

would miss seeing her at school events. "Being a part of a community that has those close ties—it means a lot," Julie said (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). These relationships extend beyond the classroom and into daily life, creating bonds that feel more like family than work.

Arthur echoed this sentiment, describing the "family feel" of his school community as one of the main reasons he has stayed at his district for 17 years. "We always say we're doing things the [school name] way," he said, noting that the culture of collaboration and unity among staff and the greater community has been integral to his experience (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). As the school grows, Arthur expressed a collective hope that the community doesn't lose touch with its roots. "It's a very unique feel... we're all in it together," he said, highlighting how this sense of shared purpose sustains him and his colleagues (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024).

These examples illustrate how the support of a close-knit community reinforces teachers' sense of purpose and belonging. When educators feel that they are part of something larger than themselves, it strengthens their commitment to their students, their schools, and their profession. This shared investment between teachers, families, and the community creates an enduring foundation for teacher retention, ensuring that educators feel supported not only in their work but in their lives.

Support is: grace in crisis

Participants shared stories of personal hardships where both colleagues and community gave of their time, resources, and empathy to show gracious support. Whether through the rallying of colleagues, the understanding of administrators, or the

compassion of students, these experiences of shared humanity create a powerful bond between educators and their school communities.

Julie shared multiple instances when the people around her became an unwavering source of strength during difficult times. Early in her career, after the tragic death of her best friend's brother, her principal stepped in with empathy and understanding. "My principal just said, 'Go, we've got it covered. Don't worry about anything while you're gone,'" she recalled (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). What stood out most to Julie was the absence of logistical stress–she was not asked to prepare sub plans or worry about her absence–and the knowledge that her well-being mattered more than anything else meant more to her than anyone could know.

Years later, Julie faced the devastating loss of her first child, a stillbirth in her early career. During this heartbreaking period, the entire district rallied around her and her family. "They brought us food every other day for the entire summer," she said, listing the ways her colleagues, from principals to teachers, came together to support her (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). Their kindness extended beyond gestures of sympathy. They celebrated with her when her daughters were born, offering diapers, food, and heartfelt congratulations. Perhaps one of the most emotional and moving stories shared was when she returned to school after the healthy birth of her first child following her miscarriage. A male student in her class "comes up to me and just gives me the biggest hug and he was like, 'Mrs. Jones, I've never been so happy for an adult in my life!'" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). Julie reflected on these moments of connection saying, "It's the personal stuff that kind of keeps you where you are" (J.

Jones, personal communication, 2024). This outpouring of love and support made her feel deeply tied to her community, solidifying her decision to stay.

Heather's story illustrated how the encouragement of a mentor helped her navigate the overwhelming challenges of starting her career. As a new teacher, Heather connected with a colleague whose passion and energy inspired her. "She was the one person I reached out to," Heather shared, adding, "She said, 'You can do this. You've got it all'" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). Her mentor's belief in her abilities gave Heather the confidence she needed to persevere and build a fulfilling career, leaving a lasting impact on how she approached her work and relationships with others.

Peter reflected on how the profession's challenges often push teachers to leave early. He emphasized, however, that the relationships built with students, colleagues, and administrators are what sustain those who stay. "How you build relationships with people—not just students, but colleagues and administrators—makes all the difference," he explained (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). These relationships, forged through shared struggles and triumphs, serve as a reminder of the collective mission that ties educators together. For Peter, it was the patient and gracious support from mentors, which he has since paid forward, that helped him in a time of turmoil to stay steadfast and persist in his role as an educator.

These stories demonstrate the profound impact of compassion, understanding, and solidarity during life's most difficult moments. Teachers face challenges far beyond the classroom, and the way their school communities respond can determine whether they feel supported enough to remain in the profession. Whether through a principal's unwavering support, colleagues' thoughtful gestures, or students' heartfelt joy, these

moments of connection remind teachers they are part of a larger family that values and sustains them through it all.

Support is: checks and balances

In a demanding profession where the lines between personal and professional often blur, recognition of and respect for teachers' needs–whether through clear boundaries or gestures of care–can make a significant difference in their well-being and commitment to their roles.

Julie described the importance of her administrators explicitly encouraging teachers to take time for themselves, especially during summer breaks. "Our boss is really good at saying, 'Summer is summer.' If you want things, ask, but if you don't want things, that's okay, too," she shared (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). As someone who tends to work nonstop unless told otherwise, Julie appreciated this direct permission to step back and prioritize her family and personal life. "Take your summer. You're not an admin," she recalled her administrator saying, reminding her to use her time intentionally to be with her kids and recharge (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024).

For Arthur, having clear boundaries set by his district has been a vital form of support. He described how leaders reinforce the importance of detaching during weekends and holiday breaks. "We're specifically told, 'It's the weekend or it's a holiday break so get off your computer, detach, and reload,'" Arthur said (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). He values this recognition from administrators, as it validates the need for rest and underscores their understanding of the pressures teachers face.

Beyond creating space for rest, administrators who recognize when teachers need extra care can make a profound impact. Julie highlighted her assistant principal, as an example of someone who understands when the staff needs additional support. "She's really good at recognizing when staff need a little bit more," Julie noted (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). Small gestures, whether from administrators, students, or colleagues, go a long way in helping teachers feel seen and valued. "That stuff's important. It makes a big difference sometimes," she added, emphasizing how thoughtful recognition, no matter how simple, can brighten challenging moments (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024).

This emphasis on boundaries and recognition reflects a culture of empathy and respect for teachers' humanity. By encouraging teachers to press pause when needed and acknowledging when they require extra support, administrators not only help their staff maintain balance but also foster a sense of trust and care. These practices remind teachers that they are valued not just for their work in the classroom, but as individuals who need time and space to thrive both professionally and personally.

Support is: the opportunity to pursue meaningful growth

Participants expressed meaningful opportunities for professional development and the freedom to pursue growth in ways that resonate with their individual goals and classroom needs were important signs of support for their work as professionals. These opportunities, coupled with thoughtful administrative backing, allow educators to thrive in their roles and stay engaged with their work.

Julie's experience highlighted the value of autonomy in professional growth. Over the years, she actively pursued leadership roles within state-level educational

organizations where she served as President-Elect, Vice President, and President for six years. "The district has been kind of like, 'Yeah, go do what you need to do,'" she explained (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). This unwavering support from her administration enabled her to take on significant professional responsibilities outside the classroom, which, in turn, enriched her teaching practice and kept her motivated. "That has been really important to me," Julie added, emphasizing how much this freedom to pursue individualized versus one-size-fits-all professional development experiences means to her growth and self-worth as an educator.

The importance of tailored, specific professional development was echoed by Jean, who underscored the difference between generic training and targeted growth opportunities. "Specified professional development to better what you think you need as a seasoned teacher is so important," she shared (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). While broad development sessions can help teachers understand how to learn as adults, Jean argued that training should align with actual classroom needs to be truly impactful. "Professional development that's given when the admin don't have an idea of the true need is not helpful," she said, pointing to the importance of listening to teachers' voices when planning growth opportunities (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024).

The desire for focus in professional development was a recurring theme among the participants. Heather described how her district began moving away from overwhelming teachers with multiple, competing initiatives. "We've talked about doing more focused sessions, where we put ourselves in groups based on our preference and work on just one idea, rather than having all these different things thrown at us," she explained (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). For Heather, this approach,

championed by her administrator, was transformative. "[He] has been really good about saying, 'We're all in it together, and we're going to focus on one thing and do it well,'" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). This focus helped center her energy and improved the efficacy of her professional growth.

Collaboration among colleagues also plays a critical role in professional development. Heather highlighted the need for greater teacher collaboration and lamented that, at times, educators feel isolated despite being surrounded by talented peers. "We have great teachers, but we feel like we're all kind of separated and not really able to work with one another," she shared (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). By fostering opportunities for teachers to build their crafts together and utilize each other's expertise, districts can create a sense of shared purpose and innovation.

