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“IT SEEMED LIKE A WONDERFUL WAY TO INFLUENCE THE WORLD AND TO TOUCH LIVES”: EXPLORING REASONS TEACHERS STAY IN THE CLASSROOM

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“IT SEEMED LIKE A WONDERFUL WAY TO INFLUENCE THE WORLD AND TO TOUCH LIVES”: EXPLORING REASONS TEACHERS STAY IN THE CLASSROOM

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

BY

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DEDICATION

To my boys, Harrison and Jackson

“Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord.” – Psalm 127:3

H & J, You are my heritage.

I love you with all my heart.

And

To all my students

You have taught me much more than I could ever teach you.

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Finally, I am profoundly grateful to my parents for their love of learning and encouragement of education. How I wish you were here to see me at the end of the course that you set me on, as a child, so many years ago.

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PROLOGUE

This dissertation adheres to a journal-ready format. Three journal articles prepared for submission to refereed journals comprise the first part of the dissertation. Manuscript I, "I'm Here to Make a Difference in Their Lives and to Impact Them for the Rest of Their Lives": Exploring the Micro-, Meso-, Exo-, and Macrosystems and Their Influence on Early Childhood Public School Teachers in the Classroom is prepared for the journal *Teaching and Teacher Education*. Manuscript II, "If I Leave, Who Will Teach the Children?" Reasons Teachers Stay in the Classroom is prepared for the journal *Early Childhood Education Journal*. Manuscript III, "When You Find a Principal You Love, You Stick with Them": Experienced Teachers Perceptions of Principal Support and Teacher Retention is prepared for *Principal Magazine*.

Dissertation Abstract

Retaining experienced, effective teachers in the classroom is essential. In fact, research shows it is the most significant factor in student achievement and the stability of the learning environment (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Gomba, 2015; Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Especially vulnerable to teacher attrition are novice teachers with 44% of them leaving the classroom in the first five years of teaching (Ingersoll et al., 2018). This phenomenological study used interviews to examine experienced teachers' reasons for remaining in the classroom. Through the lens of Brownell and Smith's (1993) conceptual framework, teachers' decisions to stay in the field were categorized into four levels: micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. These initial results showed teachers' decisions for remaining in the classroom fell mostly within the micro- and mesosystems. As a follow-up, an in-depth study of reasons from those two systems was undertaken. Results showed teachers' rationale for staying could be categorized in three broad categories: passion, *lightbulb* moments, and personal responsibility. These categories are described, with quotes from teachers provided for illustration. Finally, implications for administrators to aid in retaining highly effective teachers are presented.

Keywords: *teacher retention, teacher attrition, principal support*

MANUSCRIPT I

"I'm Here to Make a Difference in Their Lives and to Impact Them for the Rest of Their Lives": Exploring the Micro-, Meso-, Exo-, and Macrosystems and Their Influence on Early Childhood Public School Teachers in the Classroom

This manuscript is prepared for submission to the peer-reviewed journal *Teaching and Teacher Education* and is the first of three manuscripts prepared for a journal-ready doctoral dissertation.

Abstract

Teacher retention is at the forefront of educational issues with the number of teachers in the field dwindling. Research shows staffing difficulties afflicting districts are due in large part to a *revolving door*, in which substantial numbers of teachers transfer or leave schools considerably before retirement (Chang, 2009; Ingersoll & Perda, 2010). More than 44% of teachers exit the classroom during the first five years of teaching with 20% of those leaving the profession in the first three years of teaching (Gray & Taie, 2015; Ingersoll et al., 2018). Retention of teachers is imperative for reversing this trend. The purpose of this study is to explore concerns within the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem to determine their influence on early childhood public school teachers in the classrooom. By examining experienced teachers' reasons for remaining in the classroom, findings of this study can aid in turning the tide of teachers leaving the classroom by informing research-based strategies for teacher retention.

Keywords***:*** *teacher retention, teacher attrition*

"I'm Here to Make a Difference in Their Lives and to Impact Them for the Rest of Their Lives": Exploring the Micro-, Meso-, Exo-, and Macrosystems and Their Influence on Early Childhood Public School Teachers in the Classroom

> A twenty-one-year veteran teacher, Arleen, described her first year of teaching, Whenever I was hired, not only were we adding three pre-kindergarten classes, but every teacher in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and first grade would be a new teacher that year at my site. Also, a brand-new principal was coming in. They did give us a mentor teacher, although, my mentor teacher was a fourth-grade teacher. She had wonderful ideas and was a wonderful educator but changing what you see in a fourth-grade classroom down to a kindergarten classroom was very different. We only had two kindergarten classes and the other kindergarten teacher that was hired quit the week before school started. So, it was just me and a long-term sub for a while. I had to step up. I had to make it work. I had to stop and decide if I was going to be able to do this and it worked out. We made it through the year somehow. I still worry for those students that first year, but we made it. That was my first year of teaching. I remember crying every day, you know, just, I don't know what I got myself into. The next year was a little bit better, a little more stable, and as the years went on it got better and better.

Even though Arleen was faced with tremendous challenges in her first year of teaching, she persevered and has remained in the early childhood public school classroom for over twenty

years becoming a leader in her district and the state helping other kindergarten teachers become effective educators. The support of a mentor teacher along with training and knowledge of pedagogy and child development gained through a traditional teacher preparation program sustained her. Arleen has now impacted hundreds of students through her teaching.

Research shows the most significant factor in student success is access to an effective, experienced teacher (Wilson et al., 2004). Retention of well-qualified, veteran teachers supports the maintenance of high caliber instruction, especially in low achieving schools (Hanushek et al., 2016). Despite these findings, almost one-half of teachers in the United States leave the classroom during their first five years (Chang, 2009; Ingersoll et al., 2018; Ingersoll & Perda, 2010). This alarming trend is concerning for all stakeholders due to the sweeping effects on the educational system. Annually, the fiscal impact is significant with estimated national costs of up to $2.2 billion dollars and district costs for departed teacher replacement ranging from $8 to $9.5 thousand dollars (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014; Barnes et al., 2007). Additionally, federal and state governments provide funding dollars through teacher tuition reimbursements or grant programs, which often require a predetermined number of years of service in the field (Goldhaber & Cowan, 2014). Long-term benefits from these monies are lost when teachers leave the field after a short stint in the classroom.

Furthermore, the school environment is disrupted by teacher attrition through the interruption of instructional programs and the hindrance of peer collaboration and collegiality (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Most importantly, the consequence of teacher turnover has a negative effect on children in the classroom. Practitioners identify teaching quality as the most influential school-based factor in student learning (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). The quality and consistency of the faculty are gravely affected by the

cumulative impact of teacher turnover. The average number of years taught by teachers in 1987-1988 was 15 years (Ingersoll et al., 2014). That number dropped to one year in 2008, before bouncing back after the economic downturn to five years in 2011-2012. Research shows teacher effectiveness improves throughout the first years of teaching (Henry et al., 2011; Kersting et al., 2012). Yet, evidence demonstrates exiting teachers are frequently replaced by first-year teachers, thus creating a cycle in which students are taught by a series of novice teachers year after year (Ingersoll et al., 2014).

The teacher shortage is a pressing concern not only nationally, but regionally as well. Districts in many states face challenges as they attempt to hire and maintain enough teachers. Despite eliminating 480 teaching positions and a record number of emergency teaching certificates granted, over 500 teaching positions in Oklahoma remained unfilled at the start of the 2017-2018 school year, thus, failing to meet the needs of a growing student population (Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE), 2017b; Oklahoma State School Boards Association, 2017). Emergency certification in Oklahoma does not require a relevant degree nor relevant work experience. The numbers for the 2018-2019 school year were even more concerning with the Oklahoma State Board of Education (OSBOE) approving 3,034 emergency certificates (OSDE, 2018a, 2018b, 2019). The number of emergency certificates granted in 2018-2019 was a 64% increase over the number issued in the 2017-2018 school year. Seven years ago, only 32 emergency certificates were issued in the state of Oklahoma. Resulting in a 9,381% increase in emergency certificates granted in the past few years.

School districts have taken drastic measures to place teachers in classrooms including increasing class sizes, paying teachers to relinquish planning time and to instruct added sections, rehiring retired teachers, and assigning teaching responsibilities to administrators

(OSDE, 2017c, 2019). Data in Oklahoma indicates emergency certified teachers generally remain in the classroom one year or less with only 20% returning to the classroom for a second year. Ergo, the current 3,034 emergency certified teachers offer little in the way of permanently filling the chasm of additional teachers needed within the classroom. The exorbitant number of emergency certificates granted leaves multitudes of Oklahoma students with underprepared and underqualified teachers.

