

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

JOY, PASSION AND TENACITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF WHY
QUALITY TEACHERS CONTINUE TO TEACH IN HIGH-CHALLENGE
URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

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Norman, Oklahoma

2007

UMI Number: 3263427



UMI Microform 3263427

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A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ACADEMIC
CURRICULUM

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The road to this accomplishment has been incredibly interesting and enlightening for me. I began this endeavor because I love school and I believe in the heroes that go into classrooms every day. I end it remembering and admiring all of the teachers I have had along the way.

To all of my former teachers, thank you for not only making me stretch my mind but for allowing me to ask questions.

To Dr. Courtney Vaughn, for believing in my idea and guiding me to take the risk of sharing it in class, thank you.

To Dr. Liz Willner, for whom I completed the most interesting learning experience of my graduate journey – caning a chair, thank you. I will always have a career alternative.

To Dr. John Chiodo, for the first unsatisfactory grade I have ever received on an assignment, thank you – I certainly woke up.

To Dr. Gregg Garn, thank you for guiding me in understanding phenomenology and for an outstanding dissertation title.

To Dr. Frank McQuarrie, thank you for your patience while I wandered out loud past where you wanted me to go. I appreciate your guidance in not only my graduate work but my leadership development as a school principal.

I must thank my children and my parents. My children for inspiring me to be a better person every day, thank you. My parents, thank you for instilling in me from a very early age that education is the most important thing any human can do for herself. Thank you for asking me all the time if I was finished and if you needed to

get dressed up for graduation. And, thank you most of all for never, ever giving up on me.

In conclusion, thank you to the teachers on my staff who have endured all of my “experiments”; who have asked me if I’m leaving when I get my degree and if they can come with me. My teachers, who especially remind me every day what true heroes really look and act like.

I would be remiss if I did not also thank my kids at school. For 1,000 hugs per day, for smiles and laughter, for the wonder and amazement of childhood and learning, thank you.

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, research into the importance of teacher quality has shown that the quality of the teacher in the classroom plays a very important role in student achievement. (Bembry, Jordan, Gomez, Anderson & Mendro, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2002). In fact, further research has shown that students attending high-challenge schools, who have a quality teacher three consecutive years will achieve as well as their peers in schools not defined as high-challenge (Babu & Mendro, 2003; Haycock, 1998, 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2002). Typically high-challenge schools have a student population comprised of a majority of minority students who are highly mobile, have high percentages of students on free/reduced lunch and are overcrowded.

In light of the research showing that students in these schools would benefit most from a quality teacher, it is discouraging that students in high-challenge schools typically do not have access to these teachers (The Education Trust, 2004). Fortunately, there are some exceptions, quality teachers who choose to teach in high-challenge schools. This phenomenological study endeavored to determine why quality teachers choose to teach in elementary schools with a high percentage of minority and low socioeconomic students.

Twelve elementary school teachers identified by their principals as quality teachers were interviewed to determine why they choose to continue teaching in a high-challenge urban elementary school. All of the teachers worked in an urban school district located in the capital city of a southwestern state. Seven elementary

schools from this district were identified as high-challenge based upon their size, majority-minority populations, and the free/reduced lunch percentage rate.

This study revealed that the teachers chose to stay for the following reasons: relationships with students, rewards, instructional focus, collegiality, feeling needed and a desire to help others, challenges and parents. These findings are important to school administrators at both the district and building level as they could assist in developing policies and procedures that will enhance the retention of the quality teachers that students in high-challenge urban elementary schools need and deserve.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Background of Study

The vital factor in a school is the teacher. He is cause; all else is only condition and result. (White, 1894)

As I reflect on White's statement I recall teachers I have worked with both as a teacher and a principal. These teachers made all the difference in their students' academic achievement. If not for these teachers, I have wondered if the students in their classes would have been as successful as they were. I have thought of the teacher who team taught with me for a semester, the way that she touched the lives of our students, making them believe that they could conquer every obstacle. I think of the new teachers I have hired and the struggles they faced working in our high-challenge urban elementary school. I remembered the tears they shed and the discussions we had in my office over the one student they could not seem to reach and their delight when that student passed the state test. I have fretted and worried when 25% of our staff turns over every year and I have had to hire new teachers.

As the principal of a high-challenge urban elementary school that is part of a school district in the capital city of a southwestern state, faced with the mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 along with the expectations of the business community, I knew White was exactly right when he said that the teacher is the cause, "the vital factor", in education. However, simply knowing that teachers are the cause of academic achievement for their students because of my experiences as

both a teacher and a principal wasn't enough. I had to wonder what research says about the effect a quality teacher has on student academic achievement.

Over the last decade, research into the importance of teacher quality has shown that the quality of the teacher in the classroom plays a very important role in student achievement (Bembry, Jordan, Gomez, Anderson & Mendro, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2002). Lewis and Paik (2001) in their report discussing the use of research to improve education for minority and low-income students stated:

Nothing effects the achievement of low-income and/or minority children as much as the quality of the teaching they receive. No curriculum package, test, governance rearrangement, regulation, or special program can equal the impact of a good teacher, one with the knowledge, skills, and commitment to foster student success. (p. 20)

Further research on the impact of teacher quality on student achievement has shown that students attending high-challenge schools, where higher percentages of Hispanic-American, African-American, and/or economically disadvantaged students can be found, who have a quality teacher three consecutive years will achieve as well as their peers in schools not defined as high-challenge (Babu & Mendro, 2003; Haycock, 1998, 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2002). In fact, Babu and Mendro (2003) found that low achieving students could become high achievers given the benefit of a quality teacher. In their study of the longitudinal effects of teacher effectiveness, Babu and Mendro (2003) found that "t-tests clearly indicate that there are significant differences between the effective and ineffective groups" (p. 7).

The implications of the research on the impact a quality teacher has on student achievement for administrators in high-challenge schools are both exciting and troublesome. If administrators could retain a staff of quality teachers, all of the students in the school could benefit and academic achievement could be affected greatly. Meeting the expectations of the business community and the mandates of NCLB then seem to become easier. On the other hand, retaining quality teachers for high-challenge schools can be very difficult. Quality teachers don't always choose to work in high-challenge schools. In fact, it is very difficult to attract quality teachers to high-challenge schools at all.

Need for Study

In spite of the research showing the correlation between quality teachers and student achievement, students in high-challenge schools who most need this benefit typically do not have access to a quality teacher. In a review of research concerning teacher quality, Haycock (2004) reported,

No matter which study you examine, no matter which measure of teacher qualities you use, the pattern is always the same – poor students, low-performing students, and students of color are far more likely than other students to have teachers who are inexperienced, poorly educated, and under-performing. (p. 8)

While there was research that discussed the reasons teachers do not stay in high-challenge urban schools (Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 2001; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003), research related specifically to why quality teachers remain in high-challenge urban elementary schools was not found. Because of this lack of literature, one could

assume that quality teachers stayed in high-challenge urban elementary schools for the opposite reasons teachers had given for leaving, or that they stayed for the same reasons all teachers, regardless of the school they taught in, stayed in the profession. However, because quality teachers are vital to student achievement in high-challenge urban elementary schools, uncovering the reasons why teachers choose to stay could provide school leaders and policy makers with information that may assist them in retaining quality teachers.

As the principal of a high-challenge urban elementary school, I knew that there were quality teachers who have chosen to teach in these schools. I have worked with a number of quality teachers in these types of schools throughout the school district. Research revealing the reasons quality teachers chose to teach in high-challenge urban elementary schools could help school administrators design and implement policies and procedures and put structures into place that could lead to the retention of quality teachers for high-challenge urban elementary schools.

My role as the principal of a high-challenge urban elementary school led to my curiosity concerning why some of my quality teachers chose to stay while others left. I also wondered about how, in light of the increased pressure from the mandates of NCLB and the expectations of the business community, I could keep my quality teachers from leaving our school.

As a student in a doctoral program, the opportunity to conduct research and a pilot study during a qualitative research class on why quality teachers choose to teach in high-challenge urban elementary schools presented itself. Conducting the research and pilot study led me to believe even more strongly that having an understanding of

why quality teachers choose to stay in high-challenge urban elementary schools could help school administrators design and put into place policies, structures and procedures that may lead to the retention of quality teachers in high-challenge urban elementary schools.

Introduction of Research Question

Research into the effects of quality teachers on student achievement revealed that the quality of the teacher had perhaps the greatest impact on student achievement (Babu & Mendro, 2003; Bembry, Jordan, Gomez, Anderson & Mendro, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Haycock, 1998, 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2002). Further research showed that quality teachers typically do not choose to stay in high-challenge schools (Haycock, 2004). In light of this research, the mandates of NCLB, and the current expectations coming from the business community that all students be academically ready to compete in a 21st Century technologically-centered global economy, the retention of quality teachers for our neediest students, those students in high-challenge urban elementary schools, became imperative. In order for school administrators to successfully retain quality teachers, knowing why some choose to stay in a high-challenge urban elementary school was critical. The dialogue begins when we ask quality teachers why they stay. Specifically, “Why, from their own perception, do quality teachers continue to teach in urban elementary schools with a high percentage of minority and low socioeconomic students?”

Definition of Terms

Quality Teacher

For the purposes of this study, the definition of a quality teacher was developed based on literature from Haycock (1998, 2000), Hanushek (2000), and Protheroe (1998). A quality teacher was a teacher who had high expectations for his/her students, engaged students in higher order thinking, had credentials in the subjects he/she teaches, had at least three years of classroom experience, had chosen to teach in a high-challenge urban elementary school for at least three years and had students who consistently showed 1+ years of growth on tests of academic achievement.

High-challenge Urban Elementary School

For the purposes of this study, a high-challenge urban elementary school was defined as a school with a student population comprised of a majority of minority students (50% or more) with a free/reduced lunch percentage at or above 95%. Usually, these schools are also overcrowded having a student population of 500 or more. Students attending these schools lived in areas where they experience poverty, crime, high family mobility, violence, substance abuse, alcoholism and familial stress (Standard and Poors, 2005).

No Child Left Behind

The No Child Left Behind Act is the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965, usually referred to as Title One. The mandates of this new reauthorization have very strong accountability requirements, including a component that all teachers in a district be highly-qualified according to state

standards by May 2006. Schools are also required to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on state developed tests toward the numerical goal of 1500 by the year 2014.

Urban School District

For the purposes of this study, an urban school district was defined as a district located in a city with a population of 250,000 or more and has a student population of 35,000 or more. This definition is based upon the criteria for membership in the Council of the Great City Schools.

Summary

With the current demands on public education and public educators working under the mandates of NCLB to increase academic achievement for all students, administrators of high-challenge urban elementary schools must retain quality teachers for their students. Research revealed that students in high-challenge schools who have the benefit of a quality teacher for three consecutive years could overcome the deficits that in many cases prevent them from being academically successful. Research also revealed that many quality teachers do not choose to teach nor do they stay in high-challenge schools. Determining why quality teachers choose to teach in high-challenge urban elementary schools could help administrators put structures, policies and procedures in place that may lead to the retention of the quality teachers their students need and deserve.

The next chapter provides a review of literature regarding the history of urban schools. Additionally, literature related to the varying definitions of teacher quality, the effects of teacher quality on student achievement and teacher retention is discussed.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Introduction

This chapter focuses on research regarding the history of urban schools, varying definitions of teacher quality, the effects of quality teachers on academic achievement, and teacher retention. The section on the history of urban schools discusses the development of public schools, educational reform and the impact on schools of societal changes.

Teacher quality encompasses a variety of definitions from many researchers and remains a topic for debate politically, in the general public and within the profession. The section dealing with teacher quality examines some of these differing definitions. A number of studies have been conducted regarding the effects of quality teachers on academic achievement; this section focuses on research in this area.

Finally, the section on teacher retention examines the varying reasons teachers give for staying at or leaving schools, as well as a number of studies that discuss the causes effecting teacher decisions. Each of these topics provide background information relating to and supporting the research question, “Why, from their own perception, do quality teachers continue to teach in urban elementary schools with a high percentage of minority and low socioeconomic students?”

Urban Schools

Because urban schools were among the first public schools that developed in the United States, the history of urban schools is tied to the history of public schools. In fact, the urban schools that we think of today did not develop until the period

following World War II. Therefore, a review of the history of public schools in the United States along with a history of urban schools was warranted.

As the nation began to grow and change, churches, local communities, families, or philanthropic groups began to create schools (Pulliam, 1987). The primary purpose of most schools was to ensure that children learned to read, to reason, and to be indoctrinated in Christian values and morals. Schools were not viewed as a means to a better way of life, or to move one's self out of poverty. People believed that the result of hard work was tangible rewards. Because of the abundant resources available in America, poverty was viewed as a "consequence of an inability or unwillingness to work" (Rury, 2005a, p. 41).