For some teachers, professional development is about finding connections within their specific roles. Arthur, for instance, built a network of coaches who regularly challenge and push one another through shared techniques and feedback. "We're constantly corresponding via text or phone call, saying, 'Look at this video, where would you correct it?'" (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). This immediate access to a network of peers provided practical, actionable insights that elevated his work in ways traditional professional development could not. Per his suggestion, schools would be wise to allocate time for teacher-to-teacher connections as well as opportunities conducive to building an extended professional learning network.

Support was also felt when participants' contributions to school-wide initiatives were recognized and aligned with their growth. Heather described her involvement with implementing MTSS, noting how gratifying it was to see the framework evolve and make

a tangible difference. "Seeing students who were slipping through the cracks actually succeeding in classrooms was a huge part for me," she shared (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). This experience not only validated her efforts but also reinforced the importance of targeted initiatives that align with teachers' professional goals.

Finally, feeling believed in and empowered by administrators to take on new challenges makes a lasting impact on teachers. Teresa explained how she viewed being asked to take on a leadership role as a vote of confidence. "When [my principal] asks if you want to be in this kind of position, you take it as a badge of honor," she said, recognizing how administrators' faith in their teachers can inspire them to grow beyond their comfort zones (T. Price, personal communication, 2024).

These reflections illustrated that these teachers felt most supported when they were trusted to identify their professional needs and pursue meaningful growth opportunities. Whether through individual initiatives, focused district-wide goals, or collaborative networks, providing teachers with freedom, resources, and backing emerged as essential for their development. This support not only empowers educators to become better at their craft but also deepens their commitment to their schools, their students, and the profession as a whole.

Support is: empowerment and value

The meaning of support which evoked some of the greatest emotional responses from participants dealt with to what extent their expertise was respected, their voices were heard, and if they were empowered to take on leadership roles that mattered. The apparent importance of empowerment revealed educators feel valued not only for their

skills in the classroom but also for their potential to contribute to the broader goals of their schools and districts.

Julie emphasized the importance of being trusted to make decisions. Reflecting on recent improvements in her school's climate and culture, she shared how having strong administrators made her feel supported in her daily work. "Teachers feel safe to make decisions that they need to make daily: academic decisions, behavioral decisions, whatever it is," she explained (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). Knowing she has the backing of her leadership made a "huge difference" in her ability to focus on what was best for her students and not worry if her choices would be questioned and overly scrutinized.

This sense of trust was echoed by Arthur, who described the value of being recognized as a trusted voice within his district. "If people have issues, they can come to me. If I feel like something's not going the right way, I can speak up, and I know my admin is going to listen," (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). Feeling that his opinion was valued–whether at the building or district level–reinforced Arthur's commitment to his work. He also highlighted the importance of formalizing leadership opportunities for teachers, such as creating department head roles. "Their [principals] job is to facilitate and make sure the system's running... How do you put a teacher in a position to formally start growing and being recognized?" he asked, stressing how such roles empower teachers while alleviating pressure on administrators (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). For Arthur, the current situation in his building of not having departmentalized and distributed leadership was a source of frustration; however, the

chance that this shift might happen was enough to positively impact his outlook on the opportunity to affect change he and his colleagues have in their school.

Richard also underscored the value of teacher-driven initiatives, sharing his experience with strategic planning and leadership groups. "It was really teacher-driven and community-driven," he said, pointing out that the involvement of teachers and parents ensured that decisions were rooted in the realities of the school environment (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). Richard also spoke to the importance of administrators investing in teachers by involving them in key decisions, such as curriculum development or hiring leadership roles. "It makes you feel like your opinion and your thoughts are important" adding that this trust and inclusion deepens teachers' commitment to their schools (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024).

Heather highlighted how meaningful it was to have her voice represented on a leadership team, something her school had not prioritized before. "When [principal] became administrator, he wanted a leadership team of teachers nominated by staff members to voice opinions and make decisions collectively," she shared (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). This shift in approach gave staff members a platform to influence the direction of their school, something Heather had not experienced previously. For her, this demonstrated the value of teacher input and strengthened the sense of collaboration within the building.

Peter emphasized the importance of empowering younger teachers with leadership opportunities early in their careers. Reflecting on his own experiences and those of newer colleagues, he shared, "I'm pretty confident this young guy is going to stay in education a long time because he's getting these opportunities in the building to

lead and advance himself," (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). Peter believed that giving teachers the chance to grow and feel valued early on is essential for retention. "You have to give them those opportunities in order for them to want to grow," he said (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024).

This sense of empowerment is reinforced by small, everyday gestures that demonstrate respect for teachers' expertise. Richard described how his principals frequently stop by his classroom, not only to discuss instruction-related matters but also to seek his opinion on broader issues. "The trust and value that shows me is great," he said, noting how these interactions contribute to a positive and collaborative culture (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024).

Ultimately, these reflections demonstrated how empowering teachers through decision-making, leadership opportunities, and active collaboration can create a supportive and sustainable work environment. When participants felt like they were trusted as professionals, included in meaningful conversations, and given room to grow, their sense of value as integral members of their school communities blossomed. This sense of empowerment inspires them to stay in the profession and continue making a difference for their students and schools.

Theme 4: It Takes a Village

A sense of belonging

A strong sense of community and belonging iss a cornerstone of why many of the participants remain in education. For these educators, their schools are more than just places of employment: they are vibrant centers of connection and identity.

Arthur described the unique culture of his school, emphasizing how the climate and shared vision of his school's stakeholders fosters a deep sense of togetherness. "It's a very family feel," he said, adding that this environment has been key to his decision to stay for nearly two decades in the same school (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). He also voiced concern about maintaining that connection as the district grows. "Our biggest fear is, are we going to lose touch with who we are and the way we do things?" he wondered, highlighting the value of the close-knit culture he has come to appreciate (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024).

Scott echoed this sentiment, noting that "the school is my home." His family grew up attending the same school where he taught, deepening his connection to the community. This bond extended beyond his role as a teacher, becoming part of his identity. "Your high school kind of becomes the second biggest identifier in your life," he reflected (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). Peter added that this connection extends into the broader community, explaining that "the school is the heartbeat or pulse of your community" (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). To be a part of the school for these educators is to be a part of the heart of the community in which they live.

Richard illustrated how these community ties manifest during events shared between the school and its stakeholders. On Friday nights in the fall, his whole town gathers at football games. "You see everybody, whether they're tied to the school anymore or not," he shared (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). This connection makes teachers feel like they belong to something greater than themselves, fostering pride in their role and position within the community. Similarly, Jean noted how being deeply involved in the community has shaped her experience as an educator. "I love

being involved in the community and just digging in wherever I can," she said, adding

that her school often serves as the foundation for those connections to her surroundings.

The sense of community and belonging that schools foster is a powerful motivator

for these educators. For them, it reinforces their identity and purpose, providing a sense

of pride and connection that extends beyond their classroom. Whether through family

ties, school and community collaboration, or simply the culture of togetherness, these

bonds create a supportive environment where they feel valued and inspired to stay.

A major community investment

A supportive and involved community plays a significant role for the participants

in creating an environment where they feel valued and respected. This support often

manifests in tangible ways, from funding opportunities to shared celebrations of success.

Richard shared that his town consistently supports school programs throughout

the year. One such program was fundraising for initiatives like a golf hall of fame.

"We've talked to a few people in the community about monetary support, and they are

absolutely all in," he said (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). His connection

with families and former students has deepened over the years, adding to the meaning his

work provides. "Some of these kids I taught are now in positions in our community that I

get to interact with," he said, showing how ties of togetherness enrich the professional

and personal life of educators (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024).

For Teresa, community support directly impacted her professional growth

trajectory. "I got scholarships from our community foundation fund to go back to school"

(T. Price, personal communication, 2024). This financial assistance allowed her to pursue

a master's degree without financial strain, which she deeply appreciated. "I didn't have to

pay for a master's degree with the help of my community. I'm extremely grateful for that," she added (T. Price, personal communication, 2024). While the goal of the community in giving her the money was certainly not to make her feel indebted to them, it did foster a great sense of appreciation and commitment in return, resulting in her continued retention and service to their schools.