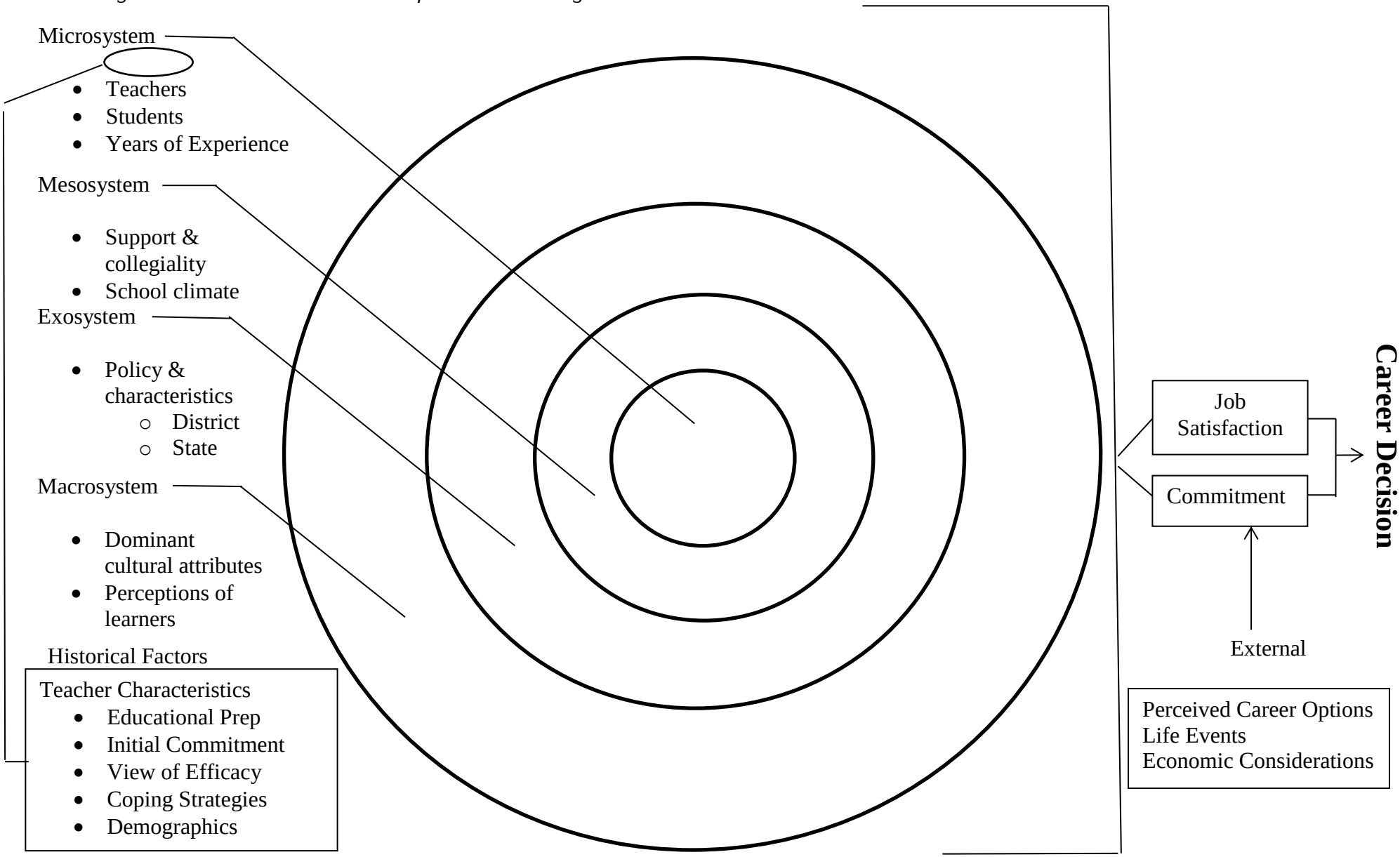
Theoretical Framework

This study, grounded in the theoretical framework developed by Brownell and Smith (1993), aids in the understanding of teacher retention by examining teachers within broader educational contexts. This framework has two assumptions: 1) connections between the expressed dimensions may be multifaceted and reciprocal, and 2) some dimensions may have a higher association than others with teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom.

The framework, based on Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological model, consists of four nested, interconnected systems: *microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem* (Brownell & Smith, 1993; Heineke et al., 2014). The microsystem is closest to the teacher and the classroom. Within the classroom, student-teacher relationships, job assignment, or class size can affect teachers in a positive or negative way**.** Also included within the microsystem are the teacher's historical influences including educational preparation, initial commitment to teach, coping strategies, view of efficacy, and demographics. The mesosystem involves relationships and their interconnectivity at school including collegiality and administrative support. The exosystem consists of broader social structures affecting the teacher and the workplace such as characteristics and policies at the district, state, and federal levels. The macrosystem encompasses the philosophies, beliefs, values, and attitudes of the dominant

culture along with economic states that influence schools and the choices of teachers within them. In addition, the framework considers the effects of external factors on teachers' career decisions. External factors possibly affecting teacher decision-making involve life events (e.g., marriage, pregnancy) and economic considerations (See Figure 1). The relationship between external influences and environmental interactions affects the teacher's assimilation into the profession conceivably affecting future determinations to remain in the field. Therefore, the framework for understanding teacher retention provides a structure to study reasons influencing teachers' decisions for remaining in the classroom.

Figure 1.1 Theoretical Framework for Understanding Teacher Retention



Adapted from Brownell & Smith, (1993, p. 27)

Literature Review

Retaining effective teachers is not a new phenomenon. As early as the 1920s, teacher turnover has been the subject of discussions by administrators, teachers, and stakeholders (Almack, 1933/1970). For many years, school districts across the nation have faced the challenge of keeping qualified and experienced teachers in the classroom (Billingsley, 2003; Ingersoll, 2003; Waddell, 2010). Of the nearly half a million teachers who leave the classroom each year in the United States, 16% retire while 84% transfer schools or leave the profession (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). Urban and rural districts are most at risk for teacher attrition with nearly double the number of teachers leaving them versus suburban districts (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014, Holmes et al., 2019; Kersaint et al., 2007; Leland & Murtadha, 2011). First-year teachers are especially susceptible to attrition with over 9% leaving the field after the first year (Ingersoll et al., 2018). These facts point to the critical need for strategies to keep highly qualified, effective teachers in all classrooms.

The impact of teacher attrition is far-reaching, affecting people, academics, school climate, and finances. While many educational reformers assert teacher attrition is the result of low compensation and student behavior, many teachers cite other working conditions such as the lack of respect for the profession, curricular autonomy, overburdensome paperwork, insufficient administrative support, and inadequate resources as reasons for leaving the field (Byrd-Blake et al., 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future and NCTAF State Partners, 2002; Santoro, 2011). Teacher turnover creates schools lacking continuity and stability when experienced teachers depart and are replaced by

novice educators (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011; Gomba, 2015). Inexperienced teachers are not yet proficient in classroom management or differentiating instruction (Rodgers & Skelton, 2014). Classroom experience is invaluable for gaining professional growth and teacher effectiveness. Studies show teacher turnover results in a reduction in student achievement as indicated by test scores (Hanushek et al., 2016; Henry & Redding, 2018; Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Instability disrupts instructional programs and negatively affects student success (Sorenson & Ladd, 2020; Urick, 2016).

Teacher attrition also has financial consequences. Districts spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on recruitment, hiring, and professional development of new teachers (Barnes et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Synar & Maiden, 2012). Synar and Maiden (2012) proposed the costs of teacher turnover could be separated into four distinct areas.

- *Separation Costs* including exit interviews, gathering of other data, and administrative costs associated with such collection of data represented 2.29% of the total cost of replacement.
- *Hiring Costs*, such as recruitment, advertisement, interviews, reference checks, drug testing, criminal background checks, bonuses, and administrative expenses accounted for 8.64% of the cost of replacement.
- *Training Costs* consisting of introduction to the school and district, new teacher training, mentoring and professional development, materials, and administrative expenses comprised 48.19% of the total cost of replacement.

- *Performance Productivity* expenses are grounded in Sorenson's (1995) calculations of 20% productivity increases per month, necessitating five months to attain complete productivity resulting in 40.92% of the cost of replacement.

  Calculations from this study placed the average cost per teacher exiting at $14,508.86. When teachers exit the field after only a brief stint in the classroom, those monies are lost. Therefore, emphasis should be placed on retention rather than teacher recruitment.

Reasons within the Microsystem

The literature concerning teacher retention and attrition can be viewed through the lens of the conceptual framework. Within the microsystem, several components may affect a teacher's decision to depart the field including class size, teacher-student relationships, educational preparation, coping strategies, initial commitment, and demographics (Brownell & Smith, 1993). Provasnik and Dorfman (2005) noted two of the most prevalent reasons for leaving the classroom included class size and student behavior. Another study posited a reduction in challenging student behaviors assisted in the longevity of teachers in the classroom (Holmes et al., 2019). Research found teacher stress and organizational demands were heightened as class sizes grew (Schanzenbach, 2014). In another study, physical education teachers stated growing class sizes, which included more students with significant behavior problems as justification for leaving education (Cieśliński & Szum, 2014). While secondary math and science teachers experienced increased rates of turnover with greater incidents of student discipline challenges (Ingersoll & May, 2012).

Research also found educational preparation with limited training often led to teachers' leaving (Lasagna, 2009; Zhang & Zeller, 2016). Ingersoll et al. (2012) and

Redding and Smith (2016) concluded teachers having little or no coursework in pedagogy with inadequate time in the field in hands-on teaching experiences (e.g. Teach for America – TFA), were twice as likely to leave the field after the first year compared to those who received extensive coursework and experience in the classroom prior to teaching through traditional, accredited teacher education programs. Other research showed alternative preparation programs, in which future teachers receive abbreviated preparation for teaching impelled teacher attrition as well (Boyd et al., 2008; Burstein et al., 2009; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

Upon entering the field of education, research shows robust teacher induction programs aid in retention. Ingersoll and Strong (2011) investigated the results of fifteen studies focused on the impact of mentoring and induction programs. They concluded the studies presented empirical evidence that teacher retention was positively affected by mentorship programs. Allen (2013) found university support provided to novice teachers also increased teacher retention.

Reasons within the Mesosystem

Perceptions of collegiality, support, and school climate comprise the mesosystem. Collegiality applies to the relationships teachers have with their peers within the school environment. Schools that foster positive, reliable relationships in which teachers can confide challenges and seek counsel from their peers seem to have lower teacher turnover rates (Allensworth et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2012; Kraft et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2020).

Ladd (2009) found teachers' beliefs of principal leadership and support were more indicative of teachers' plans to leave the classroom than any other component of the

school context. Ford et al. (2019) found administrative support of teacher's psychological needs had a probable effect on teachers' determinations to leave their school. Their findings suggest principals should facilitate teachers' individual perceived needs for competence and autonomy. Additionally, administrators should frequently engage in quality supportive interactions with educators focused on their professional development to promote organizational commitment. Research also showed teachers who believed the principal cultivated an affirmative climate were more inclined to remain in the classroom (Boyd et al., 2011; Ingersoll et al., 2016), while isolated teachers who described low principal leadership were more prone to leave or transfer the succeeding year.

In a study conducted by Urick (2016), shared leadership promoted teacher retention. Teachers' perception of engagement in collective leadership via classroom autonomy, shared school decision making, professional development, principal support, and a positive climate led to a greater proclivity to stay in their present position (Hulpia et al., 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Somech & Ron, 2007). Correspondingly, Provasnik and Dorfman (2005) found lack of planning time, excessive workloads, and limited power concerning school policy influenced teachers' decisions to leave. Research involving more than 50,000 public school teachers in Chicago showed they were more inclined to remain in a school where they had an effect on school decisions (Allensworth et al., 2009). Research signified the value of a positive school climate, since teachers' perceptions of it were directly connected with their determination to remain in the field (Hulpia et al., 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010).

Children in inner-city and lower socio-economic status schools may not have reliable access to effective and experienced teachers (Alliance for Excellent Education,

2014). The workforce in these schools is often comprised of larger numbers of instructors holding alternative certification or emergency approval and lacking certification in the area taught. All too often, less possibility for collaboration, feedback, and limited access to highly qualified, experienced peers and mentors exists for teachers in high-risk schools. Teachers' performance in high-poverty schools tends to level out after a short number of years due to the inability to collaborate with others and assess and reflect on pedagogical methods. In these lowest achieving schools, morale and school community are adversely affected since schools that are difficult to staff emerge as sites to depart, rather than sites to remain.

Reasons within the Exosystem

Policies and characteristics at the district, state, and federal level form the exosystem. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2014) put forth a policy brief featuring the work of the national nonprofit organization, New Teacher Center. It asserted a model consisting of a robust structure of professional learning whereby clearly defined effective teaching provided guidance for the global program and novice teachers obtained extensive induction and opportunity for school-based collaborative learning. In this era of accountability, novice teachers may rapidly feel voiceless and disheartened when expected to teach a restricted and/or scripted curriculum including excessive standardized test preparation activities (Hancock & Scherff, 2010). Likewise, veteran teachers with little classroom autonomy sought relief by exiting the field (Ingersoll et al., 2016). Glazer (2018) found experienced teachers left the classroom when they had no power to change the curriculum and/or pedagogy imposed on them by district officials.