As cities began to grow and more and more workers, especially immigrants, arrived in the United States there was a greater demand for schools that would meet the needs of a growing urban population. Workers could not afford to send their children to private schools nor could they afford tutors. Additionally, philanthropists recognized that as the population increased, so did crime. New York philanthropists believed that by educating children in the values and norms common to themselves, they could improve society. Their aim in educating children was in "improving the lot of the poor and addressing the growing problems of poverty, crime and disorder" (Rury, 2005a, p. 68). They also believed that hard work and commitment to a goal would lead people out of poverty. It is interesting that in the history of public education in America some of the earliest publicly supported schools were in urban areas and were opened specifically for the poor - the immigrant poor and the children of freed slaves.

These schools operated under the Lancasterian philosophy and were known as Monitorial Schools, so named after the method of instruction. This method, adopted from schools in England, consisted of one teacher, perhaps an assistant teacher and a number of monitors. The role of the teacher was to work with groups of students while the other students were engaged in rote memorization, recitation and dictation. Monitors supervised the students. Monitors' roles were to maintain strict order and discipline. Many monitors hoped to work their way up to the role of teacher (Pulliam, 1978; Tyack, 1974). Monitorial schools were designed to teach hundreds of children at a time "acceptable norms of behavior along with basic lessons in literacy, mathematics, geography, and other subjects" (Rury, 2005a, p. 67).

Reading, reasoning and socialization remained the primary purpose of schooling until the period following the War of 1812. The coming of the Industrial Revolution, westward expansion, the rise in nationalism, an increase in immigration, and population growth all contributed to changes in society and in schools (Pulliam, 1978).

Interestingly, during this period of time, educational reformers such as Horace Mann began to see a need for varying forms of instruction, expansion and development of a standard curriculum, uniform training of teachers and schools that would serve all children. These reformers were concerned that without a uniform, standardized system, "American schools would prove inadequate to the task of educating the nation's children for the demand of the industrial and urban age then dawning" (Rury, 2005a, p. 71).

With the efforts of Horace Mann in Massachusetts and other educational reformers in the northeastern United States, statewide systems of common schools where the students learned a “common body of knowledge that would give each student an equal chance in life” (Bernard & Mondale, 2001, p. 29), were developed and implemented. These were some of the first public schools that were supported by taxation as opposed to donations or fees. Common schools were accessible for everyone so that democracy and societal values could be taught and learned by more and more children.

Following the Civil War, the United States began to expand west and the cities began to swell again. With further westward expansion, many northerners took the idea of a common school with them. They modeled their schools after the ones they had known. Congress also set aside land for schools in the west and required that states guarantee in their constitutions a free nonsectarian education available for all children (Bernard & Mondale, 2001).

Meanwhile, educational leaders continued in their efforts to standardize schools. William T. Harris, the Superintendent of St. Louis schools, who later became the United States Commissioner of Education, “was probably the outstanding intellectual leader in American education in the years between the death of Horace Mann and the emergence of John Dewey” (Tyack, 1974, p. 43). Harris was instrumental in the implementation of standardization in schools as well as the first kindergartens. As an answer to the growing industrialization of the United States, Harris and others believed that children had to learn order, punctuality and precision in all things. “In the view of most urban schoolmen of the late nineteenth century,

schools should inculcate obedience to bureaucratic norms overtly and with zest” (Tyack, 1974, p. 49). These reformers were very successful in changing public schools in the United States from a haphazard hodge-podge of curriculum, books, buildings, teaching methods, and educational ideas into a well-oiled machine characteristic of the industrial age in which they lived.

However, at the turn of the 19th century, a new reform movement emerged in society and in education. This movement, known as progressivism, evolved as a result of the reform efforts of political and media figures who desired to bring to light the effects of industrialization on the United States and society. The implications of the progressive era for education were radical and long lasting.

John Dewey was one of the first school reformers who opposed the “rigid-lock step school” (Pulliam, 1987, p. 116). He advocated a more child-centered curriculum, schools where community was built within the walls of the school, and the ideals of democracy would be lived and experienced by the children. Dewey believed that schools should model the values of tolerance and fair play, that social issues should be discussed critically and that the rights of others should be respected. These were the highest ideals of democracy and it was the school’s responsibility to engage children in learning these values and ideals if democracy was to be sustained (Rury, 2005a).

Educational progressivism took many forms, from Dewey’s laboratory school at the University of Chicago to the administrative progressives who saw an opportunity to expand new versions of bureaucracy and greater efficiency in the schools. In the end, it was the systems and structures of administrative progressivism

that have had perhaps the greatest influence on schools as we know them today. Testing for placement, vocational education, varying levels of bureaucracy, and a standardized curriculum tested at the end of a school year are a few of the remnants of administrative progressivism (Tyack, 1974).

Following World War II, the ideas of the progressives continued to be implemented in schools, offering students a variety of opportunities both educationally and vocationally. However, as the political climate began to change and more people became concerned with the spread of communism and the development of the atomic bomb, especially in the Soviet Union, support for progressive education began to wane. More and more, educational reformers were advocating a return to core academics and the elimination of experiential learning. The launching of Sputnik in 1957 was the impetus for radical change.

Americans were shocked that the Soviets had beaten us into space. Congress reacted by passing the National Education Defense Act of 1958. This bill was designed to provide federal funding for enhancing science and math programs. Around this time, the public became more vocal about their disenchantment with the public schools. Arguing that there were not enough substantive academic offerings, “the critics said that the experts’ desire to make the schools more like ‘real life’ had lowered standards, diminished students’ effort, and reduced achievement” (Bernard and Mondale, 2001, p. 69). The defenders of progressive education countered these claims by saying that public schools were “doing as well as ever and meeting the needs of a larger and more diverse student population” (Bernard & Mondale, 2001, p.

69). In the end however, schools were changed again and a more rigorous curriculum returned.

Just as public schools began to go through this new round of change, high-challenge urban schools developed as more and more white middle class families moved from the cities to the suburbs. Following World War II, loans from the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and Veteran's Administration (VA) were easy to obtain. Local and federal governments were investing in the development of roads and highways. Gas was cheap and commuting to a downtown job became easier. In addition, many large companies began to build new factories and warehouses in suburban areas. Unfortunately for most blacks and other minorities, who had long ago migrated north looking for work, the inner cities became vast wastelands as stores and jobs moved to the suburbs as well. The first high-challenge urban schools developed during this time.

These high-challenge urban schools were characterized by majority-minority populations of students who were also dealing with the problems of poverty. The development of these schools was the result of white middle class urbanites moving to the suburbs during this time of American prosperity (Hilfiker, 2002).

As school segregation continued and the number of high-challenge urban schools began to increase, more people began to see schools as separate and unequal. Prior to the passage of Brown v. the Board of Education in 1954, schools were legally segregated under the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling by the Supreme Court. Brown v. Board forced the integration of schools throughout the country. Urban school boards were resistant to school integration claiming that resources were fairly distributed and

there was nothing to be done about “de facto” segregation, a condition which existed where school segregation was a result of segregated neighborhoods. However, during the latter 1960s and 1970s civil rights groups continued to fight for integrated schools and the federal courts mandated school integration. Federally mandated bussing spurred white flight out of the cities to suburban and bedroom communities (Rury, 2005).

The effect on the inner city of white flight to suburban areas and newly formed towns to avoid integration was great. Slum neighborhoods developed where unemployment and crime were high “youth gangs, alcoholism, drug addiction, illiteracy, [and] disease” (Ravitch, 1983, p. 149) were also rampant in the inner city. High-challenge urban schools in these neighborhoods were “characterized by low achievement, poor discipline, truancy, and high teacher turnover” (Ravitch, 1983, p. 149). Students dropped out and retaining teachers in urban schools was very difficult. Many people believed that urban areas were in crisis and that it was imperative to take some action regarding the poverty that was prevalent in the inner city (Ravitch, 1983).

In response to the rising tide of poverty especially in the inner cities, President Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty. One result of Johnson’s war was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA, Title I), passed by Congress “to insure that children from low-income families had access to adequate materials” (Pulliam, 1987, p. 140).

The lofty goals of Title I have created major debate in the 40 years since its passage. Numerous studies have been conducted on Title I, Head Start, Even Start,

and other programs associated with the federal government's efforts to erase the inequality that poverty brings to bear on children's educations. While the results of these studies have varied, most have shown that Title I was not meeting the challenge of erasing the achievement gap (Vinovskis, 1999).

The 1960s also brought a new move toward pluralism in education. In the waning years of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, educators were more concerned with the Americanization of immigrants. During the 1960s, individualism and plurality gained momentum. Bi-lingual education, Title IX legislation equalizing educational opportunities for women, open schools, and a modified return to some progressive ideas occurred during the 1960s and 1970s.

The 1980s ushered in a new wave of reform, the impetus "A Nation at Risk" was the result of a committee appointed by the Secretary of Education in the Reagan administration to research academic achievement and the schools. What they found led them to call for higher standards and higher expectations of America's children (Ravitch, 2003). Discussion during the Clinton era regarding education reform resulted in Goals 2000. In response to Goals 2000, states and local school districts began instituting standards and a standardized curriculum. Once again, schools returned to using a basic academic curriculum.

Moving into the new century, repeated calls for high-stakes testing became the latest reform effort in education. While some states had already begun to standardize curriculum and implement high-stakes testing to measure a child's knowledge of the curriculum as a result of Goals 2000, implementation of NCLB legislation made high-stakes testing mandatory. The effects on academic achievement of the latest

reauthorization of ESEA in the form of NCLB remain to be seen. Educators are already hotly debating the ramifications of NCLB, especially the influences of the testing mandates on high-challenge urban schools.

Current educational researchers believe that testing mandates are one of the greatest pitfalls of NCLB. They believe that teachers, in an effort to reap the rewards of high and/or improving test scores will neglect other curricular areas and focus instruction in reading and math. They also fear that teachers will employ teaching methods that do not consider children's individual needs or learning styles (Neill, 2003; Wood, 2004). In fact, Neill (2003) writes:

Under NCLB, education will be seriously damaged, especially in schools with large shares of low-income and minority children, as students are coached to pass tests rather than learn a rich curriculum that prepares them for life in the 21st century. (p. 225)

The testing mandates as well as the narrowing of the curriculum under NCLB are of great concern for urban educators. However, due to the variety of definitions of a quality teacher, the NCLB requirement that every child be instructed by a highly qualified teacher is another cause for concern.

Teacher Quality

The literature regarding teacher quality and what defines a quality teacher has become more extensive in the past few years. The requirement in NCLB that all students have a highly-qualified teacher by May 2006 has engaged educators and the general public in conversations about what exactly constitutes quality teaching and a quality teacher. Because the definition of a quality teacher varies greatly among the

general public, researchers, politicians, and educators themselves, a single definition is difficult to reach; however, there are some commonalities among educational advocates in this area.

Hanushek (2000), a leading educational economist, defines teacher quality this way, “good teachers are ones who get large gains in student achievement for their classes; bad teachers are just the opposite” (p. 3). This definition, in its simplicity, gets directly to the point of what quality teaching entails – advancing student achievement. When people talk about quality teachers they are usually talking about teachers who cause student achievement through one method or another.

Another leading advocate of teacher quality, Haycock (1998, 2000) in her review of research, identified three characteristics of teacher effectiveness. These characteristics were: strong verbal and math skills, deep content knowledge, and teaching skill. In a later article, she expanded the definitions and discussed the importance of placing teachers with these characteristics as well as classroom experience with students in urban schools. Teachers with strong verbal and math skills provide richer meanings and knowledge for their students. Teachers certified in the areas they are teaching who possess a deep knowledge of their content tend to have students who produce greater academic results. Teaching skill includes all of the pedagogical abilities a teacher has in her bag of tricks. Teachers with a high level of teaching skill meet the needs of all students. They develop connections between their students and the content and create classrooms with a culture of care and compassion. Students assigned to teachers with these skill sets experience great success especially in urban schools (Haycock, 1998, 2000).

Protheroe, Lewis and Paik (2002) in another review of research on teacher quality, identified quality teachers as having these characteristics: “[they] engage students in higher order thinking, address central ideas thoroughly in order to help students acquire deep knowledge, foster substantive conversation among students, and connect student learning to the world beyond the classroom” (p. 4). These characteristics of a quality teacher are more specific and define what a teacher does rather than the abilities a teacher should possess as outlined by Haycock. They seem nonetheless equally as important to ensure student achievement. In fact, a teacher who possesses the knowledge, skills, and experience described by Haycock could be equipped to perform the tasks Protheroe defines.