Even in challenging times, teachers recognize efforts to rebuild fractured connections. Heather shared that her district's foundation has worked to strengthen ties between teachers and the community, even amid disagreements. "Our foundation is really trying to develop that connection," she said, illustrating how the efforts of her community's organizations show support and foster unity despite a recent failed bond issue (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024).

Communities that actively back their schools have made these teachers feel valued and empowered. Their involvement reinforces the idea that teachers and schools are essential partners to building a healthy and thriving community. This mutual investment creates a foundation of trust and appreciation that inspires teachers to stay.

The Venn Diagram of personal and professional life

For many teachers, the integration of personal and professional life within their school communities strengthens their connections to the profession. Living and working in the same community fosters a sense of unity, allowing teachers to build meaningful relationships with students, families, and stakeholders.

Scott described teaching in a community-oriented school and how it has shaped his life. As shared earlier, he expressed that the school is his home. Because his family was so heavily invested in and impacted by the school, his commitment to the community

which supported the school–and by extension his family–was consistent and devout. (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024) Peter echoed this sentiment noting how living close to the school enriches his life experience. "I live three minutes down the road," he said (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). Whether it is running home for lunch or bringing his kids to the gym to play basketball while he works, the physical proximity of home to school and the overlap between work and personal life allowed him to seamlessly blend and enrich the two.

Richard spoke of the importance of connecting with students and families outside of the classroom. "It's nice to get to events and see people," he said, believing these interactions provide additional rewards and opportunities (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). "When you see a student at a game, and they say, 'This is my teacher, mom and dad, check him out,' that's an affirmation. That's why I do this," he shared (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024).

The blending of personal and professional life, for these teachers, has created a deeper connection between themselves and their communities. While they noted this level of crossing over between the two may not be for all, for them it contributed to the feeling that work is not work if you are doing what you love.

Removing the rose-colored glasses

While much of the previous celebration of community strength is important, teachers also acknowledged the challenges that arise when the cohesiveness between school and community is threatened. Rapid growth, controversial topics, or community politics can create feelings of dissent and erode feelings of trust.

Heather shared concerns about the impact of rapid growth on her district. "I just felt like it grew so much so fast that people kind of lost that sense of community," she lamented (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). This division was further exacerbated by a failed bond measure and debates over classroom policies, which left many teachers feeling unsupported. "There are teachers right now at the high school who are really angry," she said, highlighting both the difficulty and importance of maintaining unity in the face of challenges (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024).

Even in these moments, teachers like Jean focused on ways to foster connection. "The school is the number one place to help strengthen relationships," she said, underscoring the importance of finding common ground (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). Richard agreed with this sentiment in his reflection that a supportive school-community relationship can weather such challenges. "You make a lot of friendships in the community, and those ties are what help you stick through the tough times," he explained (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024).

While community cohesion is not without its challenges, the stories of trials from these teachers are also correlated to communities who are committed to weathering the storm. Many of these teachers understand that schools are often the center of efforts to rebuild connections and provide a foundation for unity and progress because they have lived and taught in these precise types of communities for so many years.

Theme 5: Fulfillment

The difference is MAKING a difference

Teachers often described their sense of purpose–knowing that they are truly making a difference–as one of the most significant reasons they remained in education.

Compared to other professions, in their estimation, education offers the chance to make a true difference in the world through impacting our future leaders. That is what separates it from other career opportunities. Whether it is receiving a heartfelt thank-you from a former student, witnessing growth in a struggling learner, or shaping the broader school community, these moments of impact lent meaning to their work.

Julie remembered a powerful graduation ceremony in which, as is tradition in her school, there were multiple valedictorians who spoke, each of whom publicly recognized her for her impact on their lives. "Thanks to Mrs. Jones…Thanks, Mrs. Jones…" they repeated, and Julie realized "Okay, I'm making an impact… these kids had appreciated everything I had done for them" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). Beyond graduation speeches, Julie drew motivation from everyday affirmations such as students telling her they felt safe in her classroom or that she's influenced their lives in a positive way, often changing their trajectory. She went on to share, "Being a kid is really hard… so just making sure kids know they have a safe place… that's the reason I do what I do" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). The experiences of Julie's own children further reinforced her commitment. "Seeing for my own kids how important it is to have a good teacher… I'm making a difference for kids, so I stay" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024).

Arthur shared similar thoughts when he spoke of teaching as his calling. "I really think this is my calling… I don't have an answer for what else I'd be doing!" he said, underscoring the completeness of his dedication to teaching (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). He also described spontaneous affirmations, such as the moment when a student excitedly introduced him to their parents after a game he coached, as

confirmation that he is where he is meant to be. His career, in his recollection, is full of "serendipitous rewards" that affirm why he teaches. "That's why I do this," Arthur recalled along with story after story of deeply meaningful moments that fuel the passion for his work as a teacher and coach (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024).

Purpose emerged for Heather from witnessing more concrete evidence that she is changing students' lives. One of the more passionate stories she shared revolved around a former student who struggled in high school as a writer and later became a college writing coach. "She was like, 'Ms. Kelly, I owe it all to you!'" Heather confessed, "When I hear that kind of stuff, I feel like I have a purpose," (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). Making a difference, for Heather, also transcended the work that happened in her own classroom. As a key member in implementing school-wide support interventions she saw "students who were slipping through the cracks… actually succeeding" as a result of the work of her and her colleagues, all of which reaffirmed for Heather the collective efforts of teachers and the school are worthwhile (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024).

Scott's experience in special education has given him a unique perspective and opportunity to watch his students progress and grow in their abilities and accomplishments over time. "You kind of see where a kid starts and finishes," referring to his multiyear role as a student's case manager, noting that he is privileged to be able to "feel you make that kind of [meaningful] impact on a student's life" (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). Scott recalled hearing from a parent who credited him as "the only reason my son made it through school," which validated Scott's day-to-day efforts. Scott further cautioned, however, that "teachers have to trust that those stories are out

there, even if you don't hear them" (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). His faith in the unseen ripple effect of his work keeps him going. This same faith was a common thread for the teachers, many of whom reflected on the phenomenon of only sowing the seeds but trusting that the harvest will come.

Not all impacts are individual as Jean shared that many times, for her, meaningful contributions to something bigger than herself is what drives her work ethic. "Just being a part of something to make the school better is important to me," she said (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). Even though she once considered leaving for a different opportunity, Jean struggled with the idea of walking away from the collective improvements she had helped initiate in her school. "I have a hard time leaving that," she admitted, because for her "the school is the number one place… to dig in and give back" (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). Beyond her immediate role, Jean cherished the broader impact of her work on the community and the school. It was apparent throughout her interview that making a better place to live for her, her family, and her students, began with the school.

For Richard, making a difference was intertwined with striving for excellence, whether that is for himself, his students, or his athletes. "I take a lot of ownership in how my students and players do," he noted (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). When things do not go well, or if there is opportunity for growth, Richard's "perfectionist attitude" drives him to adapt and improve. "I'm addicted to getting better," he said, seeing setbacks as motivation to refine his approach (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). This relentless pursuit of growth, coupled with genuine care for

his students, is at the core of what has motivated him to stay in his role as a teacher throughout his career.

Similarly, Peter tied his motivation directly to student success in the classroom and on the field. "It boils down to watching those kids have success," he said, explaining how investing in relationships and showing up for kids is key (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). When students flourish, Peter sees tangible proof that his dedication has a lasting impact, further cementing his decision to remain a teacher.

Across these reflections, a common thread emerges: teachers stay because they see their work resonating in students' lives, their communities, and within themselves. Whether it is a simple "thank you," a student's academic breakthrough, or the knowledge that they are shaping future generations, these educators discovered in these moments an enduring sense of purpose–one strong enough to carry them through the challenges of the profession.