Added obligatory responsibilities and required documentation affects many teachers' desire to remain in the field. The Nance and Calabrese (2009) study found special education teacher retention was significantly affected by additional, mandatory state assessments and increasing legal requirements. Moreover, many states have developed new teacher evaluation systems that employ multiple measures of performance (Robertson-Kraft & Zhang, 2018). By providing principals with more extensive information, these teacher evaluation systems have been suggested as instruments for "smart retention" or the retention of highly effective teachers (Jacob et al., 2012). In schools with highly effective principals, teachers valued the timely system of observation, feedback, and evaluation (Robertson-Kraft & Zhang, 2018). Also included within the exosystem, compensation is at the center of most discussions concerning teacher attrition and retention with many studies finding low salaries frequently cited as one of the primary reasons for exiting the classroom early (Cieśliński & Szum, 2014; Hancock & Scherff, 2010; Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2017a).

Reasons within the Macrosystem

Contained within the macrosystem of the framework are such elements as the dominant culture's beliefs and attitudes toward teaching, teachers' perceptions of students, and the economy. Schools with large populations of low-income, minority, and low-achieving students were prone to have a greater teacher attrition rate (Boyd et al., 2011; Boyd et al., 2005). Lasagna (2009) reported teachers made the determination to leave the field, in part, because they believed students from the inner city were not capable of succeeding academically.

External Personal Reasons

External personal factors may influence teachers' commitment to the profession. These can include economic considerations, perceived career options, and life events such as pregnancy, marriage, and spousal relocation. Ingersoll (2002) found nearly 40% of teachers include family or personal reasons for leaving the field. Moreover, insufficient funds for family needs or a perceived unacceptable standard of living were also given as reasons teachers exit the classroom (Cieśliński & Szum, 2014). Securing permanent positions and the limited opportunities for career advancement also influenced teachers' decision to depart (Cieśliński & Szum, 2014; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014).

Teacher retention is a crucial component in solving the teacher shortage problem (Billingsley, 2003) and achieving better outcomes for students (Wilson et al., 2004). Ingersoll (2001) notes teacher recruitment is futile if teachers depart after only a short time in the field. Despite this information, research has been unbalanced with reasons teachers leave the classroom receiving much more consideration than reasons teachers remain in the classroom (Gomba, 2015; Perrachione et al., 2008; Waddell, 2010).

Purpose

Numerous research studies have examined the issue of teacher retention by investigating reasons teachers leave the classroom, but few have explored the reasons teachers remain (Cieśliński & Szum, 2014; Gray & Taie, 2015; Heineke et al., 2014; Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & Perda, 2010; Lindqvist et al., 2014; Neto et al., 2018; Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2017a; Scheopner, 2010; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014). This disparity in research between reasons for teacher attrition and retention has left a gap in the literature, which this study seeks to fill.

Additionally, many studies involving teacher retention (Doney, 2013; Gomba, 2015; Perrachione et al., 2008; Waddell, 2010) did not target early childhood public school teachers. These studies included secondary teachers and elementary teachers. Early childhood is a distinct subset of children requiring teachers who possess specialized knowledge of child development and content. While there has been research concentrating on retention in early childhood (Kwon et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2018; Torquati et al., 2007; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Wells, 2015), it has been comprised of infant, toddler, and preschool teachers within the childcare setting. This study seeks to fill the gap by focusing on early childhood public school teachers.

The purpose of this study is to explore concerns within the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem to determine their influence on early childhood public school teachers in the classrooom. The primary question guiding this study is: 1) How do characteristics within the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem levels influence early childhood public school teachers in the classroom?

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research design was used for this study of teacher retention. Qualitative research allows for rich description of a person's lived experience; hence this study analyzed, interpreted, and described the teachers' lived experiences and reasons for remaining in the classroom (Bazeley, 2013). Many studies focused on teacher attrition and retention have employed quantitative methods using large, national data sets (Hancock & Scherff, 2010; Ingersoll, 2003; Urick, 2016), and smaller data sets (Ryan, et al., 2017; Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2017; Vagi et al., 2017; Whipp & Geronime, 2017). This

study seeks to balance the research by using a qualitative study, which provides a comprehensive view of teacher retention (Bazeley, 2013). Balancing the research using qualitative methods offers a more holistic view of teacher retention.

The researcher conducted classical phenomenological research for this qualitative study using interviews to examine the phenomena of teachers' rationale for remaining in the classroom (Gay et al., 2012; Grbich, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Zhang and Zeller (2016) conducted interviews of 60 novice teachers in their mixed methods, longitudinal study to gain information regarding effects of preparation on teacher retention. Their findings indicated more than twice as many traditionally prepared teachers remain in the field as compared to alternatively certified teachers over a three-year period. Interviewees trained through the *minimal*, alternative program stated they felt unprepared to manage a classroom on their own. Additionally, Glazer (2018) utilized interviews of 25 experienced and invested teachers and found teachers often leave the profession as an act of resistance. The resistance lens revealed issues of power, autonomy, and unacceptable policies and practices that drove teachers away. As is evidenced, the use of in-depth interviews for this study was grounded in previous research and sought to provide a richer perspective of reasons teachers remain in the classroom (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participants and Setting

A stratified purposeful sampling method was applied to achieve the selection of participants who met the criterion for the study, which included: (Etikan et al., 2016; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 1990)

- Current Oklahoma public school educators teaching children in the early childhood grades of pre-kindergarten through third grade, and
- Participants who have remained in the classroom at least five years.

Once recruited, participants were divided into three subgroups based on years of teaching: 1) 5-10 years; 2) 11-20 years; and 3) 21 plus years. Four teachers from each of the three strata were interviewed for a total of 12 participants. The researcher chose to require participants to have completed five years of teaching due to research that shows nearly one-half of teachers leave the field in the first five years, thus making remaining in the classroom a minimum of five years a key point in teacher retention (Chang, 2009; Ingersoll et al., 2018). All teacher participants held a traditional teaching certificate.

Beginning with professional contacts in the field, the researcher solicited potential public school teachers from various contexts throughout Oklahoma. Teachers equally represented a range of settings with four each from rural, urban, and suburban schools and from 0-49% poverty level, 50-75% poverty level, and 76-100% poverty level. Six school sizes spanned 160 to 410 students while the other six schools extended from 520 to 900 students. Across the participants, the researcher strove to interview teachers working with diverse socio-economic levels, ethnicities, and cultures. Demographics of the participants and their schools are included in Table 1.

Table 1.1

Participants' and Participants Schools' Demographics

Pseudonym	Years of experience	Urban, rural, suburban	School population	Percentage of free & reduced lunch	Percentage minority enrollment	Age	Grade level currently teaching
Jean	38	Suburban	73	16	30 (Majority Black & Hispanic)	60	Pre-K
Lori	30	Rural	227	57	40 (Majority Hispanic)	53	3rd
Grace	25	Rural	279	75	69 (Majority American Indian)	58	2nd
Arleen	21	Urban	413	100	74 (Majority Hispanic)	43	K
Sue	20	Urban	546	94	83 (Majority Hispanic)	48	2nd
Suzanne	18	Rural	520	47	22 (Majority Hispanic)	51	1st
Alane	16	Suburban	309	74	43 (Majority Hispanic)	39	K
Jackie	14	Suburban	694	42	41 (Majority Hispanic)	35	K
Lurie	8	Rural	635	55	57 (Majority American Indian)	30	Pre-K
Harriet	7	Urban	358	100	88 (Majority Hispanic)	29	3rd
Cheryl	6	Urban	900	100	82 (Majority Hispanic)	35	Pre-K & K
Dawn	6	Suburban	535	42	38 (Majority Hispanic)	29	2nd

Data Sources and Procedures

Interviews

An interview, the principal method for data collection in phenomenological studies, was designed for the purposes of this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews allowed the researcher to study and probe participants' replies to collect comprehensive data concerning their experiences and feelings (Gay et al., 2012). One- to two-hour interviews were conducted with current, pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade classroom teachers; interviewees met in-person or via FaceTime or Zoom. All interviews took place at a time mutually acceptable to both parties and were recorded using the Voice Memo application.

Interviews were a combination of structured and semi-structured formats (See Appendix A for complete interview protocol). While structured interviews often do not permit the researcher to investigate participants' views and understandings, they do serve the purpose of collecting common sociodemographic data, therefore justifying their use in this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Semi-structured interviews are guided by a flexible set of questions allowing the researcher to explore participants' responses regarding their perceptions and experiences. The semi-structured portion of the interview enabled the researcher to gather rich data focused on teachers' decisions to remain in the field. The interview was structured with the conceptual framework in mind. It was comprised of questions based on the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (Brownell & Smith, 1993; Heineke et al., 2014). The structured section consisted of pre-worded, demographic questions asked of all participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The semi-structured section used an interview guide with questions to be explored. The researcher

began by asking a broad, open-ended question of the participants regarding their thoughts and feelings concerning their teaching career and their decision to remain in the classroom. Dependent upon the participant's answer, the researcher consulted the follow-up prompts that addressed various levels of the framework (see Appendix A). Each participant was asked to address each area of the framework directly or indirectly.

Field Notebook

A field notebook was maintained documenting the physical and social context of the research setting, actions, and experiences (Bazeley, 2013). The context is crucial for understanding, interpreting, and transferability of data. Field notes were handwritten in a notebook before and after each interview. They included date, time, place, details of the interaction, and reflective commentary (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Connections and informal thoughts of the researcher were also documented in the field notebook (Emerson et al., 2011). Following the interaction, the notes were transferred to Dedoose (2018), a cross-platform application for analyzing qualitative and mixed methods research for easier and more comprehensive analyzation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative studies is an ongoing process that takes place concurrently with the collection of more data (Bazeley, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Analyzation of completed interviews and field notes throughout the process of data collection served to guide future data collection and the direction of the study. Interviews were transcribed using a word processor. Each line of the transcription was numbered to aid in the analysis of the data and transcriptions were uploaded to Dedoose (2018). The researcher used provisional start codes based on the micro-, meso-, exo-, macrosystems,

and external personal factors to code the data during the first level of coding (Miles et al., 2014). Inductive coding, the emergence of other codes during data collection, revealed additional themes within the proposed systems.