While Hanushek, Haycock and Protheroe et al. did not conduct research to support their definitions, other researchers have developed definitions of quality teachers using a value-added assessment model. A value-added assessment model evaluates a student’s progress from grade to grade. Using a variety of statistical calculations, the student’s growth is then compared to the progress of other students to determine how well teachers, schools and school systems are performing.

A recent article in Education Week (2004, November 17) discussed the growing popularity of using value-added models to measure school and teacher effectiveness. In fact, the United States Department of Education is awaiting results of pilot studies from several states approved to use value-added assessment models to measure growth for the accountability portion of NCLB. While there are some flaws in this model – students who do not finish a test or are absent one day and do not take a make up test – the value-added model could eventually be used as a tool to measure

teacher effectiveness longitudinally, as well as ensure that students in urban schools are assigned to the highest quality teachers.

Regardless of which research or review of literature one chooses to look at to develop a list of quality teacher characteristics, it is important to remember that students assigned to quality teachers for three consecutive years can and do make gains in achievement (Bembry, Jordan, Gomez, Anderson & Mendro, 1998; Babu & Mendro, 2003).

Teacher Quality and Academic Achievement

In order to provide students in urban schools with a more level playing field, policy makers and educational leaders should do everything that is within their power to recruit, hire and retain teachers who possess the characteristics previously discussed. These are teachers who consistently help students reach their full academic potential. The research on the effects teacher quality has on students is extensive and conclusive. Students assigned to quality teachers can and will achieve.

Bembry, Jordan, Gomez, Anderson and Mendro (1998) used Norm Curve Equivalent (NCE) measures from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to determine the long-term effect of teaching on student achievement. Initially, two overall groups were created. The first group consisted of students with five years of complete testing data in reading or mathematics from 1993 to 1997 and associated teacher effectiveness data in reading or mathematics for the four year period 1994 to 1997. The second group consisted of students with four years of complete testing data in reading or mathematics from 1994 to 1997 and associated teacher effectiveness data in reading or mathematics for the three year period 1995 to 1997. These overall groups were

then divided into groups with complete reading and complete mathematics data. Because the two initial groups overlapped, cohort groups were devised. These groups were organized by determining grade levels in 1997. With each group that had five years of data, four cohorts were comprised of students in grades five through eight, students with testing data from first grade in 1993 through fifth grade in 1997 – these students all had teacher effectiveness scores as well. For students with four years of data, five cohort groups were organized using the same criteria. Teacher effectiveness was also rated for each cohort using regression residuals. The importance of rating teacher effectiveness is great in that this measure is used to determine the effect of the teacher on student achievement over time.

The Bembry et al. (1998) study, designed to investigate the effects of highly effective teachers over time, revealed that students assigned to highly effective teachers for at least three consecutive years were academically successful. The study also revealed that the long held belief by school administrators that a good teacher following a bad one will make up for the loss of effective instruction was a fallacy. While this study was conducted solely in the Dallas Public Schools, the ramifications of assigning low achieving students to ineffective teachers were shown to be severe. Bembry et al. stated that, “The common practice of placing students who have had an ineffective teacher with a highly effective one to erase differences, even over three years, does not remedy entirely the loss of achievement” (p. 20). The loss of achievement is further compounded by the fact that this is not a random or occasional occurrence, but over the years can develop into a bias on the part of the administrator in the assignment of students to teachers.

In another study from the state of Texas, Rivkin, Hanushek and Kain (2002) concluded, following an extensive analysis of data, that “having a high quality teacher throughout elementary school can substantially offset or even eliminate the disadvantage of low socioeconomic background” (p. 3). Additionally, they determined that teacher quality varies from school to school and that family factors could be ruled out as determinants of student achievement when these factors were used in their equations. In fact, they reported that having a quality teacher five successive years “would almost compensate” (p. 31) for the differences in academic achievement for students in various socioeconomic groups.

This study used data collected and maintained by the University of Texas at Dallas. Three cohort groups were identified from the data. One cohort was comprised of third through sixth grade students, (fourth graders in 1995) and two cohorts were comprised of fourth through sixth grade students (fourth graders in 1993 and 1994). There were over 200,000 students and 3,000 public schools included in each cohort. The researchers looked at math scores from the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). The sample was comprised of students who had stayed in the same school for fifth and sixth grade and who had completed the TAAS in fourth, fifth and sixth grades. Teacher and student data were merged using unique school-grade identifiers.

Rivkin and his fellow researchers were not able to match the individual students with teachers, but they were able to match school and grade level. Matching students to teachers is important when measuring teacher effects and could impact the validity of the results of the research.

Additionally, the researchers removed ethnic groups, special education students and English Language Learners from their study. The removal of these groups of students has implications for leaders in urban schools because their student populations are generally comprised of these students. This study's findings were important regardless of these factors. Teacher quality can and does have a direct impact on student achievement. Another study of the same nature including the groups of students not included in this study supported the findings of Rivkin et al.

Babu and Mendro (2003) go so far as to say that the longitudinal effects of an ineffective teacher are “educationally deadly” (p. 12). Unlike the Rivkin et al. (2002) research, this study included students from ethnic groups, special education and English Language Learners. Results from Babu and Mendro revealed that students assigned to an ineffective teacher three consecutive years were doomed to failure, while students assigned to an effective teacher three consecutive years will be successful regardless of the challenging factors facing them. Their research also concluded that having one ineffective teacher can be incredibly difficult to overcome even when followed by two effective teachers in the following years. The implications of this study for policy makers and educational leaders are enormous. Placing low achieving students with effective teachers for three consecutive years could all but erase a lifetime of failure. The results of the Babu and Mendro study are significant because many urban schools have populations comprised of these student groups. Typically, these groups are considered low achieving.

Based on these studies, the conclusion can be made that teacher quality is an important factor in student achievement. Further, students in urban schools require

the benefit of quality teachers for at least three consecutive years. These findings beg the question: How do we keep quality teachers in schools, and especially high-challenge urban elementary schools?

Teacher Retention

Recruiting and hiring quality teachers to work in high-challenge urban elementary schools is of little or no value unless they are retained in these schools. Extensive research has been conducted on teacher retention from a variety of perspectives. Interestingly, the reasons teachers give for leaving teaching entirely or moving from school to school do not vary greatly from study to study.

While some teachers leave the teaching profession because of familial obligations, especially women, many leave due to low salaries, lack of administrative support, student discipline problems, and lack of influence over decision making. Not all teachers leave teaching, there are a number of teachers who move from one school to another. Typically, with the exception of moving to be closer to home or to teach in a school with the same ethnic group as the teacher, teachers who move give the same reasons as teachers who leave for their choice of schools (Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 2001; Ingersoll, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

In an extensive study of why teachers leave public schools, Hanushek, Kain and Rivkin (2001) revealed that teachers in inner-city, high-poverty, majority-minority schools typically move to schools that are closer to their homes, have a smaller population of students that are disadvantaged and/or from minority backgrounds, and pay more money. They also discovered that ethnic teachers are more likely to move to and stay in a school with students who represent the teacher's

own minority groups. Hanushek et al. also found that teachers are not attracted to inner-city, high-poverty, majority-minority schools even when the salaries to teach there are higher than other schools.

Writing about what keeps teachers in the profession, Darling-Hammond (2003) reported that teachers are more attracted to schools with better working conditions than any other factors. She states that working conditions should be the primary concern of education leaders especially in urban schools. Working conditions that should be considered include: class size, facilities, scheduling, and administrative support.

In a study to determine why teachers stay in a particular school Ives (2003) surveyed and interviewed 38 teachers in a California school. Their reasons for staying included administrative support, collegial support and a sense of efficacy. The teachers reported that they could face many of the daily challenges they encountered in their classrooms if they felt that they had the support of the principal.

Additionally, Ives stated that teachers reported collegial support as an important factor in their decisions to stay. Teachers said that their work environment supported their ideas, activities and “continuous development of best practices” (p. 36). These findings are corroborated by Williams (2003), who found that teachers were willing to accept the daily challenges of teaching when they were given an opportunity to grow and develop as professionals.

Williams conducted interviews with 12 exemplary teachers to determine why they stayed in teaching. The teachers were from four different counties in North Carolina and represented seven school systems. The systems were public and private

and located in both urban and rural communities. Additionally, the teachers represented all grades and school subjects.

These exemplary teachers, identified by building principals and central office administrators because they represented the “best that exist” (p. 71), reported that they stayed in teaching because of the rewards they received from students. “...the personal bonds that they form with young people are a kind of spiritual connection that often lasts for years” (p. 72). Teachers also stated that despite years when challenges were great in comparison to prior years, they were able to go deeper into themselves to find ways to “replenish their personal resources when the classroom is not providing this sustenance” (pp. 73 - 74).

These teachers also reported that they knew they were making differences in the lives of their students. They enjoyed the challenges, the connectedness to colleagues and to their students, and the autonomy that they had established in their classrooms. These rewards were the driving force behind their reasons for staying in teaching.

In a similar study looking at schools that new teachers chose to teach in, Johnson and Birkeland (2003) reported that teacher retention is one of the greatest challenges facing high-poverty schools. They stated, “...schools serving high-poverty communities are particularly vulnerable to this revolving-door effect: the repeated loss of teachers and frantic rush to hire new ones” (p. 21).

This study looked at what Johnson and Birkeland defined as voluntary movers, teachers who move from one school to another. They interviewed eight of the original 50 new teacher participants in the Project on the Next Generation of

Teachers. These eight teachers, who moved from the schools where they began their teaching careers, sought out schools that made it possible for them to be quality teachers. They chose schools that had managerial systems in place as well as an atmosphere of collegiality and respect and guidance from the principal. Interestingly, all of these movers chose schools that “served less impoverished populations of students than their first schools” (p. 24).

In a similar study of school organization as a motivating factor teachers report for staying in some schools, Ingersoll (1999) conducted an extensive analysis of data from the Schools and Staffing Survey and the Teacher Follow up Survey conducted in 1994-1995 by the National Center for Education Statistics. He found that high poverty public schools, 50% or higher poverty enrollment, have greater teacher turnover than more affluent, 15% or less poverty enrollment, public schools. Ingersoll also reported that schools with retention problems have problems with teacher recruitment.

Further review of the data led Ingersoll to conclude that improvement in school organizational characteristics could result in improved teacher retention. Including teachers in decision making, reducing student discipline problems and increasing support from school administrators were all factors that have been shown to effect teacher decisions to stay or leave a school.

This review of literature from teacher retention research revealed that teachers were most interested in doing what was best for their students and that they stayed in schools that supported their autonomy and creativity, where they had a sense of self-efficacy, administrative support, and collegial relationships.

Summary

This chapter focused on literature related to the history of urban schools, definitions of teacher quality, teacher quality and academic achievement and teacher retention. The initial section regarding the history of urban schools focused on the development of public schools in the United States from their inception through today. Urban schools were the first public schools in the United States. Following World War II, inner city, high-challenge schools developed. These schools are in many cases the urban schools of the 21st century. Many urban schools face the same challenges they have faced through history: poverty, overcrowding, gangs, majority-minority student populations, alcoholism, drug addiction, and illiteracy are a few of the challenges teachers in urban schools encounter daily.

The section on teacher quality examined the varying definitions found for a quality teacher. While there are a number of opinions and ideas on what defines a quality teacher, no one all-encompassing definition exists. However, value-added assessment models which measure the effects of a teacher on student achievement are being heatedly discussed as a quantifiable means of defining teacher quality.

In examining the effects of teacher quality on student achievement, several value-added studies were used. This research revealed that the longitudinal effects of teacher quality on student achievement could be both positive and negative. In fact, a student from a low socioeconomic environment assigned to a quality teacher for three consecutive years can make and sustain the same gains as her non low socioeconomic peers. Knowing this information, it is critical that school leaders and administrators be able to identify quality teachers when considering student placement. Students in

urban schools who are low-performing, second language learners, members of minority groups, come from poverty and the plethora of other challenges faced in these environments must be given the opportunity to learn from the best teachers in the academic system.

Teacher retention literature revealed that teachers chose to stay in schools where systems and structures were in place that supported their daily efforts in the classroom. Teachers also reported that another factor influencing their decisions to remain in teaching was the support of their colleagues and administrator. While the literature also details the reasons why teachers leave the profession or move to other schools, it does not specifically address retaining teachers in high-challenge urban schools. This lack of information on the retention of quality teachers in high-challenge urban elementary schools makes this research study all the more timely. The next chapter discusses the method used in this study to determine, “Why, from their own perception, do quality teachers continue to teach in urban elementary schools with a high percentage of minority and low socioeconomic students?”