Meaningful accomplishments

Teachers, like their students, often find motivation in their work when they have the opportunity to experience accomplishments and have them recognized by others. This sense of forward momentum in their professional capacity, whether pursuing advanced degrees, spearheading new programs, or simply knowing their voices matter, helps them stay energized and committed.

Julie highlighted how recognition from administration can spark a teacher's drive to lead. "Maybe a little bit of recognition… admin saying 'Hey, we see that you want to be a leader. Let's get you on some committees'" for Julie is validation of her doing her job well (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). The idea that others see teachers'

work as meaningful and of high quality corroborates their own perceptions of their professional capacity. Arthur shared this same sentiment when reflecting on an opportunity given to him to establish a school-wide initiative. "We do have a health and wellness program that I actually had a hand in helping off the ground," he explained (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). When others saw in him the capacity for creating meaningful change and gave him the authority and opportunity to make it a reality, it gave him a sense of ownership and achievement. Jean also spoke about the importance of being given the chance to take on larger projects. For Jean "It means something more when you are a part of something big, rather than just your day-to-day struggles" and she went on to explain that "working with people at all levels of the building to do something bigger for the school" provided a sense of purpose (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024).

Accomplishment, however, does not necessarily mean it is confined to the work of an individual. Heather discussed that in her role as an MTSS team member, she found appeal in working as part of a team with a collaborative focus. "My principal has been really good about… we're all going to do it together, and we're going to focus on the one thing," that needs to be accomplished (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). Seeing the positive impact that a group of empowered teachers had on students was particularly rewarding for Heather. While not the impetus for doing the work, the recognition and acknowledgement of this meaningful accomplishment created incentive for her and her team to continue their efforts. If this idea works for groups, it could also be applied to individual teacher motivation towards longevity and retention.

Professional development opportunities, particularly those that yield concrete benefits, also stand out as a major motivator and opportunity for individual accomplishment. Richard explained that many districts "offer to take care of some masters hours for you," which not only helps teachers financially but also validates their pursuit of higher-level expertise (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). Teresa similarly recalled, "I've gotten scholarships from our community foundation fund… I didn't have to pay for a masters degree… so I'm extremely grateful" (T. Price, personal communication, 2024). For both of these teachers, having resources and encouragement to reach these academic milestones provided incentive and an enduring sense of gratitude towards those who supported them.

Through leadership roles, professional development opportunities, and making tangible changes within their schools, these teachers experienced a renewed sense of purpose. By stepping into new challenges, receiving support for further education, and witnessing the positive outcomes of their initiatives, teachers find motivation that sustains them. Ultimately this motivation reinforces their decision to remain in a profession that provides them opportunities for accomplishment.

A balancing act

Teachers often cite personal wellness and balance as pivotal in sustaining if not their passion then at least their endurance for education. Their stories reveal a common thread: when educators feel healthy–both physically and mentally–they can better serve their students and remain enthusiastic about their work.

One example already addressed in previous sections came from Julie. When a friend transitioned to teaching from insurance, Angie had a colleague who could help her

put perspective on the challenges and rewards of teaching: "even on the worst day in education, we still get to make relationships with kids every day that matter" (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024). This realization helped Angie remember the deeper purpose of teaching. "We get to impact the people who are going to be the future of our country," was a thought that helped her balance the immense challenges with the even more significant rewards of teaching (J. Jones, personal communication, 2024).

A focus on physical health can also buoy teachers during stressful times. As Arthur has shared, his district's launch of a health and wellness program emphasized that when staff and schools come together to prioritize healthy habits, it strengthens the entire school community (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). Scott, who tries to exercise before school each morning and keeps a balanced diet, believes "your physical wellness and your diet…help mitigate" the mental strain that can accumulate in a demanding job like teaching (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). He also pointed out that teaching can be "a family friendly job" when teaching duties align with the schedules of their kids, making it easier to balance work and home life over time. Indeed, a commonality among the teachers interviewed who were also parents was the ability to merge work and family life.

Maintaining a supportive mindset is another cornerstone of wellness. Jean sees wellness and fulfillment as non-negotiables for her continued happiness in the profession. Rather than dwell on setbacks, she tried to find something positive in every situation, including helping colleagues, students, and parents in small ways that "make [her] happy" (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). Teresa similarly learned to let go of worries she could not control. After struggling with high anxiety, she came to accept that

"there are worse things than a kid not handing in their assignment on time" and that often "everything is going to be okay!" (T. Price, personal communication, 2024). She credits this new perspective, anti-anxiety medication, and lessons learned during COVID with helping her release an unproductive, perfectionist mindset. Her sentiments around teachers pursuing support for their emotional well-being mirrors a growing culture of recognizing, accepting, and destigmatizing mental health.

Finally, finding practical ways to streamline workloads contributed to a healthier work-life balance for these teachers. Heather recalled the pressure of "juggling 5000 things" simultaneously, prompting a district-wide shift toward more focused professional development and initiatives (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). Instead of attempting numerous initiatives at once, her principal advocated for choosing a single priority so "we're all going to do it together, and we're going to do it well" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). This narrower focus left teachers less scattered, more centered, and in turn bolstered their overall feeling of well-being.

Together, these teachers' reflections underscore how physical health, a positive mindset, and managing workload create a foundation for personal wellness. With these elements in place, these teachers found they have the resilience (a concept covered more in-depth later in this chapter) to handle inevitable stressors, the energy to invest in their students, and the fulfillment that inspires them to stay in the classroom for the long run.

A labor of love

These teachers, who exhibit a fervent passion for their craft, often described the classroom as more than just a place of work but a space of endless possibility, creativity, and human connection. For them, the daily challenges of educating adolescents became

part of what made their work exhilarating. Arthur exemplified this outlook, explaining that he never tires of teaching because "each class is different… it's crazy how much they have their own personality" (A. Davis, personal communication, 2024). Each semester or school year creates new challenges and opportunities, something he identifies as fueling his "calling" and passion.

The same spirit resonated with Jean, who stayed positive even in the face of setbacks. Recalling that "I try to find something positive" in the challenges of teaching, Jean viewed her work as a life-giving act of service to her students, parents, and colleagues (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). Meanwhile, Teresa has never truly seen teaching as 'work.' "People ask me if I have to go to work. I say, 'Yeah, I get to go to school tomorrow," she joked (T. Price, personal communication, 2024). Despite the hurdles, she relished figuring out how to support her students through each new challenge as she stated, "I just really must love torturing myself then, because this job is so hard. But at the same time, I'm like, okay, let's figure this out… let's fix this problem" (T. Price, personal communication, 2024).

Some teachers found their passion in their work from watching students strive for and embrace higher expectations. Heather described how she poured a lot of her heart and soul into her work, bringing consistent energy day after day. Her students felt it too: "They know that from day one… every day I do the same thing, like I put passion into everything I do" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024). Heather especially valued hearing about her impact after students move on. For her, the fruit of her labors was seeing students achieve their goals in spite of their individual circumstances. "When kids

come back and tell me they're so glad they took my class… I feel like I have a purpose" (H. Kelly, personal communication, 2024).

For others, it was the simple but powerful joy of daily interactions that fed their souls and provided the energy to keep innovating and growing as teachers. Peter admitted there were days when he questioned this energy, and if this labor of love was worth it, yet as soon as students stepped into his classroom "they could always pick me up" (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). The relationships he built were a source of vitality, and reflection of his efforts to hone his craft of teaching, reminding him "why I do it is because I enjoy being around these kids… listening to their stories" (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). The positive exchange of energy affirms that teaching is not just about imparting knowledge, but about forming connections that enrich both students and educators.

These teachers' passion for teaching arises from an unshakable belief in the significance of what they do. They love their craft and find meaning in every ounce of effort they pour into getting better at it. Their stories stand as powerful reminders that enthusiasm, rooted in a sense or purpose, is often the very thing that keeps teachers coming back day after day, ready to inspire and be inspired in return.