While first round coding encapsulated segments of data into groups, second round coding categorized these groups into fewer numbers of themes (Miles et al., 2014). The second round of coding involved analyzing the provisional codes of the interviews and defining emerging themes and patterns within each set of data before comparing and making connections across cases. Additionally, second level analysis of the interviews entailed analyzing the data by each of the systems provided in the theoretical framework. Level two coding also consisted of meta-coding into the number of codes that emerged for presentation in the findings. The aim of triangulation was to procure confirmation of findings through convergence of varied perspectives (Kasunic, 2005). The juxtaposition in which the perspectives converge is considered to indicate reality.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers are tasked with providing credible and dependable findings, gathered, analyzed, and disseminated in ethical ways (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Trustworthiness of qualitative research is based on the foundational idea that the data accurately measure that which it is sought to measured (Bazeley, 2013; Gay et al, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). Ensuring trustworthiness requires the researcher to think extensively about the study and the process while also thoroughly examining all aspects of the research process. Throughout this process, the researcher must adhere to ethical guidelines, always acting in a principled manner.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) put forward credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as markers of quality in qualitative research. To ensure credibility in the study, the researcher maintained an audit trail of the research process and connected the findings to the existing body of literature (Bazeley, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). Triangulation also helps to ensure credibility by using multiple data sources and connecting the current research to the existing body of literature. In this study, triangulation was accomplished with multiple data sources such as interviews and the field notebook. Another tactic for assuring credibility is to conduct member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, after transcription of each interview, the researcher provided the transcription to the participant for a member check. This strategy affirmed the transcription accurately reflected participants' perceptions and experiences. A final strategy for ensuring credibility is peer review. Colleagues, as well as the dissertation committee, reviewed the data and conclusions to verify the conclusions were possible, based on the data.

Transferability, also known as external validity, is the ability of the results of a study to transfer to other contexts (Bazeley, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). Provision of rich description of the study details including setting, participants, data collection, and analysis permits comparisons of other contexts to be made by the reader. Confirmability is obtained as well when the rich, descriptive detail of proceedings ensures other researchers may replicate the study. Care was also taken when selecting the sample to seek maximum variation, thus granting other researchers a greater range of application. To attain dependability, the researcher used quality, intercoder agreement, and member checks to confirm the accuracy of data devoid of bias (Miles et al., 2014).

Dependability was achieved in the proposed study though many practices including adherence to the guidelines of the institutional review board (IRB) (Lichtman, 2011). An audit trail and triangulation of data with various data sources and connecting findings to previous literature was undertaken by this researcher to maintain confirmability as well (Miles et al., 2014).

Findings and Discussion

Data analysis revealed the participants focused their discussions on the inner systems of the conceptual framework. Data disaggregation showed 28% within the microsystem, 37% within the mesosystem, 23% within the exosystem, and 12% within the macrosystem.

Microsystem

Induction Programs

Ingersoll and Strong's (2011) and Allen's (2013) findings support the provision of a strong induction program to boost teacher retention and strengthen teacher effectiveness. Picucci (2016a, 2016b) also found frequent meetings with a mentor, teaching observations and feedback, and reflecting on instruction increased teacher retention. Provision of a mentor teacher from the same subject area had the strongest effect on curtailing turnover (Ingersoll, 2012). Of the participants who began their careers in Oklahoma, varying levels of support were provided through induction programs. Suzanne received the most comprehensive program support as she began teaching when a state-required induction program was provided for all first-year teachers. It consisted of a three-member residency committee, which included a mentor teacher, the school principal, and a teacher educator from a state college or university. Each member of the

committee observed the novice teacher throughout the year and met on a regular basis with the mentee. Suzanne noted the program, especially her teacher mentor, was a significant support during her first year of teaching and that she "didn't know what she would have done without her."

Lurie, Jackie, and Arleen had mentor teachers with differing levels of effectiveness. Jackie was provided with a peer mentor teaching in the same grade level. In addition, she was given time to observe "master teachers" within her grade level enabling her to see quality teaching practices in action. Lurie met with her mentor teacher consistently to discuss such ideas as ways to implement developmentally appropriate practices in her classroom and conducting effective parent/teacher conferences. Although Arleen was teaching kindergarten, her mentor teacher was a fourth-grade teacher. She remembers the mentor teacher as "a wonderful teacher with wonderful ideas" but translating fourth grade teaching practices to a kindergarten classroom as a difficult task. Dawn's induction experience was unique with first-year teachers in her district required to attend three days of professional development (PD) prior to other teachers reporting for the school year. This PD consisted of learning the district's "mentality," the "feel and vision" of the district, along with meeting with the principal for a great amount of time to learn the principal's expectations of teachers. While many participants talked of various induction programs for beginning teachers, Harriet stated no such program was offered to provide support for beginning teachers in her inner-city district.

Class Size

Eleven of the teachers stated class sizes had grown throughout their time in the classroom, unlike previous studies (e.g. Cieśliński & Szum, 2014; Provasnik & Dorfman,

2005), none of them referred to it as a cause for staying or leaving. They were disturbed with the trend of growing class size with Sue saying, "I think I remember having a class of 19. So, I would guess, I mean I feel like that happened because why would you stay doing this if every year you knew you were doomed?" Jean also voiced concern

> We all know class size is the one thing we can control that will positively impact education. And when you look at class sizes going up by even one or two students, you spend astronomically more time being a behavior manager than you do teaching. So, class sizes have a direct impact on every teacher at every level.

Clearly, teachers experienced the negative impact of larger class sizes, yet chose to remain in the classroom. This matches findings in Ingersoll's (2003) study in which teachers often recommended reduction of class sizes for teacher retention, yet it was seldom provided as a cause for leaving the classroom by exiting teachers.

Placement in Current Position

Maintaining a high-quality teacher cadre is imperative for effective schools (Loeb et al., 2012; Sutcher et al., 2019). Researchers found teacher placement was the result of two factors including teacher preference and/or school policies or practices of school administrators. Much like previous research, participants in this study arrived in their current positions in a variety of ways. Cheryl, Jean, and Lurie applied for new positions in neighboring districts or schools and received the positions after going through a hiring process, while Dawn and Sue followed their principals to a new school. Frustrated with curriculum demands in their previous placements, Jackie and Alane asked the principal to move them to a lower grade level to which each principal consented. Principals asked Arleen, Grace, and Suzanne to change grade levels with Arleen being given the choice

among several positions. Harriet and Lori were told by their principal they would be moving grade levels, although their experiences were vastly different. Both were moved to third grade, a state-mandated testing grade. Harriet was told she was moving to third because she was an effective, experienced, and traditionally certified teacher. When she asked if she could decline, she was told she did not have a choice. Lori was not given a choice either, however, the administrator sent a grade-level colleague with her to third and they provided support for each other. She has happily remained in third grade for 14 years.

Teacher/Student Relationships

Kelly et al. (2019) concluded relationships with students seem to be a prominent factor in teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom. Many studies concluded there is a significant connection between challenging student behavior and students' engagement in learning (Harris et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2015). Participants commented on the overall changes in children, and more specifically the changes in students' behavior since they began teaching. Dawn, a teacher for six years, was the only participant to assert that student behavior had improved. She attributed this to a new administrator who focused the school community and professional development on behavior management. In her seven years of teaching, Harriet has not seen a change in student behavior. The remaining participants recognized a change in students, especially their behavior.

Trauma and Challenging Behavior. Aloe et al. (2014) proposed challenging student behavior resulted in greater teacher attrition. Additionally, higher teacher turnover was positively associated with teaching children with emotional and behavioral disorders (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). Children who had experienced trauma and the often

resulting challenging behaviors was cited by the participants as having grown exponentially with eight participants reporting it as a stressor in their job. Arleen said she sees more extreme behaviors such as outbursts, which has been attributed to emotional neglect/abuse and drug abuse common in the community. “In the past, it has been typical to have one child per grade level with extreme behaviors. Now, there are multiple children displaying these behaviors within a grade level with a minimum of one per classroom.” Jackie also stated the number of students with challenging behaviors had increased. She discussed the challenging behaviors of students saying, “There’s more outbursts with students and more anger and not knowing how to control those emotions without throwing something or kicking something or screaming out than there used to be.” Alane described being punched, kicked, spit on, and yelled at numerous times. Along with these extreme behaviors, Lori, Grace, Alane, and Lurie observed children were less respectful of their authority as a teacher as well.

Sue’s experiences mirrored that of other participants.

> Behavior has greatly deteriorated. It is nothing at our school to see adults chasing children around the building because the children are physically unable to sit in class. Just yesterday in my classroom, we had a fist fight in the morning. By the end of the day, friends were rolling around on the floor kicking, hitting, and screaming. We had to evacuate our room. The day before that my door burst open in the middle of a lesson. I had all my kids engaged and the door burst open. Two children, being chased by adults, burst into my room and scared all my kids. Traumatized them probably. That’s a daily occurrence now. I don’t know if it’s

like that all over or just where I am, but it seems to be a resounding theme. It's scary. It's traumatizing for the adults.

Additionally, Jean remarked

> What I see are more extreme behaviors. There have always been meltdowns. There's always been, you know, power struggles. That's a normal part of life. These are much more frequent and the strength of them is escalated a lot. The intensity of the behaviors we're seeing in school has grown. Children today do not possess as many strategies for handling disappointments and frustrations and anger as they used to. Some of those things aren't taught as directly as they used to be. And so that's kind of fallen on us now. That's another hat we wear now.

Grace noted the same inability to manage emotions, especially anger, as a change she has noticed in students. Cheryl expressed her observations stating

> I feel like behavior issues are more prevalent. I feel like there's also been a rise in this phenomenon of children who don't have boundaries at home….It's like they run the house, which may feel empowering, but it leaves a child with no boundaries. When they get to school and there are boundaries, they might feel safer, but they also might be acting out and pressing to see where the balance is. I've definitely noticed more of that.

Despite their harrowing experiences with trauma and challenging behavior, the participants chose to remain in the classroom. Seven of the twelve participants were concerned with the home lives of children. Grace lamented

> So many come from broken homes. Grandparents are raising them. There are six or seven of my 17 students who are being raised by grandparents because their

> parents are either in jail for drugs or have been taken away because of drugs…A lot of our little babies come from that kind of situation.

Lurie, Arleen, Jean, Grace, Cheryl, Lori, and Jackie pointed out that children often arrive at school with unmet needs and lower social/emotional skills. They believe there is a lack of instruction in this area by parents and so they help children develop these skills. Arleen also spoke of young children's exposure to matters inappropriate for them. Lori championed her students saying, "You might have some that are troubled. You just have to keep looking until you find their point, how you can help them. Sometimes that's challenging." Sue communicated her belief in children by saying

> I believe that every child can be a learner. I believe that every child can also be a member of a community, whether it's a school community or a neighborhood community. I get a chance every single day to make that happen.