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the methodology of this study. There are five sections in this chapter: the research question, the methodology, the population, the sample and the procedure for collecting and analyzing data. This study endeavored to determine why quality teachers continue to teach in urban elementary schools with a high percentage of minority and low socioeconomic students.

I first became interested in this topic during a graduate course in qualitative research. As a principal in an urban school district, I often wondered why some of my best teachers chose to stay in our high-challenge urban elementary school when they could teach in any school they choose. My curiosity and the desire to fulfill a course requirement led me to conduct a pilot study with teachers in my own school. This research study was an expansion of the initial study. For the purposes of this study teachers from different high-challenge elementary schools located in an urban school district in the capital city of a southwestern state were interviewed.

Research Question

This research study, conducted in an urban school district in the capital city of a southwestern state attempted to determine, “Why, from their own perception, do quality teachers continue to teach in urban elementary schools with a high percentage of minority and low socioeconomic students?”

Methodology

Moustakas (1994), in his explanation of the purpose of phenomenological research, states that to come to an understanding of a phenomena, the researcher, must, grow quiet and listen; come to an inward clearing; connect with a dominant question, issue, or concern related to a specific person (including one's own self), or a situation or event; describe the experience; determine the qualities, invariant constituents, and core themes; consider possible meaning; and arrive at an understanding of the essences of the experience. (p. 63)

In order to describe the reasons quality teachers have for remaining in urban elementary schools with high percentages of minority and low socioeconomic students, an "understanding of the essences of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 63) was required; therefore, a phenomenological research study was appropriate.

This research method seeks to understand the meanings people construct from their lived experiences of a phenomenon. Again, Moustakas (1994), referring to the purpose of phenomenological research, states: "The aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it" (p. 13). Because the teachers engaged in self-reflection and provided descriptions of their thoughts, feelings and experiences regarding their choice to stay in high-challenge urban elementary schools phenomenology was an appropriate but challenging research method.

In describing the challenges a phenomenological researcher faces, Moustakas (1994) states "The challenge facing the human science researcher is to describe things in themselves, to permit what is before one to enter consciousness and be understood

in its meanings and essences in the light of intuition and self reflection” (p. 22). To that end, the process of bracketing became critical. As an urban educator for over 17 years, the challenge for me would be to set aside all of my thoughts, feelings and beliefs about why teachers choose to stay in high-challenge urban elementary schools. I would have to step out of my role as the principal of one of these schools and into the role of a phenomenological researcher. This transition was difficult but critical.

In order to prevent my own thoughts, feelings and beliefs from influencing me during the interviewing, transcription and coding process, I engaged in several different activities. First, prior to conducting any of the interviews, I read over the purpose of my study and my research question. I also conducted the interviews and completed the transcripts and coding during summer vacation when I was not immersed in my own school. Additionally, although my school met the criteria for inclusion in the study, it was removed to prevent bias on my part and the part of my teachers. I also tried to conduct the interviews away from my own school. Taking these steps helped to clear my mind of preconceptions, enhance my openness, and stay engaged in actively listening and reflecting on what the teachers were saying as I was interviewing the teachers and transcribing and coding their interviews (Moustakas, 1994).

Population

The population for this study was six of seven high-challenge urban elementary schools in the school district of the capital city of a southwestern state. As a member of the Council of the Great City Schools, the district met the requirements of an urban district. It was located in a city with a population of over 250,000 and had

student enrollment over 35,000. At the time of the study, this school district had a student population of 43,026 students. According to statistical data prepared by the Planning, Research and Evaluation Department (2005) for this district at the conclusion of the 2004 – 2005 school year, the following ethnic groups were represented: Native American 5.7%, Asian 2.7%, Black 32.3%, Hispanic 33.6%, and Caucasian 25.7%. Approximately 84% of the students in this district came from low socioeconomic families and qualified for free/reduced lunch.

There were 58 elementary schools in the district. In these elementary schools, there were 22,743 students. The individual school populations ranged from 118 students to 860 students. Fifty-three of the elementary schools had minority populations ranging from 56% to 100%. All 53 of these schools had free/reduced lunch rates ranging from 45% to 100%. The remaining five schools did not have a majority of minority students in their populations. The free/reduced lunch rate at these five schools was less than 35%.

From this population, seven schools were identified as meeting the criteria for a high-challenge urban elementary school. These schools had student populations over 500 and all of them were overcrowded. The schools also had students who “face challenges to succeed academically” (Standard & Poors, 2005, p. 3). The students attending these schools lived in areas where they,

experience greater exposure to poverty, violence, crime, substance abuse and racial and economic discrimination. Even within the family, there may be

challenges such as greater family mobility rates, less stable home environments, higher levels of stress and less than adequate health care.

(Standard & Poors, 2005, p. 3)

The minority populations in these seven schools ranged from 69% to 91% and the free/reduced lunch rate ranged from 97% to 100%. Because I am the principal of one of the seven schools identified for this study, it was removed from the population and the teachers were not included in the sample. The quality teachers in my school were interviewed for my initial pilot study.

Sample

The sample for this study was 12 elementary school teachers purposefully selected from six of seven high-challenge urban elementary schools. A purposeful sampling technique was best suited because the purpose of this study was to determine why quality teachers stay in high-challenge urban elementary schools.

Data Collection

Teachers in this study were purposefully selected from six of seven high-challenge urban elementary schools in the urban school district located in the capital city of the southwestern region of the United States. In order to purposefully select teachers for participation in this study, the building principals of the six schools included in the study were contacted in person, via email and by telephone to identify teachers in their buildings who met the following criteria.

- Students assigned to the teacher consistently showed growth on tests of achievement.

- The teacher had high expectations (determined by the expertise of the principal)
- The teacher engaged students in higher order thinking (determined by the expertise of the principal).
- The teacher was credentialed in his/her subject area.
- The teacher had at least three years of classroom teaching experience.
- The teacher had chosen to teach in high-challenge urban schools for at least three years.

The first five criteria were identified based upon teacher quality literature (Haycock, 1998, 2000; Hanushek, 2000; Protheroe, Lewis and Paik, 2002). The sixth criterion was necessary because the teachers who were interviewed had chosen to stay in high-challenge urban elementary schools. The teachers identified for this study were “information-rich with respect to the purposes of the study” (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003, p. 165). These teachers had experienced the phenomenon which is an essential component of research participant selection in a phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994).

Each of the teachers who were identified by his/her principal was contacted to explain the purpose of the study and determine if he/she was interested in participating. Initially, I intended to interview two teachers from each school; therefore when two teachers from each school had indicated their willingness to participate the 12 teachers for the sample would have been selected. Several of the principals were able to identify more than two teachers who met the quality teacher criteria. Each of these teachers was contacted. A total of 22 teachers were contacted.

Thirteen teachers returned my phone calls. During these calls, I explained the purposes of the study and the procedure to be used. I also suggested that they think about why they stay in their schools. All 13 of the teachers agreed to an interview. At one school, only one teacher agreed to an interview and at two of the schools, three teachers were interviewed.

Twelve of the 13 teachers scheduled an audio taped interview at a time and place of his/her choosing. One of the teachers was unable to schedule an interview in person due to her schedule. For this teacher, a follow up visit with her at her school was conducted following her telephone interview. One of the teachers was removed from the study following her interview as she was a Physical Education teacher and did not meet the academic achievement criteria required for inclusion in the study. Prior to beginning each of the interviews, an explanation of consent forms, the interview procedure, the teacher's right to withdraw from the study at any time, and the purpose of the study was given. Appropriate signatures were obtained on consent forms.

To begin the interview, each teacher was asked to complete a web diagram (Appendix A). The web diagram is commonly used in schools as a graphic organizer to help students brainstorm ideas about a topic. For the purposes of this study, the web diagram was used to help the teachers reflect on why they chose to stay in their schools. Each teacher listed his/her thoughts and feelings about why he/she chose to continue teaching in a high-challenge urban elementary school. This diagram then became the foundation upon which interview questions were developed.

After completing the web diagram, the audio-taped portion of the interview began. During this part of the interview, the teachers were asked to discuss in-depth the responses recorded on the web diagram. Specifically, each teacher was asked to explain his/her responses one at a time. In many of the interviews, this portion became more of a conversation than a question and answer interview; the teacher would begin talking about the reason he/she had given and would continue until there was nothing left to say. As the teacher talked about his/her responses, additional questions would sometimes arise, when this occurred, follow-up questions were asked. These questions varied from teacher to teacher as they were follow-up questions based upon each individual's responses to the reasons given on the teacher's web diagram.

Data Analysis

Following each interview, a transcript was made of the audio-tape. Prior to beginning an analysis of the transcripts, each of the teachers was asked to read the transcript for additions, corrections or deletions (Moustakas, 1994). After approval of the transcript by the teacher, analysis of the transcript began. Transcript analysis included engaging in horizontalization, transcript coding, clustering and thematizing, and validation of the themes.

As I read the teachers' interview transcripts, I engaged in the horizontalization process. This process requires that the researcher read and reflect on the interview transcripts and delete statements that are repetitive, that overlap and are not relevant to the topic or research question (Moustakas, 1994). To this end, as I read through each teacher's transcript the first time, I simply read it through, thinking only about

what the teacher said. Reading through the transcript a second time, I thought about why the teacher said he/she stayed. During the third reading, I looked for statements that described the teacher's perception concerning why he/she stayed. If the statement could be labeled and was necessary for understanding the teacher's experience with the phenomenon, it was coded.

Each of the transcripts went through this process. Following the horizontalization and coding of each of the transcripts, the codes were clustered based upon commonalities into "core themes of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). After identifying the themes, charts were compiled that included the teachers' statements related to each theme. The themes were validated by returning to each interview transcript and my interview notes to ensure the essence of the meaning of the phenomenon was captured for each teacher. Following the validation of the themes, a synthesis was written using the teachers' statements. This synthesis of the themes included a "description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

Finally, a description of each teacher and his/her school was written based on the teacher's responses, interview notes and visits to the schools. These descriptions are meant to provide the reader with an understanding of the schools where the teachers work and the teachers themselves.

In discussing these themes and descriptions, I tried to place the meanings and essences of the teachers' experiences in the context of the time and place they occurred. This essential component of phenomenological research reminds me that there are no conclusions. The experiences of the phenomenon that the teachers'

described in their interviews are as they were at that time. These experiences could change. As the researcher, I must not allow this synthesis to be construed as fact. Because phenomenological research is an on-going journey, I could come back in six months or a year or even two years and find that the teachers have had new experiences which have lead to new descriptions. Moustakas (1994) says it best when he describes phenomenological research as “journeys within journeys, within journeys” (p. 65).

In this chapter, an explanation of the methodology as well as a description of the population and sample for this study and the procedure for collecting and analyzing data was presented. The next chapter focuses on why, from their own perception, quality teachers continue to teach in urban elementary schools with a high percentage of minority and low socioeconomic students.

CHAPTER IV

Findings of the Study

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine why quality teachers continue to teach in urban elementary schools with a high percentage of minority and low socioeconomic students. This chapter focuses on the results of this study. There are three sections to this chapter: 1) summary of the study, 2) descriptive information related to the schools and teachers, and 3) common themes.

Summary of the Study

To come to an understanding of and describe the reasons why quality teachers stay in high-challenge urban elementary schools this phenomenological research study was conducted. Through interviews with the teachers, themes related to their experiences with the phenomenon emerged.

Seven high-challenge elementary schools in an urban school district of the capital city of a southwestern state were initially identified for inclusion in this study. These schools were chosen because they met the criteria developed for a high-challenge school. One of the schools was removed from the study. The school was removed because I am the Principal and a pilot study was previously conducted with the quality teachers in this school. Therefore, there are six schools included in the study.

Principals from the six schools were contacted personally, through phone calls and via electronic mail, and asked to identify two or more quality teachers from their staffs that met the criteria developed defining a quality teacher. All of the principals

eagerly responded with the names of at least two and in some cases more teachers who met the quality teacher criteria.

Each of the teachers was contacted via a telephone call to the school where he/she taught. Telephone messages were left for each of the teachers with the school, home and cell phone number of the researcher and an explanation of the reason for the phone call. Initially, 22 teachers were contacted.

In all but two of the schools, the teachers were quick to return the call and agreed to be interviewed for the study. In one school, only one teacher returned the phone call. For two of the schools, contact was made a second and third time to speak with the teachers. In one school, the principal had to be contacted and a request for assistance in having the teachers return phone calls was made.