On Resilience

As discussed in Chapter 1 of this manuscript, the four-dimensional framework for defining teacher resilience described by Mansfield et al. (2012) served as the foundation of the theoretical framework for this study. As such, data related to these dimensions–professional, emotional, motivational, and social–have been presented indirectly throughout Chapter 4. While the data obtained from participant interviews

related to the four dimensions have been woven throughout the presentation of the study's results, here I explicitly present data on this concept.

These teachers exhibited resilience and showed they were able to adapt, persevere through challenges, and maintain a sense of purpose even when the demands of the job became overwhelming. Their stories revealed key strategies for staying the course: self-reflection, a willingness to evolve, and an ability to let go of what they cannot control. By developing these qualities, these teachers gained the perspective they needed to remain in the profession despite external pressures.

For Scott, resilience first emerged through learning not to take critiques personally. "If a principal or administrator asks you to correct something or if a parent's upset with you, you really have to assess what that's all about" he explained (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). Over time, he realized that maintaining a reflective stance, rather than seeing feedback as a personal attack, strengthened his teaching and eased the emotional toll. "I probably taught for 10 years before I felt comfortable," he said, underscoring that resilience often grows with experience and an openness to feedback (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024).

Teachers like Jean and Peter stayed grounded by cultivating an optimistic, flexible mindset. Jean believed in "finding something positive" in any situation, no matter how small (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). Peter, meanwhile, described how "being able to adapt… not getting too high strung," helped him navigate the constant changes and surprises of teaching (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). When directives shifted or policies were updated, Peter's approach was: "Hey, okay, this is the policy we're going to do… I think you have to be that way a little bit, otherwise you're

just going to be so full of anxiety" (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). His ability

to "go with the flow" reduced stress levels and allowed him to focus on what truly

mattered: student learning.

Teresa found resilience by recognizing she could not control everything. After

embracing the motto "The grass is greener where you water it," she realized that "I can

only control the things that go on in my classroom" (T. Price, personal communication,

2024). Teresa also made changes to address her anxiety, explaining that medication and a

shift in mindset helped her accept small imperfections. "There are worse things than a kid

not handing in their assignment on time," she said, reminding herself that "everything is

going to be okay" (T. Price, personal communication, 2024). This healthy detachment

from minute stresses reinvigorated her sense of purpose.

These resilient teachers were often driven by a strong desire to improve,

sometimes to the point of perfectionism. Richard talked about "that perfectionist attitude"

which can be both motivating and draining, yet he harnessed it as "a good thing… it

motivates you" (R. Jenkins, personal communication, 2024). Teresa described embracing

the difficulty of teaching: "I just have really enjoyed the challenge," she admitted,

laughing at how it felt like "torturing myself" at times (T. Price, personal communication,

2024). Despite the hardship, her excitement to figure things out and fix the problem

propelled her forward instead of pushing her away.

Resilience is not just an internal quality as these teachers often reinforce it

through relationships with others. Peter saw the early exit of many teachers as a symptom

of a lack of strong connections. "How you build relationships with people… not just

students, but colleagues, administrators," he noted, may have determined whether they

sank or swam (P. Nelson, personal communication, 2024). Teresa agreed and explained that once she "stopped caring a whole lot about what other people thought," she could devote her energy to authentic connections (T. Price, personal communication, 2024). Teachers who form close ties within their school community discover the support and camaraderie that enable them to adapt in challenging times.

Ultimately, resilience can grow into a sense of stability. As Scott noted, by the ten-year mark, he found a routine, a level of comfort in the job, and even said, "the salary's not that bad!" (S. Perez, personal communication, 2024). This stability, combined with the ability to adapt, a positive mindset, and strong support systems fueled the long tenured positions of these educators. Taken together, their reflections illustrated how resilience, taken as self-reflection, adaptability, and focus on what truly matters, helped them withstand setbacks and remain dedicated to their students and schools.

Chapter 4 presented the data obtained through participant interviews. As the analysis of the data was conducted, the preceding themes emerged and served as the organizational framework for presenting the results. While the reader is encouraged to draw their own conclusions and synthesize their findings from these results, Chapter 5 summarizes the major findings from the data, discusses the potential implications of this study, provides recommendations for current and future educational practitioners, and outlines potential next steps in contributing to ongoing research of teacher retention vs attrition.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The final chapter discusses the results of this research study and provides both recommendations and topics for consideration to practitioners in the educational field. While the extent to which these results and recommendations may impact each group varies, there exists the potential for principals, superintendents, school boards, community stakeholders, and teacher preparatory programs, to name a few, to gain insights which may help improve rates of retention in the teacher workforce. Furthermore, teachers themselves, whether individually or in larger bodies, such as departments, building staffs, and teacher associations may find the results and recommendations to be insightful, affirming, and encouraging.

The purpose of this narrative study was to discover and describe the factors that Nebraska secondary teachers identified as significant in their decision to persist in education. Study participants consisted of eight high school teachers from rural Class B schools in Southeast Nebraska. These participants were selected from a larger pool of potential candidates to provide a wide range of teaching, coaching, and leadership experiences over a career spanning at least ten years in the same position. Additionally, these teachers were identified by their evaluators as highly effective instructors with their performance consistent with the Nebraska Performance Standards for Teachers. During one-on-one interviews conducted via Zoom video conferencing, each teacher shared stories and thoughts on the experiences, interactions, and dispositions of themselves, their school, community, and colleagues over the course of their career which impacted their decision to continue teaching. These interviews lasted, on average, an hour in length. Participants responded to the interview prompts, but more importantly, were given the

opportunity to share their thoughts freely and engaged in an evolving dialogue on themes that emerged during their reflections. The interview transcripts served as the data source for the results presented in the previous chapter. The data was acquired to address the primary research question: *What elements of the lived experiences of highly effective, veteran, rural Nebraska secondary teachers positively impact their decision to remain in their teaching position?*

Discussion of Findings and the Literature

On Relationships

The results of this study confirm and are consistent with much of the literature previously conducted on teacher attrition and retention with regard to the domains discussed in Chapter 2 (Hasselquist & Graves, 2020). A notable difference in the results of this study compared to the literature is the extent to which relationships provide the foundation for or, at the very least, serve as a synergist to the factors central to each domain of the literature. While relationships between teachers and their colleagues is certainly a consistent theme in both the narratives of these participants and prior studies (Bauer et al., 2007; Frank et al., 2004; Praise & Spillane, 2010), these teachers' experiences suggest that relationships between teachers and all stakeholders are the cornerstone to a successful and long-tenured teacher. Each of these veteran teachers shared a high degree of social networking within their schools and larger educational community, and credited this trait with why they found teaching so enjoyable. This suggests, contrary to Dreeben's (2005) general claim that peer-to-peer social interactions among teachers are less common than in other professions, that perhaps these social interactions are simply more intentional, important, and prolific in the well-adjusted and

resilient educator than the general population of teachers, especially those who fall victim to attrition.

The importance of both personal and collaborative working relationships with their administrators was consistent both in this study as well as those reviewed (Bono et al., 2007; Hetland et al., 2007; Kauts, 2010). Limited previous work (Robbins et al., 2013) suggests that some behavioral attributes of administrators are more highly valued by teachers than others; however, these focused primarily on work-centric traits like empowerment, integrity, accountability, etc. The teachers in this study had a high regard for a more relational administrator who took time to tend to their personal as well as professional needs and demonstrated genuine care and interest in them as individuals.

On Growth and Empowerment

Teachers both in the present study and prior ones shared a high appreciation for the opportunity to grow and develop themselves as professionals throughout the course of their career. Professional ownership, autonomy, and a sense of empowerment to affect change within their organizations were themes the study participants identified with from previous research (Barth, 2001; Birkeland & Johnson, 2002; Ndoye et al., 2010; Sledge & Morehead, 2006). The same is true for the participants' views on professional development opportunities: timely and meaningful topics, as identified by the teachers themselves, and the opportunity to collaboratively work with and learn from their peers and counterparts in other schools are more valuable than arbitrary and universal one-size-fits all professional learning experiences (Bressman et al., 2018; Gaikhorst et al., 2015; Steffy & Wolfe, 2001).