Without a doubt, participants were tremendously concerned with the increase in trauma and challenging behavior. Yet, they sought to meet the needs of their students every day. While research points to higher teacher turnover rates when faced with challenging student behavior (Aloe et al.,2014; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020), these participants, who all graduated from traditional teacher preparation programs, were examining the reasons why the behaviors were happening and keeping their focus and attention on the children, not the behavior. Research by Redding and Smith (2016) suggests that traditional teacher preparation aids in mitigating teacher attrition due to challenging student behavior. Feelings of ineffectiveness in classroom management or working with students with challenging behavior may result in alternatively certified teachers leaving the classroom.

Mesosystem

The school climate is paramount to teacher's decisions concerning remaining in the classroom (Podolsky et al., 2017). A positive school climate includes administrative leadership and support, instructional resources, and peer collaboration. Other research studies found principal, peer, and parental support are significant elements of the school climate (Conley & You, 2017; García Torres, 2019; Hughes et al., 2015; Kelly et al., 2019). In line with previous research (Conley & You, 2017; García Torres, 2019; Hughes et al., 2015; Kelly et al., 2019; Podolsky et al., 2017), Dawn remarked, "The big reason that I stay is because of my principals and the community I have with my school."

Principal Support

Effective principal leadership is essential for retention of faculty. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) concluded perceived administrative support was the most indicative factor of teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom. An "inclusive approach to leadership" by the principal resulted in greater support of administrative policies and improved teacher job satisfaction (García Torres, 2019; Johnson et al., 2012).

All participants said they were supported by their principals, although to varying degrees. Participants expressed the importance of a consistent, effective administrative leader with whom they had a strong relationship. Arleen voiced concern regarding the number of administrators she has had throughout her teaching career.

> In my 20 years, I've had eight different principals. We only have one principal and a half-time counselor for over 400 students. I'm lucky to have had some amazing administrators. But it's learning everything all over again just when

> you're trying to get a culture of the school together. It's hard to do when you start over every couple of years.

Dawn responded enthusiastically when asked about administrative support.

> When you find a principal you love, you stick with them. That's what led me here. I like pushing myself. I think it also helps when you have a principal that is really, really supportive. I felt like she was good at molding me to who I was. I've gotten really good feedback of what I need to do better. I just think one of the reasons that I've stayed, honestly, is because I've been pushed, not to the breaking point, but pushed.

Leadership qualities of the principal were relevant to participants. Grace said, "She's a leader because she doesn't expect us to do anything that she will not join us in doing. She's not just here telling us and making us do all these things, but she's doing it with us." Lori appreciated her principal's humble leadership when, in his first year as a principal, he planned a walk-a-thon fundraiser in March just before the state testing window. It was stressful for the teachers. Later, he presented a handwritten apology/thank you note to each teacher. She said, "It meant the world to us that he was willing to acknowledge his mistakes." Jean and Lori appreciated their principals' ability to listen to all sides, reflect on the situation, and make calm recommendations. Jean stated, "I think it helps everyone to feel that they've been heard and to come to common ground." As previous research shows (e.g. Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; García Torres, 2019; Johnson et al., 2012), administrative support and inclusive leadership keeps teachers in the classroom.

Peer Support

Conley and You (2017) found collegial support promoted teacher retention with special education teachers. While the degree of collaboration with peers was shown to impel teachers' retention or attrition (Simon & Johnson, 2015). Dawn stated her belief in the importance of strong peer relationships and emphasized her principal's priority on creating a collaborative team.

> One thing that our principal really focuses on when she hires people is, are you going to be a good fit for this team? You may be an excellent teacher but if you're not going to be a good fit for this team, then she may find another spot for you or just not hire you at all. She's very focused on the interpersonal skills that we have with each other.

All participants spoke of the positive peer support provided at their schools. Jean acknowledged she met her grade level teammate when they were teaching at different schools and completing their National Board certification together. She transferred to the school where her peer was teaching and remembers her reasoning, "The main reason for the move was to get with someone I knew I could help be a better teacher and she could help me be a better teacher. That inspired me to make that move." The support of her grade level team was one of the reasons Suzanne pointed to for remaining in first grade. Harriet, a teacher in the inner-city, asserted, "I'd say peer support is what probably keeps people at our school. We don't have emotional and personal support from administration, but I would say overall the teachers go above and beyond to make sure everyone's okay." Much like Harriet, Sue contended

> I have a lot of peer support. I think the more the administration has become unavailable, the more the teams are having to rely on each other. So, it's kind of a good and bad thing because now you're having to rely on these people that are next to you for a lot more than I think we ever have.

Oftentimes, peers provided professional support including planning together or helping each other with curricular or classroom management support. Lori and Cheryl emphasized knowing and using the strengths of peers when faced with challenges. For example, Lori's team is composed of experienced and novice teachers. The experienced teachers help new teachers with classroom management strategies, while the novice teachers help the experienced teachers with technology. Emotional and personal support of peers was expressed by one-half of the teachers in this study. Six participants enjoyed getting together outside of school to eat at a restaurant, do an activity, or for a monthly payday celebration. Cheryl professed, "We try to meet up as often as we can outside of school just to hang out and get to know each other. It's nice being that close to people who you work with."

Teachers raised few negative points concerning peer support. Being a veteran teacher, Sue stated

> Because I've taught with a lot of these people for the past seven years, I know who to go to for what. A new teacher may not feel that same amount of support because they're still not sure who to go to. When you have been somewhere for a while, you learn those ropes. If the principal is not there, it doesn't really affect me too much because I know who can help me.

Although Alane felt she and her peers were united in their sense of purpose, that her peers would meet any need she communicated, and that they celebrated the adoption of her children with an adoption shower, she conceded there were many cliques among the faculty and she missed having a close "teacher friend."

Teacher turnover certainly affects peer collaboration. Arleen related her experiences with teacher turnover and peer support.

> In my 20 years, I've taught with 13 different kindergarten teachers. We kind of have to build that every year. We have to go through those phases of storming and norming and figuring out how everybody's going to have their roles and their gifts and how to use them. Once we do, it goes really well and that pace is going faster. We've had the same group for the past three years. We've noticed what a huge difference that makes for us, because we don't have to go through those spaces anymore.

Concurring with past research (Conley & You, 2017), participants emphasized the significance of collegial support in job satisfaction and remaining in the classroom. Data also showed the degree of collaboration with peers affected negative and positive experiences leading to retention or attrition (Simon & Johnson, 2015).

Parental Support

Teachers' relations with parents were a significant indicator of teachers' intention to remain in the classroom (Kelly et al., 2019). Further, research exploring the influence of compensation, quality of the school facilities, and connections with parents and the broader community on teacher retention revealed parent and community relationships had the most impact on retention (Buckley et al., 2005). Additionally, other studies found

parental relations fraught with conflict may influence the retention decisions of teachers (Lindqvist & Nordänger, 2016; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014). Four participants spoke of the merit of positive parental relationships that often developed into close friendships. Cheryl summed up the deep relationships with the following statement. “You just have a comradery that makes solving problems so much quicker and better.”

A wide variety of support was described by the participants. Harriet, Jean, and Grace have no parent/teacher organization (PTO) at their schools, while Lurie and Sue had small, fairly supportive PTOs, and Suzanne’s school had a strong PTO. The PTOs varied in their support from clerical (making copies, filling take-home folders) to raising significant funds and providing a plethora of volunteers. Jackie and Dawn stated the level of classroom parental support at their schools, from no support to a great amount of support, differed each year depending upon the composition of the class. Twelve of Grace’s 17 students had a parent or grandparent come to a recent class party showing considerable support. Suzanne and Alane reported the same substantial parent participation for school events. Sue communicated she had very little parent support within her classroom. Harriet’s experiences with parental support were vastly different. When teaching second grade, she had very low parental participation in parent/teacher conferences. After moving to third grade, the percentage of parents attending parent/teacher conferences rose significantly to about 85%. She attributed this to the state Reading Sufficiency Act, which requires third graders to be reading on grade level before promotion to fourth grade.

Parental respect was addressed by five of the participants. Lorie and Suzanne felt valued in their rural communities and Arleen and Harriet perceived the large number of

parents requesting them as teachers for their children as a sign of respect and admiration. Jean asserted many of the parents view her as an asset and a resource, but the growing number of parents lacking respect for the profession has hurt the parent/teacher partnership. She believes this can be overcome by building a connection and a relationship with each parent. Unlike the previous research (Kelly et al., 2019), participants noted that although significant parental participation was desired, it had little effect on their determination to remain in the classroom.

Exosystem

Not unexpectedly, when discussing district, state, and federal policies affecting their decision to stay in the classroom, teachers talked most about district policies followed by state policies and finally federal policies. Teachers provided characteristics and policies within the exosystem influencing retention. Although past research (e.g. Cieśliński & Szum, 2014; Hancock & Scherff, 2010; Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2017a) found low salaries to be a predominant reason for leaving the classroom setting, 11 of the 12 participants believed they were paid competitive salaries. This may be due to the recent teacher pay raise, which was mentioned by some of the educators and a reflection of the financial status of the participants since only three were the primary wage earners in their family.

District Characteristics/Policies

The most prevalent district characteristic influencing teachers to remain in the classroom was professional respect. Participants talked about the freedom to teach in ways that benefit children benefit and policies that favored teachers and students. Similar to the findings of Ingersoll et al. (2016), teachers who were provided the freedom to use

diverse methods and materials when teaching appreciated the respect that the administration showed for their professional knowledge and pedagogy. Ford and Ware (2018) also found a school environment that supports self-regulation and learning of teachers has the possibility of greater teacher contentment and retention. Cheryl, exasperated with the prescriptive curriculum required in her district, stated she remained in the classroom because she was given the opportunity to pilot a Montessori school within the district. This autonomy supports Glazer's (2018) finding that veteran educators often leave the classroom when they have no control over the curriculum and/or pedagogy required by the district. Others valued the ability to determine the schedule within their classroom.

Superintendent's attitudes and decisions also impacted teacher's decisions to remain in the classroom. Especially respected by Arleen was a superintendent's policy to maintain educators certified in the areas in which they teach, particularly in the early childhood grades. In a rural district, Lori spoke of the superintendent's attitude of team. One year, classes began the year in a church building due to delayed construction at the school. When construction was completed mid-semester, the superintendent was present and helped teachers move back to the building. Once the move was over, the principal went to each grade level providing them with money for their classrooms as a gift of appreciation. Teachers in this district regularly receive stipends twice a year, in August and before Thanksgiving. Lori spoke highly of the superintendent's respect and care for district faculty.

As with the other systems, participants pointed out district policies/characteristics that frustrated them. Like past research by Glazer 2018 and Ingersoll et al., 2016, the

most common dissatisfaction was not feeling heard or having input in district decisions directly affecting teachers, students, and the classroom. Seven teachers stated they had no voice in district level decisions, while five educators mentioned the use of surveys and the formation of district committees to gain insight into teachers' perspectives and opinions. However, three of the five believed the surveys to be formalities with little influence on the final decision by the district. Participants also indicated the level of input building administrators had at the district level with three stating their principal contributed to district policies, three stating their principal had some contribution in district policies, and three stating their principals had no influence on district policy.