In the end, 13 teachers were interviewed at a variety of locations. One teacher came to my school to be interviewed. Seven teachers were interviewed at their own schools. Three teachers were interviewed in public libraries and one teacher was interviewed in a coffee shop. One interview was conducted on the telephone because a suitable time and place could not be determined due to the teacher's schedule. A follow up visit with this teacher occurred after the initial interview. One teacher was removed upon determining that she did not meet all of the criteria for a quality teacher. Specifically, she did not meet the academic achievement criteria because she taught physical education.

The schools and teachers included in the study were identified with alias names in order to protect anonymity. The schools were referred to as School I, School II, School III, School IV, School V, and School VI. Demographic data related to each

school is included in Table 1. Teachers were identified as follows: Mary, Jane, Jack, Fran, Beth, Bill, Liza, Dina, Sara, Kate, and Opal. Demographic data related to the teachers are included in Table 2.

Table 1

School Demographic Data

School	Population	Free/Reduced	Minority Students	Distance
		Lunch		Downtown
School I	534	97%	69%	6 miles
School II	748	98%	91%	3 miles
School III	546	99%	88%	2 miles
School IV	533	98%	87%	3 miles
School V	603	97%	87%	3 miles
School VI	549	100%	91%	5 miles

Table 2

Teacher Demographic Data

		Years of	Schools			Ethnic	Prior	
<u>School</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Experience</u>	<u>Taught In</u>	<u>Grade</u>	<u>Degree</u>	<u>Group</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Career</u>
I	Kate	17	2	6 th	BS	C	F	None
I	Opal	26	2	4 th	BS	C	F	None
II	Jack	12	3	4 th	BS	C	M	Nurse
II	Fran	4	1	1 st	BS	C	F	Acct
II	Beth	8	1	2 nd	MEd	C	F	Retail
III	Mary	15	2	ELL	BS	Asian	F	None
III	Jane	14	2	K	BS	C	F	None
IV	Liza	8	2	5 th	BS	C	F	Clerk
V	Dina	17	1	1 st	BS	C	F	Day Care
V	Sara	16	2	1 st	BS	C	F	Day Care
VI	Bill	13	1	5 th	MEd	C	M	None
VI	Jill	22	3	K	BS	AA	F	None

Descriptive Information Related to the Schools and Teachers

This section includes descriptive information related to the schools and teachers involved in this study. The descriptions of the schools provide the reader with information related to and an understanding of the schools where the teachers work. The descriptions of the teachers provide the reader with a better understanding of the teachers themselves.

School I

This school was situated in a neighborhood located under the landing and take off zones of the major airport in this capital city. Built in 1949, the school was one level. The original entrance was enclosed at some time, probably at the same time the hallway ceilings were lowered. Many of the classrooms had ceilings that were angled with the original structural steel beams exposed. The addition of central heating and air conditioning made these particular classrooms especially fascinating to look at. Upon entering the school, visitors encounter a six foot long magazine rack containing pamphlets, booklets and brochures for parents. Painted on the walls throughout the building were a variety of murals as well as multiplication problems.

The lowered acoustical square ceilings give one the feeling of being incredibly tall. Some of these tiles were loose and falling down. This school is scheduled for renovation but the exact date for beginning the renovation was not known.

There are two rows of portable buildings used as classrooms and a large playground with some swings, jungle gyms and other playground equipment located just west of the school. The students who attend this school wear uniforms, but

because they are poor, the principal did not strictly enforce the uniform policy. The school was very clean but poorly maintained.

Kate

Kate began teaching 17 years ago. She began her teaching career as the in-school suspension teacher at a middle school located in a suburban school district in the same city where she now teaches. She became a teacher after starting as a law major in college. After spending some time tutoring college students in math, she discovered a love for teaching and helping others and changed her major to education.

I met Kate in her classroom after school. When I walked in, she was sharing a book order form with her 6th grade students. Her room was filled with posters, student work, books, and science equipment. When Kate came to her school from middle school, she taught first grade for four years. She said she moved to 5th grade the same year her first graders stopped crying. Kate has also taught 4th grade and computer lab.

Kate was relaxed and easy to talk with. She shared her experiences in urban and suburban schools eagerly. Her passion for her work and her students was evident from her room, her energy and her willingness to share why she stayed in a high-challenge school.

Opal

A sign on Opal's door requested that visitors knock before entering. When I knocked on her door, the classroom greeter welcomed me to the class and asked my name so that he could introduce me to his classmates. Opal smiled and thanked the young man for his outstanding introduction. Her classroom was very neat and tidy.

Becoming a teacher was an easy choice for Opal. Her mother told her from the day she was born that she would be a teacher. Opal has been teaching 4th grade for the last 23 years in the same classroom at the school she is in now. She began her teaching career in a 5th grade center in the same district where she now teaches.

Opal was proud to explain that during her 23 years at her present school, she has never missed a day of school with the exception of one year of medical leave to battle cancer. The only time she ever considered leaving her school occurred when she was returning from medical leave. While she had been gone, the school had adopted a uniform policy. The principal at that time wanted all of the teachers to wear the uniforms as well as the students and Opal just couldn't wear navy blue, khaki, or black. She loved color too much. She decided to stay where she was when she found out that the principal was leaving and she wouldn't have to wear the school uniform.

Visiting with Opal was like talking with an old friend. She laughed easily and talked openly about her commitment to her students and her desire to continue teaching in her school.

School II

School two was a three story brick structure completed in 1910. There were three rows of portable buildings painted army gray located just behind and extending to the south of the building. The paint and manpower were donated by the local air force base, hence the color of the portables. This color made them appear very dreary and sad.

In order to enter the building, one must go through the back door, into the basement and up a set of stairs. At the top of the stairs was a long, narrow hallway

with several classrooms, the library and office complex. The classrooms were large and had beautiful windows and hard wood floors.

Posters representing the culture of the children who attend school there were hung throughout the building. A large trophy case displayed the honors and awards this school and the children who attend there have won. A large rack hung on the wall next to the office filled with pamphlets and booklets for parents. The school was very clean and bright.

Jack

Jack agreed to an interview only if he could come to my office at school. He didn't want to talk at his school because they were having summer school there. Our conversation was filled with laughter. Jack was very eager to discuss why he stayed at his school.

Following a few years nursing his ailing brother, Jack pursued a career in teaching. He has been a teacher for 12 years. He became a teacher because he always admired his good teachers and wanted to be like them. Originally from a coal producing county of Tennessee, he was the first person in his family to go to college. Jack has taught at a variety of schools and in a number of different grades. When he began his teaching career in Tennessee, he discovered that if he taught in a low socio-economic school his student loans would be forgiven. His love for students who live in poverty developed during his experience teaching in Tennessee.

He began teaching at his present school as a substitute teacher and stayed on teaching in 1st grade for a number of years. He currently teaches 4th grade and serves as the grade level chair. He has been at his school for the past eight years.

Fran

I met Fran after the morning session of summer school in her classroom. Fran teaches 1st grade. Fran has taught the length of her career at this school and has never taught any other grade. Her room was very kid-centric. It was obvious from the environment that the arrangement and selection of materials for this room was well thought out and designed for kids. There were books, manipulatives, computers, and very small chairs in Fran's brightly colored room.

Fran became a teacher after working in the accounting field. Her aunt and uncle were both teachers, and she had worked at her church with young children. These experiences working with children led her to leave her accounting job and pursue a degree in education.

Growing up in a rural community, Fran has had to adjust to the challenges found in urban teaching. She said that her experiences with her students were very different from her life experiences. Her decision to teach at her current school was an easy one however; it was the first job offer she got. Speaking in a soft, slow voice and quick to laugh, Fran talked with passion and commitment about her desire to stay in her current school.

Beth

Coming to teaching after being a manager in retail women's clothing, Beth has been teaching for eight years. Beth serves as the grade level chair for the 2nd grade at her school. She has been teaching 2nd grade for five years. When she began teaching at this school, she was assigned to 3rd grade. This is the only school in which she has ever taught.

The interview was conducted in Beth's classroom, a bright, neatly arranged room filled with books and student work, following summer school. Beth was very blunt and straightforward with her answers. She did not embellish much and had to be asked a number of follow-up questions in order to share her experiences as a teacher at her school.

School III

School three was rebuilt in 1984 using the columns from the original building. The first school in the district to have central heat and air-conditioning, this school is built partially underground. Very few of the classrooms have windows. Ramps are used in place of stairs to move through the levels of the building. Because the building is underground, there are no windows in the classrooms and the playground is located on the roof of the building.

Inside this building it was somewhat dark. The plexiglas in the entrance doors was scratched and dingy. Flyers concerning upcoming school events, visitor policies and the school hours were taped to the inside of the doors. Inside the entryway were a bench and a potted plant that did brighten this area up a bit.

In the teachers' lounge and some of the classrooms, the original orange and brown carpet was on the floor. In many places duct tape held the carpet together. The teachers have worked hard to find duct tape that matched the carpet so that the wear and tear wasn't quite so obvious.

Mary

Mary chose the teaching profession over nursing. She always knew that she wanted to pursue a career helping people. She settled on teaching because she

couldn't stand the sight of blood. As an immigrant to America, Mary can appreciate the challenges faced by the immigrant children she teaches. Her teaching is infused with her desire to be the kind of teacher she had when she came to America.

The interview took place in the teachers' lounge at her school following a morning of professional development. Mary's passion for teaching and learning were very evident throughout the interview as she spoke with conviction about her students and her work in ensuring they learn a new language.

Mary has taught English Language Learners in two different schools in the district. She has been teaching for 15 years.

Jane

Jane's passion for teaching kindergarteners to read exuded from her words and her body language. She has taught 1st and 2nd grade as well as kindergarten. Her love for teaching kindergarten was what brought her to her present school. She taught in a school with a similar student population for eight years prior to her six years here.

Having teachers she didn't like inspired Jane to become a teacher. Her commitment to teaching is coupled with her desire to make learning exciting and interesting for her students. Her passion for ensuring that her students enjoy learning and especially learning to read was very evident in her mannerisms and enthusiasm when talking about her students.

I interviewed Jane in the teachers' lounge at her school after she had completed a morning of professional development. She was open, honest and

incredibly passionate about teaching. We laughed easily and had a long conversation about students, parents and teaching.

School IV

Built in 1928, School four was located next to a main thoroughfare that is a very high traffic area. The neighborhood surrounding this school contained single family dwellings that were in disputed gang territory. The trash dumpster and recycling bin were covered with graffiti from rival gangs. Many times, the school has been spray painted with gang graffiti claiming this school campus as their territory.

There were three portable buildings set in front of the school because the school is slated for a renovation project that is expected to take two to three years. Recently, concrete barriers were installed on the corner of the lot in front of these portable buildings because they have been crashed into by cars on two separate occasions.

The school was a two story brick structure that when entered was clean and bright. There were a number and variety of murals that have been painted on the hallway walls. These murals celebrate learning, life and the Hispanic culture. The hallways and staircases were wide and the classrooms had large windows and hard wood floors.

Liza

Liza was the only teacher contacted at this school who agreed to an interview. We met in a local coffee shop on a summer afternoon. Liza was somewhat apprehensive to talk about herself but after a little while, she opened up and talked at length about why she taught in her school.

Believing that she wasn't smart enough to become a teacher prevented Liza from pursuing a career in teaching even though she always wanted to be a teacher. Finally, when her youngest child began kindergarten, the teacher convinced her to go to college and get a degree in education. She was checking groceries in the supermarket after teaching for one year in the small town where she lives when another friend brought her husband in and told him to hire her to teach. She began teaching 5th grade at the school she is in now seven years ago.

School V

School five was located at the intersection of two very highly traveled streets. The original building was completed in 1910 with an addition completed in the 1930s. There was a hallway on the second floor that connected the original building to the addition. Located directly underneath this hallway was a classroom.

From the outside, this building felt cold and uninviting. There was very little landscaping and a small playground with antiquated equipment. A very small driveway was located on the side of the building where students were dropped off and picked up from the school. In order for visitors to enter the building, they must go up a large flight of stairs from the parking area located in the back. The classrooms were inviting and had large windows. The media center had the original mock fireplace surrounded by handmade tiles representing children reading. The original built-in oak bookcases and molding add to the quaint atmosphere. The building was clean and well kept.

Dina

Dina was the busiest of all the teachers I interviewed. She taught 1st grade all day and went to school several nights a week. She also taught as an adjunct professor at a local community college when she was not attending school at night. Because of her schedule, our interview proved to be very short but informative.