On Communities and Stakeholders

The findings of this study also expand upon our understanding of the role communities play in teacher retention. Seelig & McCabe (2021) suggested the role a teacher holds within the community hierarchy brings with it a sense of importance and respect that is positively correlated with teacher loyalty to the community in return. The narratives gathered here suggest this is true and expands on the idea of mutual loyalty to include teachers' own desires to give back and contribute when they see the community is invested in their work (O'Brennan et al., 2017). One difference worth noting, however, is that these teachers consistently spoke of the blurring of lines between personal and professional lives as a desirable phenomenon. Studies by Biddle & Azano (2016) and Lazarev et al. (2017) suggested smaller communities, their resources, and lack of anonymity and boundaries contribute to a less desirable long-term environment for educators, something that was clearly untrue for these teachers.

On Work & Personal Life

These narratives did confirm much of the research on the importance of establishing a healthy balance, rather than complete separation for these teachers, between work and personal life (Mandal & Dhar, 2023; Murray et al, 2011). Consistent with the results of previous studies, these mid-career educators seem to have developed a strong and consistent ability to set firm parameters on how they use their time and what they commit to (Hasselquist & Graves, 2020).

On Resilience and Career Stage

All of the educators in this study were chosen because they fit within a specific stage of their professional lives: the mid-career teacher. In reviewing Fessler and

Christiansen's (1992) career cycle of educators and comparing the narratives of the participants, they all fall in the stage of "Career Stability" with varying degrees of "Enthusiastic and Growth" or "Career Wind-down" thrown in. Their experiences and the traits that they identified as to why they were able to persist when others were not are also consistent with the ideas of Mansfield et al. (2012) and Graves & Hasselquist (2021) in that they all have found a balance between their personal and professional needs. The results of this study expand on these ideas by providing insight into what constitutes meaningful balance and what has contributed to it for rural Nebraska secondary school teachers. While the generalized concepts provided by previous studies appear to hold true with regard to this idea of resilience and career cycles, the nuanced differences and characteristics of local educators can provide insights for the region's practitioners to help perpetuate and cultivate resilience qualities in their schools and teachers.

Considerations and Recommendations for…

School Districts

Each school district varies in its structure, resources, and demographics. As such, what works for one may not work for another; however, from the lessons learned from these teachers, there are some that may be generalized but most will be presented from the perspective of a district similar to those from which the participants came.

First, fostering and maintaining a school district culture that values collaboration across all roles and levels is an essential step in creating a community where educators can be involved, contribute, and build relationships and loyalties. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways from dispositions to actual policies and practices. For example, providing teachers the opportunity to have shared planning and collaboration

time or protected professional learning communities creates time, space, and permission to exchange ideas and build relationships. The desire to learn from other practitioners who understand their specific challenges and opportunities was consistently important to the study participants. Scheduling and geographic constraints may make this challenging at times; however, even small steps like shared department lunch shifts has made a noticeable positive impact on the teaching staff at my school because they have a consistent opportunity every day to touch base on school topics and, more importantly, build community.

When it comes to teacher learning opportunities, professional development structures in many districts could be easily changed to facilitate more meaningful exchanges and, in some cases, reduce administrative burden. Teachers consistently voiced the desire to have professional development sessions which were both relevant to their specific needs and presented by other teachers. Too often school district leaders feel they have to provide the professional development to all teachers or they fear if they give up control of the teaching they will give up control of the quality. In reality, those in the trenches are more credible, knowledgeable, and "in-the-know" than those at central command. I contend, based on what teachers are asking for, the role of the district should not be to conduct all professional development but to solicit the needs of the teachers and then seek out the most qualified people to present it. Be the coordinator, not the instructor. Utilize the expertise of the teachers in your district, neighboring districts, or professional developers from the local Educational Service Unit and free yourself up to learn along with your staff so you can provide ongoing support during implementation.

Professional opportunities and leadership pathways are also highly desired by teachers. When school leaders acknowledge the strengths of their teachers and provide avenues for them to lead their peers, they build capacity in them to share the load of instructional and school improvement. Repeatedly the study participants cited times when their district or principals gave them an opportunity, whether formally or informally, to take on leadership roles. In every case this fostered gratitude, respect, and commitment from the teacher and strengthened school culture. But be careful not to create the illusion of leadership: if you are going to provide teachers the chance to lead, get out of the way and let them lead. Listen to their suggestions, respect their opinions, and be clear about what parameters they have to work within. Failure to listen or disregarding their work is a huge potential pitfall, according to teachers.

Finally, and perhaps least importantly according to the teachers interviewed, be mindful of how financially competitive your district is when it comes to compensation and benefits. Though not commonly mentioned, teachers did allude to a secure, stable, and fair compensation package as a factor in their decision to stay in the profession long-term.

School Principals

Know them. *Really* know them. Every teacher spoke of how important it was to them that they feel their principal takes time to get to know them, not merely as an employee, but as an individual. Jean provided a powerful example of this when her principal took an interest in her, her family, and her health as she went through a difficult chronic illness. "My principal came to my room and he cried with me" (J. Bennett, personal communication, 2024). You do not truly learn about people through evaluations,

hallway duty, activity supervision, or answering emails. All of these teachers spoke of principals who came to their room to see how they were doing or followed up on important dates and life events. We have all heard "people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" and it is just as applicable and important to your role as the principal.

Similar to the district's responsibility to provide leadership pathways and cultivate a culture of collaboration, principals can more directly demonstrate the importance of trust and respect in this process. Teachers value having their opinion heard, not merely listened to. Ask for their opinion on decisions that you need to make, give them the chance to lead committee work, and give credit where credit is due when they provide helpful suggestions. These are all simple ways to improve your leadership efficacy and teacher morale simultaneously.

Finally, remembering that while your teachers spend a large portion of their day in your building, there is life outside of school as well. How you respond to and respect their personal lives, and all of the messiness that comes along with them, will truly communicate to your teachers how much or how little you respect and know them as individuals. Like the teachers who shared about crises that came up and principals who responded with empathy and understanding, be careful not to let the challenges and responsibilities of your role as the principal make you callused to the personal needs of your people. The emotional wake you leave behind when handling a delicate situation without compassion can be hard to overcome. Furthermore, ensuring that your teachers are able to balance both work and home is an important responsibility. While you cannot control what happens outside of the school building, you can create parameters and

boundaries to help them keep work problems at school. You do this by respecting evenings, weekends, and breaks whenever possible. Acknowledge that sometimes teachers have to play the role of parents and make provisions or processes for how they can do justice to both roles. Offer flexibility to balance responsibilities and promote compromise instead of compromising your teaching workforce.

Teachers want a principal that has high standards, holds others accountable, shows integrity, is transparent, and someone they can follow. Earning the respect necessary to be that person starts with fulfilling their need to have a relationship with their leader. Start small, be consistent, and remember that your role is to support your teachers so they can support your students.

Communities

Particularly in smaller communities, the school often serves as the heart and cultural center of the town. Your teachers are acutely aware of this role as well as the responsibility they have to the community's families. Just as schools are an important presence in the community, the community should be an equally integral presence in the school. Teachers who felt a strong sense of loyalty to their community experienced community members who showed up to activities, who gave of their time to help support the efforts of the school, and who demonstrated pride in their schools by how they spoke of them in public forums. But presence can be both positive and negative. While a full gym or stadium at a home sporting event shows tremendous community support for the hard work of our students, hostile and ungracious comments at the coffee shop or online can have the equal but opposite effect.

Offering resources and partnership to the school and its teachers is another way to show there is mutual investment between the school and its community. While schools and teachers exist to perform a community service, a community that partners with them demonstrates respect for the work being done. Whether it is financial support through donations, teacher discounts, or voting for school funding measures, or non-monetary support like volunteering your time, inviting students to tour your business, or serving as a mentor, community members can show schools and their teachers "we're in this together."