Two participants provided examples of negative district policies. One initiative concerned an open transfer policy within the district. Alane relayed that, due to her reputation for working well with challenging children, parents with children in other schools could transfer their children to her classroom resulting in her having a much higher percentage of students with extreme behavior. She was not given an opportunity to provide feedback on the open transfer policy and the resulting burnout. Another policy focused on teacher assignment. When asked about the ability to move within the district, Arleen stated

> If you wanted to move, as long as there is an opening and your principal and the principal that you're going to agree, there shouldn't be a problem. The only problem that we do have with movement is we have to have a certain percentage of years of service within all of those buildings. That's why I've taught with so many teachers because that policy has caused them to come in and take a teacher and move her or him to another building just to make that percentage equal across

> the district. I've told principals I would love to be here until I retire or decide to do something else. This is where I feel like I'm meant to be, but at the end of the year, I'm scared every year that they're going to need my years of service someplace else because somebody's going to retire. There's always that jeopardy at the end of the year. What if they moved me? What if they place me someplace else? And so those types of things, to me are stressful-- that type of placement the principal has no control over that.

Arleen has been teaching kindergarten in the same building and the same classroom for 21 years. She grew up attending the school she teaches in, yet every year she is nervous about her placement. These negative policies left participants feeling discouraged and anxious with little input much like research findings by Glazer (2018) and Ingersoll et al. (2016).

State and Federal Characteristics/Policies

Despite the goal of teacher evaluation systems to retain highly effective teachers, participants in this study did not mention teacher evaluations as impacting them in the classroom. Teachers also voiced aggravation with policymakers who had little or no experience in education creating policies without consulting professionals in the field (i.e. a policy proposed by Bill Gates paying highly effective teachers to assume additional students) (Schanzenbach, 2014). They often considered many of these policies to be unreasonable, harmful to children's development, and/or punitive. Educators also communicated the level of respect for teachers and the profession was lacking, although many vocalized that following the teacher walkout in the state, respect seemed to grow somewhat among citizens. Despite finding state characteristics and policies to be

frustrating, every participant expressed these policies did not impact their determination to stay in the classroom.

Participants proclaimed the large umbrella of federal characteristics and policies did not have a direct effect at the classroom level. There were implications at the building level with the provision of Title I monies providing needed materials and teachers while cuts to federal funding resulted in the loss of support personnel such as teacher assistants, specialists, and assistant principals.

Macrosystem

Not surprisingly, since the macrosystem is the furthest removed system from the teacher and the classroom, comments associated with this system were far fewer than the other systems. While none of the teachers attributed characteristics influencing their decision to remain in the classroom solely from the macrosystem, they did state elements from this system along with components of other systems had a cumulative effect on their desire to persist in the classroom. Inside the macrosystem, participants focused on perceptions of education, learners, and teachers, the effect of the economy, and dominant cultural attributes (Brownell & Smith, 1993).

Perceptions of Education, Learners, and Teachers

While the research literature reports diminished support and respect for the teaching profession as concerns by teachers, participants provided mixed reactions to their perceptions of these concerns dependent upon the context (Harrison, 2017; Sass et al., 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). In general, teachers declared their communities viewed education, learners, and teachers positively. Most participants mentioned a favorable shift in community perceptions following a statewide teacher walkout in the

spring of 2018. Five educators taught near universities known for having strong teacher education programs. These communities were especially noted as strong supporters of education, learners, and teachers deeply valuing the importance of education. Support included the passage of bond issues, donations from businesses, and monetary donations from parents. Several educators also spoke of community members lining the streets cheering the teachers each morning as they went to the State Capitol during the teacher walkout or parents bringing food and their children to the Capitol to bolster teachers. The most appreciated characteristic of community support was respect and regard for the teacher's professionalism and expertise.

Each teacher expressed there was a general lack of respect for teachers and education at the state level. Explanations encompassed not being viewed as professionals, continuous funding cuts, and lack of understanding and respect. Despite these feelings, many of the teachers believed state perceptions were *a work in progress* following the teacher walkout and voiced hope that education, learners, and especially teachers would be seen more favorably in the future.

Participants discussed national perceptions of education, learners, and teachers with mixed responses. On the positive side, educators considered the national perception to be one of respect and value of teachers in addition to the provision of resources. Negatively, participants believed national perceptions of teachers to be blameworthy with the education system being a scapegoat for many of the nation's challenges. They also noted several other states were experiencing teacher walkouts and the sense that teachers were merely seen as babysitters.

Economy Effect

According to participants, the economy has had a significant negative effect on the educational system in the state, specifically on the number of new teachers. Teachers emphasized the crisis within the state faced by schools trying to fill the void left by the tremendous number of educators exiting the classroom, often for another state or career. One educator, teaching in a town near a university well-known for producing many teachers, reported having a student teacher every year for several years. For the past six years, she has not had a student teacher due to the low number of prospective teachers. While most respondents previously stated they believed their school paid a competitive salary compared with other similar districts, when asked if they were fairly compensated for their responsibilities held seven felt they were not compensated fairly for their level of education, responsibilities, and multiple roles required. Despite feeling undercompensated, the participants, all traditionally prepared with at least five years of experience, remained in the classroom. This coincides with research (Clotfelter et al., 2011) showing teachers with strong preservice preparation and veteran teachers were less responsive to salary with consideration to remaining in the classroom.

The economy also played a part in the closing of schools and the increase in class sizes. When a school is closed, they pointed out the negative effects on the community losing a school and on the receiving school responsible for taking on additional students. One teacher commented, “Who would have thought it was ok to teach 25 or 26 kindergarteners in one classroom?” The loss of funding also means many teachers spend personal monies funding their classroom, including buying their curriculums. Cheryl expressed her disappointment when walking into her classroom and finding only desks

and chairs were supplied. Needing curriculum and other supplies, Lurie and others in her school posted online wish lists. However, administration told them to remove their wish lists "because it made the school look bad." All teachers reported they had to become knowledgeable, resourceful, and proficient in obtaining resources through other methods including grants, fundraising, and private, philanthropic organizations.

Dominant Cultural Attributes

Most participants who had taught over 10 years recognized shifts in dominant cultural attributes throughout their years of teaching. Teachers said children enter school with more knowledge and exposure to technology and things inappropriate for their age, and with fewer social and emotional skills. Trauma and behavioral challenges have increased, which leads to emotional outbursts with greater intensity. The teachers attributed these shifts to more prevalent substance abuse and changes in the family structure and parenting styles (Agbaria, 2020; Fomby & Cherlin, 2016; Shadur & Hussong, 2019).

Limitations

Participants were limited to teachers living and teaching in Oklahoma. Additionally, the researcher only interviewed traditionally-certified teachers with five or more years of experience. Also, participants self-reported in this study, thus the results depend on their honesty and recall ability. Teachers may have answered questions according to their perceptions of the researcher's desired answers as well.

Conclusion

Teacher attrition has significant and enduring adverse effects on the quality of faculty and student achievement (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Retaining quality,

experienced teachers in the classroom is essential for the success of students and, ultimately, the community (Rodgers & Skelton, 2014). Teachers wield a cumulative effect on student learning and a succession of highly qualified, effective teachers helps to mitigate the gap between underprivileged students and their more advantaged peers (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). Correspondingly, the enduring effects of instruction by ineffective teachers year after year are calamitous. Despite 50% of teachers exiting the classroom within their first five years, a change in perspective allows the 50% of teachers who remain in the classroom to be seen (Chang, 2009; Ingersoll & Perda, 2010; Ingersoll et al., 2018).

The importance of traditional teacher preparation programs (TPP) cannot be overlooked in aiding teacher retention. Previous research (Aloe et al., 2014; Gelmour & Wehby, 2020) shows challenging behavior in students hastens teachers' exits from the classroom. Despite tremendous spikes in challenging behavior, participants in this study chose to remain in the classroom. All participants completed a traditional TPP which helps mitigate the impact of challenging behaviors that pushes teachers out of the classroom (Redding & Smith, 2016). In most teacher education programs, preservice teachers are taught that challenging behavior is a manifestation of an underlying issue and to separate the behavior from the child; bad behavior does not mean a bad child. Participants' responses show their focus is on the reasons for the behaviors, they do not dwell only on the behaviors themselves, which is most likely why challenging behaviors do not drive them from the classroom. Unprepared teachers lack the knowledge and skills needed to work with children displaying challenging behaviors. Rather than seeing

children, inadequately prepared teachers see behaviors. It is imperative that these high-risk children have access to experienced, effective teachers.

Principal and peer support are primal to retaining highly qualified teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Conley and You (2017) found principal support and peer collegiality the strongest predictors of teacher attrition for special education teachers. Participants spoke of varying levels of support and the impact that support had on their desire to remain in the classroom. Principals are obligated to aid in the creation and encouragement of peer collegiality if teacher retention is to be realized. Furthermore, many elementary schools contain five grade levels (pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, first, second, and third grade) of children in the early childhood age range. Yet, only 24% of principals possessed early childhood certificates in a recent survey of National Association of Elementary School Principals members (Leiberman & Cook, 2016). For principals to provide competent support, they must have knowledge of early childhood development and pedagogy. It is crucial that graduate-level administration programs focus on early childhood and elementary education to prepare knowledgeable principals.

Education should have overt public support from the federal to state to district levels. This includes appropriate funding for teacher compensation, curriculum, materials, and supplies. When surgeons enter the surgery suite, all equipment and materials are provided by the hospital or surgery center and funded through patient fees. This equipment is essential for the surgeon to provide care for patients. Curriculum, materials, and supplies are the critical equipment teachers must have to meet the needs of young children. It is unfathomable that teachers, especially considering the salaries of

many of them, are given only desks and chairs and are expected to equip their classrooms with everything else. It is little wonder that teachers often feel undervalued and overwhelmed.

It is vital that the field of education be appealing to attract and retain teachers (Zavelevsky & Lischchinsky, 2020). An appealing profession would encompass professional respect, dignity, and worthy wages. Teachers and the surrounding community commonly view the field of education as unappealing (Glennie et al., 2016). Research centered on reasons teachers remain in the classroom can have positive effects on schools and the field of education. Changes to federal, state, and district policies, school contexts, and classroom experiences can improve the work environment for teachers and affect student achievement. Teachers may feel more connected and less isolated. Most importantly, experienced, effective teachers will remain in the classroom to teach the nation's most vulnerable and valuable population.

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MANUSCRIPT II

"If I Leave, Who Will Teach the Children?" Reasons Teachers Stay in the Classroom

This manuscript is prepared for submission to the peer-reviewed journal *Early Childhood Education Journal* and is the second of three manuscripts prepared for a journal-ready doctoral dissertation.