Having taught for 17 years in the same school, Dina has established relationships with many of the families in her school. She has always taught 1st grade, but was thinking of moving to high school to teach English Language Learners. However, she wasn't sure if she would be able to leave the students and families at her school. She became a teacher because she loves books and kids and teaching brings her love of both of these together. It took her a long time to get her degree with a number of twists and turns along the way, but she wouldn't do anything else.

Sara

I interviewed Sara on the telephone because she was taking classes after school to earn her master's degree in reading. She has been teaching for 16 years. Fifteen and one-half have been at the school she is in now. Even over the phone, Sara's passion for her students was obvious. Her mission was to convey the love for reading she has to her students and parents. A follow up visit to meet Sara in person occurred following the interview. She was as enthusiastic about teaching in person as she was on the telephone.

School VI

Located next to a major housing project, this art deco building was completed in 1937 with an addition directly north of the original building completed in the 1950s. There were two rows of portable buildings directly behind the school. There was a new playground that was installed by the parks and recreation department approximately five years ago.

The front of the school faced a major highway that encircles the city. Over the summer, thieves went on the roof and stole the copper from the air-conditioning units to sell to the recyclers. Being located about five blocks from a large housing project, this particular school has had the most radical change in demographics of all of the schools. In the past, the majority of the students were African-American and Caucasian, over the past several years the population had changed to a majority of Hispanic students with fewer students from the other ethnic groups being represented.

Bill

During the interview in the public library, Bill spoke passionately about his desire to not only educate his students academically, but socially as well. Bill decided to be a teacher because his father was a teacher who always wanted one of his children to become a teacher.

Bill has taught 5th grade for 13 years in the same school. It was the first job offer he got when he graduated from college and he has stayed there since. Bill has had his master's degree in administration for about three years and would like to become a school principal.

Jill

I met Jill during the summer in the public library. On the day that we met, Jill was suffering from laryngitis and could barely talk. She had just finished a visit with her grandson and was excited to talk about her passion for education.

During her 22 year teaching career, Jill has taught in a variety of schools: private, public and Department of Defense. She began her teaching career with the Department of Defense as her husband was in the military. Her experience in the DOD schools was very different from her experience in her present school even though the kids were not that different.

Beginning in college as a business major, she knew after the first year that that was not for her. She just couldn't picture herself behind a desk, so she changed to education and has been happy with her decision ever since.

Themes

All of the teachers spoke with passion and conviction regarding their reasons for staying in the schools where they taught. They were open and honest about the challenges that they faced in their schools. The teachers did not mind traveling from suburban and rural areas to work with their students. They laughed easily about their experiences. At the same time, they were thoughtful and spoke with poignancy about the work that they faced every day. As a result of the interviews, the following themes emerged.

Relationships with Students

Eleven of the 12 teachers said that the relationships they had with students was a reason why they stayed in their schools. Each of the 11 teachers who mentioned

students spoke with passion about the students they worked with. Several of them stated that the only reason they continued to teach in their schools was due to the students. Jack stated that his school had an atmosphere where kids just came first. He explained, “We’re here for kids and we’re going to do our best to do what we can do for the kids.” Liza, Jane, Jill, Sara, and Kate all talked about their love of the students they worked with. Sara said, “I just love these kids. I really do, I hit my stride with them.” I just love the kids was a recurring statement they made. Jane remarked, “Oh the kids, I love the kids. They’re just really great kids. They come, they want to learn. They work hard, they want to learn and the more they learn, the more they want to learn.” Kate believed her love for her kids came from where they were in their lives, “They’re so on the edge bless their little hearts. They are just on the edge. When they slam the door, or when they roll their eyes at me, we have a talk.”

Several teachers talked about students that returned to visit them when they had gone on to middle or high school. Kate remarked, “I tell them, once you’re my student, you’re mine forever. I help my students with their high school work.” Opal mentioned that she has had students come back after they had left her school to tell her that the only reason they had come to school was because they knew that she would be there. She went on to say that many of her former students, who are now parents, have told her they were glad their child was in her class. “They [parents] say, I remember you, whenever I was in 4th grade, that was my favorite year and I was so happy when I found out my child had you.”

Many of the teachers repeated over and over how important they felt they needed to be in the lives of their students. Kate talked about recognizing that her

students were people too. She told the story of spending an entire recess teaching her students how to tie their shoes in a checkerboard pattern, “I spent one whole recess, ’cause I know how to do laces like a checkerboard and one day, we had lessons at recess on how to do that because they wanted theirs to look like that. They need to be loved, most of them aren’t loved. They need the stability, if I go from school to school, they don’t have the stability.” Liza recounted the importance of her role as the teacher when she told the story of one of her students who had been kicked out by his stepfather one night and the moments he spent crying on her shoulder when he arrived at school the next day. Bill discussed his belief that he needed to be more than just a teacher for his students. “They think of me more as a role model, a mentor and a teacher rather than just a teacher.” He went on to say that it was important for him to have these relationships to inspire his students to come to school; that he needed to be the reason they came to school.

Several of the teachers talked about the culture of their school being student focused. Jill discussed her belief that because her school’s culture was serving the needs of the students, she was willing to stay there. “I love the atmosphere of the school because it’s about kids.” Jill remarked. She went on to say that if it wasn’t this way, she would probably leave. Similarly, Bill stated, “I just like that atmosphere, where kids come first, I don’t think I could work anywhere where people are not doing their jobs and helping kids.” Mary stated that one of the reasons she stayed in her school was because, “For the kids they [teachers] do everything. They do everything for kids.” Kate talked about the people at her school taking care of kids. Simply stated, “We just take care of them. They know that we’re here.”

Rewards

Eight of the 12 teachers spoke about the rewards they received from teaching in a high-challenge urban elementary school. They discussed these rewards in terms of parents, student achievement, overcoming language barriers, and when students learn to read.

The teachers explained that parental rewards came from the respect parents have for education and showed for them as teachers. Jane remarked, “They [parents] have a lot of respect for you and that’s rewarding, you don’t always get that as a teacher.” She explained that her students’ parents wanted their children to be successful and they were respectful of teachers and teaching.

Kate talked about the importance of working with parents in a partnership for helping her students achieve academically and socially. She told a story about a mom who had asked her if she would visit with her middle-school daughter, a former student of Kate’s, because she was skipping school. Similarly, Opal, who has been at her school for 23 years, talked about how she felt when former students came in and told her they wanted their children in her room because they remembered that her class was hard but she was always at school. She went on to say, “And it’s so funny because they’ve [the students] been really good but their parents know me and it’s like I’ve just become part of the community here. You can go anywhere in the community on the south side and they all know Opal.”

Student achievement was another reward the teachers discussed as a reason for staying. When their students were successful, the teachers felt incredibly rewarded. They talked in terms of the work that it took to get their students from

where they were to where they needed to be and the satisfaction that came with seeing that light come on or hearing “Oh, I get it”, from their students. Sara said, “...you hear them read and then to see the gradual improvement over the year is just amazing. I love it.” Along the same line, Kate remarked, “These kids, sometime you might spend weeks on just one topic trying to get through to them and then they do get it, they’re like, woo-hoo, I mean they get excited.” She went on to explain that in the upper socioeconomic school where she began teaching, the students just didn’t get that excited about learning. Bill also reported that his students’ successes were very rewarding. “...just a little bit of success, they think it’s a good deal because it’s something they haven’t had whereas kids you know that are in an upper socioeconomic are used to getting things all the time.” Jill said, “It’s rewarding when you have a student who starts in kindergarten and then to see them go on to 4th and 5th grade and then they’re on the honor roll, it’s exciting. It’s just so, it just really makes me want to cry.”

Because the schools had a majority of Hispanic students, many of the teachers faced the challenge of trying to overcome language barriers. They reported that the rewards they received when their students could finally converse with them were very satisfying. Jane remarked, “...but I think the rewards are so much extra because I would never get the rewards with the English speaking child just walking in and I’d say okay we’re learning the sounds and they already know half the sounds”. She went on to say that when her students could tell her things they’ve been working on all year and they could use the information, she felt a sense of accomplishment. Beth also discussed the rewarding feeling she experienced when her students could understand

what she was saying and what she was teaching. She felt very excited when this happened, especially when her students started out the year not speaking any English. When the students “won’t listen to you and won’t try and won’t do anything and then by the end of the year when they are able to come up and carry on a conversation and they’ve made so much progress, that’s what’s so exciting to see. When they first talk to you, it’s so exciting. It makes me feel good about what I do.”

Students’ learning to read was also a reward the teachers discussed. “A lot of satisfaction, a lot of satisfaction” was how Jill described her students’ success in reading. As she talked about her kindergarten students learning to read, she lit up, saying that she went home many nights smiling because that one student she had that she had been worried about had finally read. She went on to say, “I knew that they were getting there and to see them actually just do it, that is just rewarding to me.” Jane spoke passionately about how teaching reading was rewarding, “I think if I can give them that, then there’s nothing that can’t open the door to later on, if they can read, it can open the door for everything.” Just teaching them to read brought a rewarding feeling to Fran when they “finally get it, they’re reading and when you get them at the beginning of the year and they don’t know very much, you feel like you’ve really accomplished a lot when they’re reading and some of them end up reading pretty easy chapter books.”

Jill, a Kindergarten teacher, best summed up the rewarding feelings the teachers experienced when she told this story. “I think the best thing that happened all year last year was these two little boys that I had. One had never been to school. This

was all new to him and at the end of the year he was one of my best readers. I saw him grow immensely and it just brought chills to me.”

Focus on Instruction

Having a focus on instruction whether it is driven by data, an adopted instructional program or weekly tests was a reason given by seven of the 12 teachers for staying in their schools. These seven teachers taught in four of the schools included in this study. In two of the schools, a focus on instruction was not mentioned by any of the teachers as a reason for staying.

In the four schools where the teachers mentioned focus on instruction as a reason for staying, their reasons varied. School III and IV were involved with a Reading First grant awarded by the State Department of Education to improve reading achievement for the Kindergarten thru 3rd grade students in their schools. School III had also adopted Core Knowledge, a unit based approach for providing instruction in all curricular areas, as a part of their curriculum. Both of these instructional programs influenced why the teachers stayed at their schools. Jane stated that the requirements of Reading First kept her on task and pushed her further than she might go herself. She went on to say that Reading First pushed many of the teachers in her school further than they would go on their own, “ It [Reading First] keeps everyone moving toward the goal.” Mary, who is a teacher at School III, talked about the ways that designing and implementing Core Knowledge units helped keep the focus on instruction when teachers met and discussed the units they would be teaching each nine weeks.

While Schools II and IV do not have formal instructional programs similar to Reading First or Core Knowledge, the teachers in these schools also talked about instructional focus as a reason for staying in their schools. The teachers in these two schools talked about the use of data to drive instructional decisions and the impact that it had on accomplishing their goals for their students. Fran talked about the different types of data used in School II to drive instruction. "...the upper grades use data from the CRT and decide what areas they need to work on and we use the Gates test and the STAR test to find out where our kids are lower and what we need to work on." Along this same line, Liza talked about using PASS skills and vertical alignment to ensure that the teachers in her grade and the grades below her were focused on what the students needed to know and be able to do in order to move to the next grade. Beth summed up the importance of instructional focus as a reason the teachers stayed when she said, "I just like the way that we are focused on what they need to learn and we just concentrate on that. You teach four days and test every Friday. I really like that, I mean, that keeps you on task. It keeps you focused and makes sure that you teach."

Collegiality

"Everybody seems to know why we are there. Everybody is working toward a common goal" spoke to the need the teachers in these schools had for opportunities for collegiality. Seven of the 12 teachers mentioned collegiality as a reason for staying in their school.

Interestingly, when formal structures were not in place to provide opportunities for collegiality, the teachers found them for themselves. As was the case

with Dina who made time every Thursday to meet with another teacher to plan lessons and talk about what she was doing and how it was working in her class.

In fact, working together was a common theme among all seven teachers when talking about collegiality. “Well, I think since we meet in grade level teams, that time we spend together really helps us support each other by talking to each other and sharing ideas” stated Beth. Along these same lines, Jane commented that to have collegiality in teaching was a wonderful thing. It helped everyone stay motivated and encouraged about teaching. Sara talked about the importance for her of meeting with her fellow teachers to “steal ideas” about skills she was teaching when she said, “It helps me to know what the other teachers are doing because sometimes I can pull and steal ideas about certain skills I want to teach.” Fran remarked, “It is important that we can go next door, I need to borrow this or everybody is real helpful and we talk about what we’re doing. We share copies and they help me remember how I did something before.” Liza commented that even though one of the teachers on her team had “been there forever” and wasn’t about to change, “the rest of us will talk and share stuff and I’ve got this, and what have you got.” All seven of these teachers talked about the importance to them of sharing materials, ideas, and the best practices that were working with their students.