As school communities continue to diversify, celebrating the accomplishments of all and meeting the needs of each group are essential components of a healthy school-community partnership. Recognizing teacher and student accomplishments in local media, at community gatherings, or via social media platforms are small but impactful gestures. Public acknowledgement makes teachers and students feel appreciated and reminds them their impact extends beyond the school walls. This transference of success from school to the real world is, after all, the ultimate goal of education. Start promoting it now!

Politicians

Despite what may be the common public narrative surrounding school funding, this was a relatively small, though still important, element of the participants' stories. Perhaps more important than funding, politicians who advocate for teacher-friendly legislation can have an impact on teacher morale and perceptions of the profession. Initiatives which unnecessarily remove local control or overly burden schools with additional responsibilities outside of teaching academic skills have caused added stress

for these and other teachers. The perception of educators is these decisions are often well-intended but misguided through lack of understanding on how schools actually function. To help bridge this gap and demonstrate respect for the work they do, politicians, like administrators, should create avenues for teacher voices to be heard on matters of policy. Just as healthcare professionals are consulted on medical legislation, so too should teachers be at the table for discussing educational policy.

Teachers

Finally, while teachers may seem like an unlikely target audience for recommendations from this study, there is much wisdom and insight that these veterans can pass along to help their fellow educators stay in it for the long haul. Building and nurturing relationships within your school, both with teachers and students, must be a priority from the beginning. Appreciating that students and their success should be our "why" in education, taking the time to enjoy and foster strong teacher-student relationships can help keep educators grounded, energized, and empathetic to their core customers. Further, avoiding the pitfalls of staying isolated in their classrooms, these teachers emphasize the importance of balancing the day-to-day tasks of teaching with the opportunities for friendships and networking that schools provide. Neglecting relationships with your colleagues, the biggest source of support and encouragement, can be, as the participants pointed out, the biggest mistake and contribution to attrition that a teacher can make. Small steps include eating lunch together, going to activities as a group, and participating in social gatherings and community-building events in school. These are all manageable, meaningful, and fun ways to cultivate relationships with fellow teachers.

As far as resiliency goes, the primary recommendations of this study apply to teachers more than any other group. These veteran educators emphasized the importance of remaining flexible, reflective, and adaptable as you experience inevitable challenges and changes. Remaining open to feedback, learning from setbacks, and acknowledging that you cannot control everything are essential and healthy skills to develop for personal satisfaction and mental well-being. Pairing this positive mindset with realistic and healthy boundaries between work and personal life are not only essential best practices, but consistent with a large volume of research on avoiding burnout and attrition (Castro et al., 2010; Johnson & Down, 2013: Johnson et al., 2014; Mansfield et al., 2012; Mandal & Dhar, 2023).

Just as educators desire to establish an appreciation of lifelong learning in their students, teachers should be open to practicing what they preach. The teachers who persevered in their positions for a decade or more all shared a common trait: they avoided intellectual and professional status quos and kept growing. They sought out opportunities to help improve the school through leadership roles and committee membership. Many of them also pursued advanced degrees to make them more effective educators. Expanding skills and stepping into new roles can rekindle passion and stave off stagnation as well as increase teachers' understanding of education and school processes on a larger scale.

Recommendations for Future Study

This narrative study provided meaningful and relevant insights into why teachers in this specific demographic and geographical area have chosen to stay in their position while so many educators have left their school or the field altogether. The scope of this study was limited to eight teachers from rural, Class B high schools in Southeast

Nebraska; subsequently, the insights gathered may be generalizable to other schools but should be done with caution. This limitation, in and of itself, provides an opportunity for future studies as this research could be broadened to incorporate different educator roles in districts with varying demographic and geographic characteristics. For example, this same study could be conducted in the same geographical region of the state but instead target elementary or middle school teachers or teachers in larger urban or smaller rural schools than those sampled here. Teachers who work in smaller rural districts have fewer potential colleagues to interact, network, and build relationships with and they are often outside of their area of emphasis; conversely, larger urban school districts have many more teachers in the same specific role or teaching assignment thereby providing a much larger but potentially more homogenous pool of teachers for supportive relationships. Additionally, the resources and opportunities available to teachers in both sizes of districts for advancement, leadership opportunities, professional development, etc. likely vary from those studied in this investigation. Another opportunity exists in teachers with more or less years of teaching experience, possibly opening up an opportunity to learn if and how factors important to a teacher's decision to remain in their position change throughout the course of their career.

Another limitation of this study, though quite intentional, is that it sought narratives on factors contributing to voluntary retention. That is to say, none of the study participants in this research were within Fessler & Christensen's (1992) career stage of "Career Frustration." This phase, if left unremedied, leads to attrition. As a result, the perspectives of teachers who have either left the profession or plan to were not gathered. This makes it difficult to tell if the factors which correlate with the retention of the study

participants are unique only to them, if they are wholly absent from teachers lost to attrition, or if they just exist to a lesser extent. Additional study on the perspectives of recently resigned teachers with regard to these factors may yield additional insights into how educational stakeholders can reduce attrition and promote retention.

Finally, expanding the sample size of participants in this research could help clarify the extent to which these factors are true for all veteran teachers or if there are as of yet unidentified factors which also contribute to retention. While the current narrative methodology with a large sample size is potentially overly time consuming and impractical, a more quantitative approach based on participant responses of a larger sample size to the themes identified in this study may lend additional credence to their importance in retention and/or potentially augment or identify gaps in our understanding of the phenomenon.

Investigator's Final Reflection

The topic of teacher retention and how to prevent further exacerbation of the nationwide teacher shortage has become an increasingly relevant and concerning topic for me and my fellow principals. Having worked in a district which has long enjoyed a plentiful candidate pool for any teaching position and now seeing that pool drying up in recent years, it seems that no district is immune to this educator epidemic. As an active member of the state principal organization, I have had the opportunity to speak with legislators at the state and national levels to advocate for policies which would help correct the current conundrum; however, while we do have advocates and friends of education at every level, often these governing bodies move too slowly or have too many

other priorities to affect real change. This is why the current research has become so important and interesting to me.

I have had the opportunity to work with so many talented teachers over the course of my career. Seeing so many of them leave the profession has been disheartening. Furthermore, the premature loss of such experience and wisdom which has traditionally been passed down from one generation of teachers to the next is just twisting the dagger in the teacher shortage wound. To this end, preserving the talented, highly qualified veteran teachers we have has never been more important to me than it is now.

As I conducted this study, I had the opportunity to talk with educators who have seen and experienced the same kinds of challenges that my teachers and school have faced. A fresh perspective and one that is free of any bias or relational constraints opened up a new avenue of understanding how to solve this problem. The level of honesty that was shared from these teachers–because they too feel the effects of the teacher shortage and are just as eager for a solution–provided a sense of shared interest and unified intent to explore solutions. Additionally, the trust that they placed in me to accurately capture and share their stories in the hopes of affecting change was truly humbling.

It has been gratifying to learn that many of the steps that schools can take to support their teachers, to encourage collaboration, to foster growth, and promote retention are actions we are already working on. While one might be tempted to say "you're already doing them but there's still a problem," I would contend that we are playing the long-game. Retention of teachers will not fix the shortage of teachers going into the profession; however, if we can promote environments that encourage existing teachers to stay, we may be able to return to a narrative of respecting teaching as a career profession.

If we can help our teachers continuously learn, improve, and empower them to become the most effective teachers they can be, then we might also reverse the trend of excessive public scrutiny, lack of respect, mistrust, and skepticism of public education and make it an attractive profession for future generations.

While the ultimate goal of this study is to provide insights to help educational stakeholders improve the working environment for our teachers, if nothing else, this research has made me into a better leader. Exploring the phenomenon of teacher retention and attrition through analysis of the literature and participant interviews has given me new insights into how I can create a better place at Norris for my teachers. I am extremely grateful for the educators who have helped me in this learning process by sharing their stories with me, and I hope this study has helped to share their stories for the benefit of their students, their schools, and their fellow educators.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. Identification of subject and permission to conduct and record the interview.