Abstract

The consequences of teacher attrition have a negative impact on many levels of the education system. Student achievement (Hanushek et al., 2016; Henry & Redding, 2018; Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020), the stability of the school environment (Gomba, 2015; Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020), peer collegiality and mentorship (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020), and school finances (Barnes et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Synar & Maiden, 2012) are affected by teachers leaving the classroom. A component in the solution to teacher attrition is keeping effective teachers in the classroom. Understanding why experienced teachers remain in the classroom is a beginning step in solving the teacher shortage challenge. This qualitative, phenomenological study examined early childhood public school teachers' (ECPST) reasons for remaining in the classroom. Their reasons fell within three broad categories including passion, "lightbulb" moments, and personal responsibility. Knowing ECPST' reasons for staying in the classroom enables stakeholders to enact policies and practices that support their reasons and cultivate a climate; whereby, ECPST remain in the classroom.

Keywords*: teacher retention, teacher attrition*

"If I Leave, Who Will Teach the Children?" Reasons Teachers Stay in the Classroom

In the United States, almost one-half of novice teachers leave the classroom during their first five years and overall, 8% of them exit the field before retirement (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Sutcher et al., 2016). This trend is disturbing for all concerned parties due to the broad effects on the educational system. With estimated national costs of up to $2.2 billion dollars and district costs for departed teacher replacement ranging from $8,000 to $9,500, the annual financial consequences are substantial (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014; Barnes et al., 2007). Moreover, federal and state governments provide funding dollars through teacher tuition reimbursements or grant programs, which often require a predetermined number of years of service in the field (Goldhaber & Cowan, 2014). When teachers leave the classroom after only a short time, lasting impacts from these monies are lost.

Additionally, teacher attrition impedes the school climate through the disruption of instructional programs and the obstruction of peer collaboration and collegiality (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Most significantly, the ramifications of teacher turnover is the adverse impact on children in the classroom. Practitioners determined teaching effectiveness is the most impactful school-based factor in student learning (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). The effectiveness and stability of the faculty are severely impaired by the cumulative impact of teacher attrition. In 1987-88, teachers taught an average of 15 years (Ingersoll et al., 2018). That number fell to one year in 2008, before rebounding, after the economic downturn, to five years in 2011-2012. Due to an increase in the hiring of new teachers, the average public school teacher

in 2015-16 was in her first three years of teaching. Scholars assert teacher effectiveness improves throughout the first five years of teaching (Henry et al., 2011; Kersting et al., 2012). Nevertheless, data shows outgoing teachers are often replaced by first-year teachers resulting in students taught by a succession of beginning teachers year after year (Ingersoll et al., 2018).

The teacher shortage is an urgent issue nationally as well as regionally. Striving to hire and retain enough teachers has proved challenging for districts in many states. Despite eliminating 480 teaching positions and a record number of emergency teaching certificates granted, over 500 teaching positions in Oklahoma remained open at the start of the 2017-2018 school year, thus, failing to meet the needs of a growing student population (Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE), 2017b; Oklahoma State School Boards Association, 2017). Neither an appropriate degree nor pertinent work experience are required for emergency certification in Oklahoma. The approval of 3,034 emergency certificates by the Oklahoma State Board of Education during the 2018-2019 school year was even more troublesome (OSDE, 2018a, 2018b, 2019). The number of emergency certificates granted in 2018-2019 was a 64% increase over the number issued in the 2017-2018 school year. Seven years ago, only 32 emergency certificates were issued in the state of Oklahoma. Resulting in a 9,381% increase in emergency certificates granted in the past few years.

School districts have taken aggressive steps to place teachers in classrooms including increasing class sizes, paying teachers to forego planning time to teach an added section, rehiring retired teachers, and ascribing teaching responsibilities to administrators (OSDE, 2017c, 2019). Research in Oklahoma shows emergency certified

teachers typically remain in the classroom one year or less with only 20% returning to the classroom for a second year. Consequently, the current 3,034 emergency certified teachers provide little in the way of permanently filling the void of additional teachers needed within the classroom. A massive number of Oklahoma students are being taught by underprepared and underqualified teachers as a result of the egregious number of emergency certificates granted.

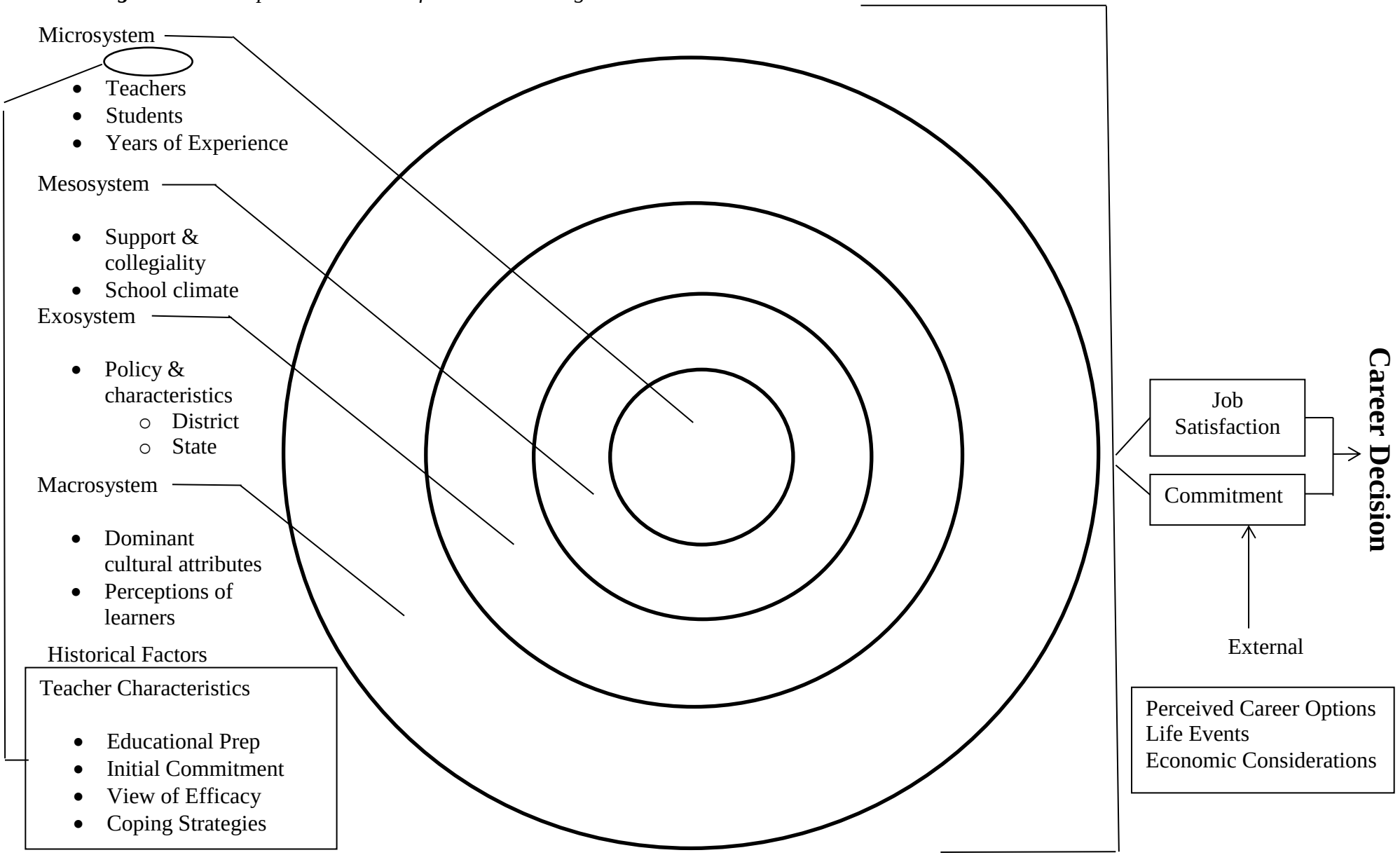
Conceptual Framework

Grounded in the theoretical framework put forth by Brownell and Smith (1993), this study aids in the understanding of teacher retention by investigating teachers within broader educational contexts. This framework has two assumptions: 1) connections between the expressed dimensions may be multifaceted and reciprocal, and 2) some dimensions may have a higher association than others with teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom.

Based on Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological model, this framework is comprised of four nested, interconnected systems: *microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem* (Brownell & Smith, 1993; Heineke et al., 2014). Nearest to the teacher and the classroom is the microsystem. Within the classroom, student-teacher relationships, job assignment, or class size can influence teachers positively or negatively**.** Also contained within the microsystem are the teacher's historical influences including educational preparation, initial commitment to teach, coping strategies, view of efficacy, and demographics. Relationships and their interconnectivity at school including collegiality and administrative support constitute the mesosystem (Brownell & Smith, 1993; Heineke et al., 2014). Broader social structures affecting the teacher and the

workplace, such as characteristics and policies at the district, state, and federal levels, compose the exosystem. The philosophies, beliefs, values, and attitudes of the dominant culture along with economic states that influence schools and the choices of teachers within them comprise the macrosystem. The effects of external factors on teachers' career decisions are also taken into account by the framework. External factors concern life events (e.g., marriage, pregnancy) and economic considerations (See Figure 1) and could potentially impact future decisions to remain in the field. The teacher's acculturation into the profession is influenced by the relationship between external influences and environmental interactions possibly affecting teacher decision-making. Hence, the framework for understanding teacher retention provides a structure to study reasons influencing teachers' determinations for remaining in the classroom.

Figure 2.1 *Conceptual Framework for Understanding Teacher Retention*



Adapted from Brownell & Smith, (1993, p. 27)

Literature Review

Nationwide, keeping qualified and experienced teachers in the classroom is a major issue continuously faced by school districts (Billingsley, 2003; Ingersoll, 2003; Waddell, 2010). Annually, 16% of teachers leave the classroom for retirement while 84% transfer schools or leave the profession totaling almost half a million teachers exiting the classroom (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). Especially vulnerable, urban and rural districts experience teacher attrition at twice the rate of suburban districts; approximately two times the number of teachers in urban and rural districts leave the classroom as compared to teachers in suburban districts (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014; Holmes et al., 2019; Kersaint et al., 2007; Leland & Murtadha, 2011). Particularly vulnerable to teacher attrition are novice teachers, since over 9% leave the field after the first year (Gray & Taie, 2015; Ingersoll et al., 2018). This data points to the urgent need for strategies to keep highly qualified, effective teachers in all classrooms.