Feeling Needed and a Desire to Help Others

“We’ve had teachers leave before and it worked out for them and I guess I’m just stuck. I don’t want to leave....to know that I’m wanted for six years is pretty good,” Jack explained his own need to be wanted as a reason for his decision to stay in his school. He continued, “I guess because I know they’re struggling I hope I’m a

part of them learning what they should learn and being able to use that as they grow up.” This desire to help others and a feeling of being needed was a reason for staying given by six of the 12 teachers. These feelings of being needed ranged from simply having an empty nest filled with students at school to having empathy for the students because of the teacher’s life experiences.

Mary talked about how having a teacher who showed her love and compassion when she first came to school in America inspired her to teach in her school. “I came here when I was young so I didn’t speak any English. But even though I didn’t speak any English at first, I can feel the love that the teacher gives to the student.” She can remember the struggles that she faced and knew that her students needed her to show the same compassion and understanding. Dina felt needed because “These kids, from a different culture and a different socio-economic background, are just kids who need books, reading, math, and all the fascinating information in the world.” Liza talked about growing up poor and knowing exactly how her students felt. She told the story of how as a 13 year old she would give her babysitting money to her mother to buy groceries. She believed that this life experience was one of the reasons she stayed in her school.

When she talked about the difference between working with higher socioeconomic kids and lower socioeconomic kids, Kate said “They have more than they need. They don’t really need me. It’s more like a selfish reason that I’m here. It’s because I want to feel needed and I guess that’s kind of selfish.” In comparing her students and the students who live in her affluent neighborhood, Jane remarked I can’t imagine anywhere else.....most of my friends teach in the suburbs, I didn’t

want to teach there, that's not what I wanted, I wanted to be there to really help someone that desperately needed it."

Challenges

Dealing with the challenges they faced was a reason six of the 12 teachers gave for staying in their schools. The challenges they described range from differences in language to the socioeconomic status of their students and the challenges that came with poverty.

Before she ever took her job, Jill was told that she would face challenges on the first day of school as a kindergarten teacher. Her students would not have the skills they needed and there wouldn't be any help coming from home. Fran said the same thing about her students coming at the beginning of the year when "they're still not sure of what all of their letters are and their sounds and I'm like oh no, I don't know if I can get them to read this year or not and then around Christmas, or right before Spring Break, sometimes it takes that long, it'll click and so it makes you feel good."

Jane discussed the challenges that come with working with students who do not speak English, "It's very challenging at the beginning of the year because a lot of our students do not speak any English at all, or it's very limited. Sometimes we get some that really do speak a lot more, but at the very beginning it's very difficult." Similarly, Beth reported, "Well, the challenge is a daily challenge because English is not their first language, it's so hard to teach and them to understand just basic vocabulary. You have to do a lot more than the average teacher, so you just teach."

Jack said it most simply when he said that the challenges he faced are “because of the language.”

In confronting the daily challenges of working with students living in poverty, two of the teachers related their experiences. As he discussed his frustration concerning the challenge of poor student attendance, Bill remarked that he tries “to do a lot of hands-on learning in my classroom and I try to do a lot of sitting down and working with them. I just want to make it interesting for them and try to do all I can to try to get them to enjoy school and be there.” Relating the story of delivering some food to the home of one of her students whose mother had recently died, Kate discussed another of the challenges the teachers faced when dealing with the effects of poverty on their students. Upon arriving at the home, Kate discovered that one of the bedrooms was blocked off and unusable because the roof had fallen into the room. She also discovered that the water and electricity had been turned off weeks before. Talking with the father of her student, she learned that he had a full time job but wasn’t able to pay his bills. She urged him to contact either the school counselor or principal who could put him in touch with agencies that could help him pay his bills.

Parents

The parents they work with and the appreciation they had for what the teachers do for their children was a reason five of the 12 teachers gave for staying in their schools. The teachers talked about how supportive the parents were and that they would do anything they needed to for their children even if they didn’t always understand what the teachers needed them to do. The teachers also related stories about parents who wanted them to have their other children in their class. “Having a

brother and knowing that another one is coming on and parents tell me, I've got one in pre-school, he's coming to kindergarten next year I want you to have him. That makes me feel really good because it makes me feel like I've done a good job with their other kids," Jill said.

Jane and Liza both said that the parents were grateful and showed them respect as a teacher. Fran discussed how much she appreciates the support that the parents give her, "I had one parent, I told her that her child was misbehaving and I saw a change the next day." Discussing how nice it was to be loved back by the parents of her students, Sara stated, "They love you back. They are appreciative. I just feel the appreciation and support." She went on to say that it was gratifying to see how much importance the parents put on education. When the parents told them thank you for what they did as teachers, they all felt good about what they did with their students. "They are always thanking us, they cook for us, they give us small gifts, tokens throughout the year," explained Sara.

Summary

In this chapter, the schools and teachers included in this study were described and the themes that emerged from the teachers' interviews were discussed. The emerging themes were: relationships with students, rewards, instructional focus, collegiality, feeling needed and the desire to help others, challenges, and parents. The reason given by most of the teachers for staying was relationships with students; this theme was reported by 11 of the 12 teachers interviewed. The teachers reported that the rewards they felt from student achievement, teaching the students to read, parents, and overcoming language barriers were reasons that they stayed in their schools.

Instructional focus, whether it was in the form of data driven instruction or the adoption of specific instructional programs, was another reason some of the teachers gave for staying. Another theme, collegiality, either in the form of working together and sharing ideas with one other staff member or in groups was important to the teachers. The theme, feeling needed and the desire to help others spoke to the teachers' feelings about the importance of their work in the schools. A number of the teachers reported challenges as a reason for staying in their schools. The challenges varied from language differences to working with families who live in poverty. Parents was another theme that came from the teachers' interviews. The teachers discussed the support and respect they got from parents as a reason for staying in their high-challenge urban elementary schools.

The next chapter provides a summary of the findings, recommendations and conclusions from this study of why, from their own perception, quality teachers continue to teach in urban elementary schools with a high percentage of minority and low socioeconomic students.

CHAPTER V

Summary of Findings, Recommendations and Conclusions

Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the findings, recommendations, and conclusions for this study. This phenomenological research study was conducted to determine why quality teachers continue to teach in urban elementary schools with a high percentage of minority and low socioeconomic students.

As recently as 2004, Haycock reported that “poor students, low-performing students, and students of color” (p. 8) were the least likely students to have quality teachers. However, in my experience, I know that there are quality teachers who are teaching these students in high-challenge urban elementary schools. In this phenomenological study, I have tried to identify, understand and describe why quality teachers chose to teach in urban elementary schools with a high percentage of minority and low socioeconomic students. I wanted to know why the teachers stayed because students in these schools need quality teachers in order to have the same educational experiences and successes that their peers, who are not challenged by trying to learn a new language, or facing the cruelty of poverty on a daily basis, receive in other schools.

To come to an understanding of and describe the emerging experiences of quality teachers’ reasons for staying, a total of 12 quality teachers from six urban elementary schools with a majority-minority and low socioeconomic student population were interviewed. The 12 teachers whose interviews were included represented three ethnic groups and both genders with the majority of the teachers

being white females. Their years of teaching experience varied from four to 26 years. Four of the teachers had taught in only one school while six had taught in two schools. Two teachers had taught in three schools. Interestingly, only one of the teachers had taught in a school that was not a high-challenge urban elementary school. Three of the teachers pursued careers outside of the education field prior to beginning a career in teaching. Two of the teachers had a Master's Degree while the remaining 10 had Bachelor's Degrees.

Following interviews with each of the teachers, transcripts were made and read thoroughly a number of times. The transcripts were then coded and emerging themes were identified. A total of seven common themes emerged across the interviews. A summary of these themes is provided in the next section.

Summary of Findings

Summary of Themes

As a result of interviews with the 12 teachers who chose to teach in high-challenge urban elementary schools, seven common themes emerged. These themes were: relationships with students, rewards, instructional focus, collegiality, feeling needed and a desire to help others, challenges, and parents.

The most common emergent theme was a relationship with students. Eleven of the 12 teachers said this was a reason for staying in their school. They discussed their love for their students. The teachers also talked about how important it was for them to be a part of their students' lives. It was crucial to the teachers to be involved with their students in more than an academic role. Martin Haberman (1995) discusses the importance that star teachers of children in poverty place on developing

relationships with their students. He states that by developing relationships with their students, star teachers are able to teach their students more because they have spent time getting to know them. Perhaps this is the reason the teachers in this study feel that having a relationship with their students is critical to the students' academic success. This theme is also consistent with the findings of Williams (2003) in her study of quality teachers' reasons for staying in urban, suburban and rural schools. The teachers in her study reported that they stayed because of "the personal bonds that they form with young people" (p. 72).

Seven of the 12 teachers reported that rewards were one of the reasons they stayed. The teachers stated that they felt rewarded when their students were able to achieve academically. Another reward the teachers reported was witnessing their students overcoming language barriers while they were learning. The respect that the parents of their students had for them as teachers was another reported reward. Finally, they were overwhelmed by the enthusiasm and excitement of their students when they were able to begin reading. These responses are consistent with teachers' responses in Williams (2003) study of exemplary teachers in seven school systems in North Carolina. The teachers she interviewed reported "witnessing students' change and growth, inspiring them to learn, helping them to acquire such essential skills as reading" (p. 72) as a motivating factor in their decisions to remain in teaching.

A focus on instruction in their schools was reported as a reason for staying by seven of the 12 teachers in this study. The research of Johnson and Birkland (2003) supports this finding. In their research, they discovered that teachers are more likely

to choose to teach in schools with “practices that kept students focused on learning” (p. 24).

There were seven teachers in this study who reported that a focus on instruction was very important to their decision to stay in their schools, regardless of whether a formal instructional program like Reading First was used or the school administration required that the teachers use data to drive instruction. They all believed that the climate of the school was enhanced by this strong instructional focus. Because this focus influenced their teaching and their conversations about teaching and learning, it enabled them to provide academic success for their students.

Collegiality was another theme seven of the teachers reported as a reason for staying in their schools. Opportunities for collegiality were a part of the formal structure at three of the schools included in this study. These schools required that the teachers meet weekly in grade level teams to discuss data and plan lessons. In those schools where these structures were not in place, the teachers made these opportunities for collegiality themselves. They met during planning time, after school or they ate lunch together in order to engage in collegial conversations about what they were doing in their classrooms.

In one of the schools, a teacher reported that he wished he had more opportunities to meet with the other teachers in his grade level but was unable to figure out how to make this happen. This is interesting in light of the fact that the Reading First program in this school requires grade level planning for the primary grades but there isn’t a formal structure in place in the upper grades that offers similar opportunities for collegial meetings.

The importance the teachers placed on their collegial time is consistent with teacher retention literature. A number of studies have found that teachers are more likely to stay in schools where opportunities to share best practices, grow through meaningful professional development and have open, honest communication are a part of the structure of the school. (Cochran-Smith, 2006; Ives, 2003; Johnson and Birkland, 2003; Williams, 2003)

Six of the teachers talked about their desire to help others and a feeling of being needed as a reason for staying. Several of the teachers have had life experiences that influence this reason. They had teachers who made a difference for them, and they desired to be that kind of teacher for their students.

While all of these teachers faced many different challenges in their work, only six of the 12 reported challenges as a reason for staying. Whether it was students beginning school with a lack of skills, English as a second language, or the grim realities that stem from poverty, the teachers reported that seeing their students work through these challenges in order to learn was an important part of why they stayed.

Lastly, there were five teachers who talked about parents as a reason for staying in their school. They appreciated their supportive parents, who worked hard to make sure their children got their schoolwork finished. The teachers also felt gratified by parents who wanted their other children in their classes. Interestingly this finding is the opposite of Ives' (2003) findings in his research on teacher retention. He reports that non-supportive parents were a reason the teachers in his study gave for moving to another school.

Threads

My interviews with the 12 teachers included in this study resulted in the emergence of seven common themes that were fairly easy to identify and describe. As I identified the “invariant constituents” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121) and clustered them into the seven common themes that emerged, I kept thinking about the threads that seemed to weave these themes together. Creswell (2003) described sophisticated phenomenological studies as those studies that go beyond a description of the themes to connections of the themes. Two connecting threads revealed themselves as I thought about my visits to the schools, the teachers and their interviews.