2. Demographic questions:

   a. Please state and spell your first and last name.

   b. What are the demographics/traits of your current school district? (size, class, consolidation status, rural/urban/suburban, etc.)

   c. Discuss your present and previous positions/roles you have held in education including the number of years in each position.

3. Tell me about your experiences, influences, and your own character traits that led you to become a teacher.

4. Share with me about experiences that have led you to stay in the profession/this position for as long as you have.

   a. What external factors have influenced your decision to stay?

      i. As needed, use prompts to reference literature framework areas:

         1. Professional Relationships

         2. Administrative Factors

         3. Professional Development, Support, and Empowerment

         4. Community Factors

         5. Individual Wellness and Fulfillment

5. Why do you think you have been successful and persistent when others have not?

6. There may be other factors that influence why teachers stay in the profession for as long or longer than you have. What examples from your experience can you share that might illustrate these?

Appendix B: Notification of Informed Consent

UNIVERSITY 1 OF

Nebraska
Omaha

IRB PROTOCOL # 0189-24-EX   Page 1 of 1

Title of this research study: SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO NOW? WHY NEBRASKA'S RURAL VETERAN TEACHERS CHOSE TO REMAIN IN THEIR POSITION.

Dear Participant,

My name is Nate Seggerman and I am currently working on my doctoral degree through the University of Nebraska Omaha with the goal of earning my Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership degree. As part of this degree, I am completing my dissertation work (EDU 9990). This course allows me to conduct interviews as part of my research to explore the factors that veteran Nebraska teachers identify as important to their decision to remain in their teaching position for at least the last ten years. As a former teacher and current high school principal, the topic of teacher retention is of special interest to me in light of the current nationwide teacher shortage. Specifically, I am interested in the stories and experiences which you associate with your reasons for remaining in your role as a classroom teacher at your school.

This study aims to capture your experiences and the experiences of other participants who have been secondary teachers in rural Class B schools in Nebraska serving in their present position for ten years or more. I will capture these experiences through an interactive interview individually with study participants via Zoom conferencing. Due to the nature of narrative qualitative research, I will at times take on the role of both interviewer and participant along with you. The goal of the interview and research study overall is to help inform other school administrators on what factors contribute to secondary school teacher retention and subsequently aid in reducing teacher attrition.

You will have the opportunity to review your data (interview transcript) prior to its use in my dissertation. Your identity and privacy will be protected at all times. A pseudonym will be associated with your data during the writing process for my dissertation and any subsequent publications, if applicable. At no time will your name be disclosed to any parties other than myself as the principal investigator. Participation in this investigation presents no risk to you as a participant.

Thank you for your support and consideration to be a part of this study. I hope that this research will help me to grow as a principal, provide a better working environment for my teachers, and help other administrators achieve the same. If you have any questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to email me at nate.seggerman@nsdtitans.org. Questions or concerns about the research you may contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs (irbora@unmc.edu).

Appendix C: Principal Survey for Study Participant Identification

IRB PROTOCOL # 0189-24-EX   Page 1 of 1

Title of this research study: SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO NOW? WHY NEBRASKA'S RURAL VETERAN TEACHERS CHOSE TO REMAIN IN THEIR POSITION.

Greetings, [Principal Name].

My name is Nate Seggerman and I am currently working on my doctoral degree through the University of Nebraska Omaha with the goal of earning my Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership degree. As part of this degree, I am completing my dissertation work (EDU 9990). This course allows me to conduct interviews as part of my research to explore the factors that veteran Nebraska teachers identify as important to their decision to remain in their teaching position for at least the last ten years. Specifically, I am focusing my dissertation on the experiences of secondary teachers in rural, Class B schools in Southeast Nebraska.

My ask is if you would be willing to recommend teachers from your staff for participation in my study who meet the following criteria:

- Have taught in your building for at least 10 years.
- Who are successful teachers, as determined by your local evaluation process.
- Who demonstrate consistency in their practice with the Nebraska Performance Standards for Teachers.
- And are generally open to sharing their experiences or are good "storytellers."

Attached to this email is a copy of the letter that I would send to any teacher(s) you recommend asking them to participate in my study. The study itself will consist of a semi-structured interview conducted via Zoom.

I hope that this research will help me to grow as a principal, provide a better working environment for my teachers, and help other administrators achieve the same in an effort to reduce teacher attrition and promote retention.

If you are willing to help me in my research, please reply to this email with the name(s) of any teacher(s) you feel would be a good candidate for my study.

Thank you for your consideration, I greatly appreciate your help!

Sincerely,
Nate Seggerman
Norris High School Principal
Doctoral Student - University of Nebraska at Omaha

Questions or concerns about the research you may contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs (irbora@unmc.edu).

Appendix D: Recruitment Letter to Potential Participants

UNIVERSITY OF Nebraska Omaha

IRB PROTOCOL # 0189-24-EX   Page 1 of 1

Title of this research study: SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO NOW? WHY NEBRASKA'S RURAL VETERAN TEACHERS CHOSE TO REMAIN IN THEIR POSITION.

Dear potential participant,

My name is Nate Seggerman and I am currently working on my doctoral degree through the University of Nebraska Omaha with the goal of earning my Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership degree. As part of this degree, I am completing my dissertation work (EDU 9990). This course allows me to conduct interviews as part of my research to explore the factors that veteran Nebraska teachers identify as important to their decision to remain in their teaching position for at least the last ten years.

Your building principal has identified you as a potential candidate who meets the criteria for participation in my study. I would love the opportunity to visit with you about your experiences as a teacher, what made you passionate about the profession you are in, and hear your stories about what has helped you to stay in your position for as long as you have. As a veteran educator, your voice has value to our profession, and I would be honored to have the chance to interview you.

This study aims to capture your experiences and the experiences of other participants who have been secondary teachers in rural Class B schools in Nebraska serving in their present position/building for _ten years or more_. I will capture these experiences through an interactive interview individually with study participants via Zoom conferencing.

I hope that this research will help me to grow as a principal, provide a better working environment for my teachers, and help other administrators achieve the same in an effort to reduce teacher attrition and promote retention. If you would be open to learning more or participating in my study, please email me at nate.seggerman@nsdtitans.org.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Nate Seggerman
High School Principal - Norris School District 160
Doctoral Student - University of Nebraska - Omaha

Questions or concerns about the research you may contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs (irbora@unmc.edu).

Appendix E: Institutional Review Board Approval

University of Nebraska
Medical Center™

NEBRASKA'S HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER

Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

April 17, 2024

Nate Seggerman, M.S.
Education
UNO - VIA COURIER

IRB # 0189-24-EX

TITLE OF PROPOSAL: "Should I stay or should I go now? Why Nebraskas Rural Veteran Teachers Chose to Remain in their Position."

Exempt under 45 CFR 46:104(d), category 2

The Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA) has reviewed your application for *Exempt Educational, Behavioral, and Social Science Research* on the above-titled research project and has given approval. You are therefore authorized to begin the research.

It is understood this project will be conducted in full accordance with all applicable HRPP Policies. It is also understood that the ORA will be immediately notified of any proposed changes for your research project that
A. affect the risk-benefit relationship of the research
B. pose new risks which are greater than minimal
C. constitute a new risk to privacy or confidentiality
D. involve sensitive topics (including but not limited to personal aspects of the subject s behavior, life experiences or attitudes)
E. involve deception
F. target a vulnerable population
G. include prisoners or children
H. otherwise suggest loss of the exempt status of the research.

You are encouraged to contact the ORA to discuss whether changes to exempt research requires review by ORA.

Please be advised you will be asked to update the status of your research yearly by responding to an email from the Office of Regulatory Affairs. If you do not respond, your project will be considered completed.

Sincerely,

Signed on: 2024-04-17 15:36:22.170

Gail Kotulak, BS, CIP
IRB Analyst III