Firstly, each of these teachers knew that the work they did was important. Their passion for the art of teaching and the importance of their chosen profession came through during each of the interviews. Yet not one of them ever explicitly stated they believed they were crucial to their student’s success.

What is most interesting about this unspoken understanding of their work’s importance is that they never talked in terms of what they did; they never said “I am the vital factor.” The teachers didn’t think of themselves as, “Oh I’m so great.” They were not self deprecating but they didn’t brag about their accomplishments. If and when they told a story about their students’ or a particular child’s achievement it was always in the context of, “Oh, this child did really well,” or “I had a really great group of kids.” They knew that they are having an impact, but it wasn’t verbalized that way. They never talked about how their teaching impacted their students; they always talked about what their students were doing to achieve success. Even in one instance, when I commented that perhaps it was the teacher that had contributed to the success

of her class, Liza talked about how proud she was of her students for increasing their reading scores.

It is fascinating that the teachers seemed to describe the impact they were having on their students' academic achievement in terms of the students' success. Even when they discussed feelings of reward when their students were able to be successful, they never spoke in terms of what they had done to ensure that success. Their students' successes were based upon the students' accomplishments. This is interesting especially in light of the most important thread weaving all of these themes together.

The most important thread that weaves through each of the seven themes is kids. These 12 teachers were always all about the kids they had in their schools. They didn't refer to them as "my students." They were "my kids." Several of the teachers remarked that if the schools they taught in were not focused on the kids, they didn't think they would stay. "We do everything for kids" and "I don't think I could work anywhere where people are not doing their jobs and helping kids" were two statements given that illustrate how important focusing on kids was to these teachers.

When they talked about their students, the teachers would lean forward and really look into my eyes as if trying to make sure I understood how they felt, not just what they were saying. They would sigh deeply when talking about the challenges of teaching English Language Learners, or when they discussed the obstacles that some of their students faced because of their socio-economic status. The teachers would laugh easily when talking about how funny their kids were. When they talked about how their students are sometimes perceived, their frustration became evident. They

also spoke with awe in their voices when discussing how committed their kids were to learning to read or do math. Several of them spoke with such passion about their work that they were on the verge of weeping. Yet, they held back their tears. I wonder if this stems from their choice to teach in their schools. They have to be tenacious about their work and tenacious about their kids. Crying isn't tough enough to get the results that they expect.

The joy that they experienced when their students were successful came through in their voices when they told stories about their students' achievements. During these stories, they would sit a little straighter and smile broadly. They were proud teachers of successful students.

Because their passion for their students came through so clearly in these interviews, I can't help but wonder if their love for kids and especially the kids in their respective schools is just understood. Teachers say they teach because of kids, because they love kids, because they want to make a difference for kids. Perhaps that is why the teachers included in this study never verbalized this as a reason for staying in their respective schools. Their "kid-centric" outlook was so internalized that it was a part of who they were as teachers. This outlook became then, instead of an emergent theme, a thread that ties all of the themes together.

Recommendations

In light of current research on the impact a quality teacher has on student achievement, it is imperative that school administrators hire and retain these teachers for their students. Babu and Mendro (2003) found that low achieving students could become high achievers given the benefit of a quality teacher. In their research, they

discovered that students in high-challenge urban schools who have a quality teacher for three consecutive years can overcome the challenges they face and achieve academic success. Similarly, Rivkin, Hanushek and Kain (2002) determined that the disadvantages associated with poverty can be virtually eliminated when a student has a quality teacher throughout elementary school.

However, the students who most need quality teachers generally do not have them. As recently as December of 2006, the superintendent of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system admitted that “low performing, high-poverty schools didn’t have the same quality of teachers that higher-performing CMS schools have” (Flono, p. 11A). In fact, Haycock (1998, 2000, 2004), Darling-Hammond (2000) and Ingersoll (1999) have been calling attention to the lack of quality teachers in high-challenge urban schools for at least the past nine years. Congress recognized this problem and attempted to solve it when the NCLB Act was reauthorized in 2001 by including a provision that required states to develop a plan to ensure all teachers would be highly qualified by May 2006. Currently, not all of the states in the United States have met this requirement

Fortunately, as this study revealed, there are quality teachers in high-challenge urban elementary schools who stay for a variety of reasons. If school administrators know that it is imperative that students in high-challenge urban elementary schools have the benefit of a quality teacher and we know some of the reasons these teachers give for staying, what is the next step?

Recommendations for District Level Administrators

From a district level perspective, there are a number of policies that could be put into place to recruit and hire quality teachers for their high-challenge urban elementary schools. In reviewing literature that discusses teacher retention from a district perspective, a number of reports revealed that a safe and orderly climate and mentoring and induction programs were important especially to new teachers (Stockard & Lehman, 2004; The Urban Teacher Collaborative, 2000). To this end, school district officials in those urban districts where high-challenge schools exist should ensure that district wide discipline policies are in place and effectively implemented in schools. This requires communication and on-going training for all school employees.

Additionally, human resource departments should develop effective induction and mentoring programs for all new teachers, not just first year teachers. For example, these programs should include familiarizing teachers with district policies concerning their contracts, leave time, job descriptions, evaluation systems, certification requirements, just to name a few vital pieces of information necessary for negotiating the bureaucracy of urban school districts. Mentoring programs must include training for teachers acting as mentors so that they can effectively engage in this role. This training should include a peer coaching model that would provide opportunities for those collegial conversations which are so vital to retaining quality teachers.

Working with local colleges and universities, human resources personnel could also hold job fairs in those high-challenge urban elementary schools most in

need of quality teachers. This would give prospective teachers an opportunity to tour the schools, meet the teachers and administrators working there and see the students who attend the school. Again, working with colleges and universities, district personnel could develop cohorts of para-professionals who are interested in obtaining teacher certification in “grow your own programs”. While examining the number of strategies districts could employ to recruit and hire quality teachers, it is just as important that principals do what they can to retain quality teachers in their high-challenge urban elementary schools.

Recommendations for Principals

Returning to the seven themes that emerged in this research study, and for the purposes of designing and implementing structures that principals might implement, these themes could be divided into two groups. If we think of the themes in terms of those that could be controlled and those that could be influenced, they can be grouped this way.

Themes That Could be Controlled

The themes that could be controlled by an administrator are collegiality and a focus on instruction. Administrators can put structures in place that provide teachers time to meet together for planning, sharing instructional practice and talking about handling differing situations with students. In those schools where teachers in this study were given these opportunities, they spoke specifically about how important these meetings were to them. As this study has shown, providing teachers with opportunities for collegial conversations could prove vital in the retention of quality teachers especially in high-challenge urban elementary schools. Whether it was a

grade level meeting, a vertical team meeting, or an informal meeting to write lesson plans with a colleague, working with other teachers helped the teachers included in this study stay focused on the curriculum. The teachers also enjoyed having an opportunity to share ideas with other teachers. Providing time for collegial conversations could ensure that quality teachers choose to stay.

The role of a building administrator is to consistently and consciously keep teachers focused on instruction. Regardless of whether the focus on instruction was in the form of a formal instructional program or using data to make instructional decisions, the teachers in this study felt that this was a reason why they stayed in their schools. Implementing structures, providing professional development opportunities for teachers to learn to use data, and monitoring student achievement with data are simple ways to ensure that schools are focused on instruction. In this era of NCLB, when school accountability is measured with data, administrators must ensure that teachers are willing and able to use data to stay focused on instruction for all students and that structures are in place that support their efforts.

Any structure or system that a building administrator chooses to implement to support collegiality and provide for a focus on instruction must be valued and protected. These structures must be inculcated into the culture of the school.

Themes That Could be Influenced

Themes that would fit into a group that could be influenced by a building administrator were: relationships with students, rewards, feeling needed and a desire to help others, challenges, and parents. Because these themes appear to be intrinsic values that the teachers possess, a building administrator would be hard pressed to try

to control them. However, by putting structures in place which provide support and nurture the teachers who possess these values in our schools an administrator could influence quality teachers in their choice to stay.

Perhaps the most important choice that any administrator of a high-challenge school could make for her teachers is to recognize that it is crucial to design and implement structures that nurture and support quality teachers. Many times, listening to teachers is the best way to provide support. Using meetings as a time to recognize teachers and their accomplishments is another way to support these intrinsic reasons for staying. Taking a class for a teacher to have extra time to plan and prepare is another way an administrator can support her teachers.

Teachers need to know that administrators understand and can empathize with their feelings. They must have safe and orderly environments in which to work. Sometimes teachers just need a safe place to vent their frustrations and anxiousness about their work without worrying about the ramifications of their feelings. Principals must ensure that there are structures in place that protect teaching and learning from outside interruptions. Providing a school climate that supports and nurtures the work of quality teachers is essential if our goal is to retain the best teachers for our most needy students.

Because the effects of a quality teacher on student academic achievement are so strong, it is imperative that the students in high-challenge urban elementary schools have the very best teachers in our profession. If the goal of public education is to ensure the continuation of democracy, to level the playing field and provide all children in our nation with equal opportunities, it falls upon school administrators at

both the district and building level to design and implement structures and policies that keep the best teachers in our most challenging schools.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study, determining why these 12 quality teachers continue to teach in urban elementary schools with a high percentage of minority and low socioeconomic students, was conducted in an urban school district in the capital city of a southwestern state. In order to get a better understanding of this phenomenon from a variety of perspectives, conducting the study in a variety of school districts would be warranted. Including schools from rural and suburban areas where they are beginning to experience an increase in English Language Learners and more students subjected to living in poverty could also add to our understanding of why quality teachers choose to stay in schools with challenges.

High-challenge urban middle and high schools were not included in the current study yet they face the same challenge of retaining quality teachers. As important as quality teachers are to high-challenge urban elementary schools where the foundation for academic success is laid, middle and high school students must also have the benefit of a quality teacher in order for students to experience life long success. Conducting a study similar to this one in high-challenge urban middle and high schools could help building level administrators in these schools design strategies to retain their quality teachers based upon the results of such a study.

Because the minority population represented in the schools included in this study was Hispanic, interviewing teachers in schools with other majority-minority student populations could provide different results. If quality teachers are to be

retained in all high-challenge urban schools, we must know why they stay in each of these schools.

Finally, it would be interesting to know why building level administrators continue to work in high-challenge schools. As educators, we all have reasons for staying in our schools. Because the role of the school administrator is crucial to the success of the teachers and students in a school, it could be beneficial to come to an understanding of why they chose to stay in high-challenge schools.

Summary

Reflecting on White's (1894) statement from the beginning of this work, "The vital factor in a school is the teacher. He is cause; all else is only condition and result" (p. 19). I think of all of the teachers I have had as a student. I think of the teachers I have worked with and the teachers yet to come to my school. Teachers amaze me. Their passion and commitment awe me every day. I look at the faces of the children in my school, and I hope that I have done everything that I can to make sure they have the benefit of a quality teacher. A teacher who can not only help them learn to read, write and compute, but can show them there is no limit to what they can achieve in their lives.

This study stemmed from a curiosity about teachers, especially teachers who chose to stay and teach in a most challenging situation. I found that the teachers I interviewed stayed because they enjoyed the relationships they build with their students, the rewards, the challenges, and the feelings of being needed they get from their work. They stayed because of supportive parents and supportive colleagues. When the focus of their school is on instruction, they stayed. They stayed because

they know, deep inside that their work is crucial. But mostly, they stayed because of their kids. They loved their students, and they loved what their kids were able to become.

It falls then to the administrators of high-challenge urban elementary schools to provide their students with these quality teachers. We must support and nurture quality teachers for our students. These teachers need opportunities to meet with their colleagues and share their knowledge and their ideas. They must have a school culture that is focused on instruction. Implementing structures that nurture and support quality teachers is the least an administrator can do for her students in a high-challenge urban elementary school.

Students in high-challenge urban elementary schools, many of whom are low-performing, second language learners, members of minority groups, come from poverty and the plethora of other challenges faced in their environments must be given the opportunity to learn from the best teachers in the academic system. Especially in light of the types of jobs that will be available for them when they grow up. Technology, the downsizing of big business, and the exporting of jobs to foreign countries eliminates a number of the jobs that students without the academic tools required for success in the current and future job market would be qualified for. There are only so many manual labor, construction and fast food jobs available.

If public education is really the great equalizer for all people, then every child must receive the benefit of an education that will enable him/her to be successful in the 21st Century. The first step in ensuring that our most needy students achieve this success is by retaining quality teachers who possess the joy, passion and tenacity their

work requires in our high-challenge urban elementary schools. Failure to do so is nothing less than the perpetuation of disadvantage.

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APPENDIX A

Web Diagram