The negative impact of teacher attrition is widespread, affecting students, academics, school environment, and finances. While many educational reformers assert teacher attrition is caused by low compensation and challenging student behavior, many educators identify other working conditions such as the lack of respect for the profession, curricular autonomy, overburdensome paperwork, insufficient administrative support, and inadequate resources as reasons for leaving the field (Byrd-Blake et al., 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future and NCTAF State Partners, 2002; Santoro, 2011). Replacing veteran teachers exiting the field with novice teachers results in lower student achievement and schools lacking continuity and stability (Gomba, 2015; Ronfeldt et al.,

2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Inexperienced teachers are not yet adept in classroom management or differentiating instruction (Rodgers & Skelton, 2014). Professional growth and teacher effectiveness are advanced through classroom experience. Research found lower student achievement, as indicated by test scores, was the outcome of teacher attrition (Hanushek et al., 2016; Henry & Redding, 2018; Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Instability disrupts instructional programs and negatively affects student success (Sorenson & Ladd, 2020; Urick, 2016).

Teacher turnover also contributes to financial consequences. Recruitment, hiring, and professional development of new teachers cost districts an exorbitant amount of their yearly budgets (Barnes et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Synar & Maiden, 2012). Synar and Maiden (2012) calculated the average cost per teacher leaving at $14,508.86 and proposed the costs of teacher turnover could be separated into four distinct areas.

- *Separation Costs* including exit interviews, gathering of other data, and administrative costs associated with such collection of data represented 2.29% of the total cost of replacement.
- *Hiring Costs*, such as recruitment, advertisement, interviews, reference checks, drug testing, criminal background checks, bonuses, and administrative expenses accounted for 8.64% of the cost of replacement.
- *Training Costs* consisting of introduction to the school and district, new teacher training, mentoring and professional development, materials, and administrative expenses comprised 48.19% of the total cost of replacement.

- *Performance Productivity* expenses are grounded in Sorenson's (1995) calculations of 20% productivity increases per month, necessitating five months to attain complete productivity resulting in 40.92% of the cost of replacement.

Those monies are forfeited when teachers only remain in the classroom for a short time. Therefore, emphasis should be placed on retention rather than teacher recruitment.

Microsystem Rationale

The conceptual framework can be used to organize and understand the literature concerning teacher retention and attrition. Components of the microsystem that could potentially have an impact on a teacher's decision to leave the field include class size, teacher-student relationships, educational preparation, coping strategies, initial commitment, and demographics (Brownell & Smith, 1993). Class size and student behavior were two common reasons cited for leaving the classroom (Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005). Research by Holmes et al. (2019) found that decreasing challenging student behaviors helped maintain teachers in the classroom. Also, according to scholars, as class sizes increased, correspondingly, teacher stress and organizational demands grew (Schanzenbach, 2014).

In further research, insufficient educational preparation frequently contributed to teacher attrition (Lasagna, 2009; Zhang & Zeller, 2016). Ingersoll et al. (2012) and Redding and Smith (2016) concluded teachers having little or no coursework in pedagogy with inadequate time in the field in hands-on teaching experiences (e.g. Teach for America – TFA), were twice as likely to leave the field after the first year compared to those who received extensive coursework and experience in the classroom prior to teaching through traditional, accredited teacher education programs. Furthermore, studies

showed alternative preparation programs, in which future teachers receive condensed preparation for teaching spurred teacher attrition (Boyd et al., 2008; Burstein et al., 2009; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

Retention of beginning teachers is promoted through robust teacher induction programs. After examining fifteen empirical studies, focused on the impact of mentoring and induction programs, Ingersoll and Strong (2011) found data indicated that mentorship programs positively influenced teacher retention. Support supplied to novice teachers by teacher preparation programs enhanced teacher retention as well (Allen, 2013).

Mesosystem Rationale

Perceptions of collegiality, support, and school climate form the mesosystem. The relationship teachers have with their peers within the school environment is known as collegiality. Lower teacher turnover rates were found in schools that promoted positive, stable relationships in which teachers confided challenges and sought counsel from their peers (Allensworth et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2012; Kraft et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2020). Teachers' perceptions of principal leadership and support were more suggestive of teachers' intentions to leave the classroom than any other factor of the school environment (Ladd, 2009). Studies also indicated that teachers who believed the principal promoted an affirmative climate were more likely to remain in the classroom, while isolated teachers who described low principal leadership were more inclined to leave or transfer the succeeding year (Boyd et al., 2011; Ingersoll et al., 2016).

Moreover, effective and experienced teachers may be inaccessible to students in urban and lower socio-economic status schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). Greater numbers of instructors holding alternative certification or emergency approval

and lacking certification in the area taught often constitute the teacher corps in these schools. Far too often, teachers in high-risk schools have less possibility for collaboration and feedback and limited access to highly qualified, experienced peers and mentors. The inability to collaborate with others and assess and reflect on pedagogical methods results in teachers' performance in high-poverty schools leveling out after a short number of years. In these lowest achieving schools, morale and school community are adversely affected since schools that are difficult to staff emerge as sites to depart, rather than sites to remain.

Research undertaken by Urick (2016) showed shared leadership promoted teacher retention. Teachers were more prone to remain in the classroom when they perceived engagement in collective leadership via classroom autonomy, shared school decision making, professional development, principal support, and a positive climate (Hulpia et al., 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Somech & Ron, 2007). Accordingly, scholars found lack of planning time, excessive workloads, and limited power concerning school policy influenced teachers' determinations to leave the classroom (Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005). Influencing school decisions resulted in inclination to remain at that school suggested research involving over 50,000 public school teachers in Chicago (Allensworth et al., 2009). Research evidenced the value of a positive school context, since teachers' perceptions of it were directly associated with their decision to remain in the field (Hulpia et al., 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010).

Exosystem Rationale

The exosystem is comprised of policies and characteristics at the district, state, and federal level. Inordinate standardized test preparation activities and expectations to

teach a restricted and/or scripted curriculum may quickly lead to novice teachers feeling voiceless and disheartened in this era of accountability. (Hancock & Scherff, 2010). Similarly, experienced teachers with little classroom autonomy sought relief by exiting the field (Ingersoll et al., 2016). When teachers believed they had no power to change the curriculum and/or pedagogy imposed on them by district officials, Glazer (2018) found veteran teachers left the classroom.

Many teachers' desire to remain in the field was affected by added obligatory responsibilities and required documentation (Nance & Calabrese, 2009). This study found additional, mandatory state assessments and rising legal requirements dramatically affected special education teacher retention. Included within the exosystem, compensation is at the center of most discussions concerning teacher attrition and retention with many studies finding low salaries frequently cited as one of the primary reasons for exiting the classroom early (Cieśliński & Szum, 2014; Hancock & Scherff, 2010; Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2017a).

Macrosystem Rationale

The macrosystem of the framework holds such elements as the dominant culture's beliefs and attitudes toward teaching, teachers' perceptions of students, and the economy. Greater teacher turnover was experienced in schools with substantial populations of low-income, minority, and low-achieving students (Boyd et al., 2011; Boyd et al., 2005). In addition, inner-city public school teachers made the decision to leave the classroom partly because they perceived pupils in urban schools were incapable of academic success (Lasagna, 2009).

External Personal Rationale

Teachers' commitment to the profession may be influenced by external personal factors. These can include economic considerations, perceived career options, and life events such as pregnancy, marriage, and spousal relocation. Research found nearly 40% of teachers include family or personal reasons for exiting the classroom (Ingersoll, 2002). Further, inadequate salaries to meet family needs or a perceived unacceptable standard of living were also provided as reasons teachers leave the field (Cieśliński & Szum, 2014). Teachers' decisions to leave were impacted by the inability to secure permanent positions and insufficient opportunities for career advancement (Cieśliński & Szum, 2014; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014).

Resolving the teacher shortage challenge (Billingsley, 2003) and increasing student achievement (Wilson et al., 2004) are dependent upon teacher retention. Teacher recruitment is pointless if teachers leave after only a short stint in the classroom asserted Ingersoll (2001). Despite this information, research has been unbalanced with reasons teachers leave the classroom receiving much more consideration than reasons teachers remain in the classroom (Gomba, 2015; Perrachione et al., 2008; Waddell, 2010).

Teacher Retention and the Conceptual Framework

In a study exploring the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, Gieger (2020) examined characteristics within each level that influenced early childhood public school teachers in the classroom using Brownell and Smith's (1993) conceptual framework. The most influential characteristics were centered on the inner systems, microsystem and mesosystem, of the framework.

Microsystem

Within the microsystem, induction programs, class size, placement in current position, teacher/student relationships, and trauma and challenging behavior were explored (Gieger, 2020). Teachers experienced a wide variety of induction programs from no program to robust programs that included peer, principal, and higher education mentors and time to observe effective teachers in the classroom. Those provided with the strongest induction programs increased in their efficacy supporting their desire to remain in the classroom. Although participants felt the negative effects of growing class sizes, they did not cite it as a cause for staying or leaving. Teachers arrived in their current positions through various routes with differing levels of input. Some were given a choice among multiple positions, while others were directed to move with no input permitted. Despite the frustrations of some of these practices, teachers were determined to stay in the field. Teacher/student relationships and increased challenging behavior weighed heavily in teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom. Faced with more frequent and intense negative behaviors, teachers focused on the children and meeting their needs rather than focusing on the behaviors. Their backgrounds, having completed a traditional teacher preparation program, helped to mitigate the effects of challenging behavior on teacher turnover.

Mesosystem

Gieger's (2020) study also highlighted principal, peer, and parental support within the mesosystem as characteristics influencing teachers to stay. Experiencing varying levels of principal support, teachers identified effective principals as a cause for remaining in the classroom. Peer support was also crucial to participants' decisions to

remain in the field, especially if principal support was lacking. Although teachers hoped for strong parental involvement, it was not a deciding factor in remaining in the classroom.

Exosystem and Macrosystem

District, state, and federal characteristics and policies were investigated within the exosystem (Gieger, 2020). Teachers perceived district characteristics and policies had a more direct impact on the classroom, hence teachers attributed district-level characteristics and policies as having more influence in their determination to remain in the field. In addition, participants sought professional respect, input in decision-making, and autonomy from district, state, and federal officials.

Perceptions of education, learners, and teachers, the effect of the economy, and dominant cultural attributes were addressed within the macrosystem (Gieger, 2020). Teachers did not attribute influences for remaining in the classroom solely with characteristics from the macrosystem; however, these characteristics combined with components from other systems had a cumulative effect on their desire to remain in the classroom.

Teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom were most impacted by components from the micro- and mesosystems (Brownell & Smith, 1993; Gieger, 2020). Within those systems, teacher/student relationships had the greatest impact on teachers' intentions for staying in the field.

Purpose

The teacher shortage has been well documented in previous literature (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Sutcher et al., 2016). At the present time, research has been unbalanced, with

studies focused on teacher attrition being much more prevalent than those centered on teacher retention (Gomba, 2015; Perrachione et al., 2008; Waddell, 2010). Furthermore, Ingersoll et al. (2018) reported a growth in the number of teachers in the field and a *greening* of the teacher workforce, whereby beginning teachers are hired at increasing rates. With the higher numbers of inexperienced teachers entering the field, there must be a simultaneous rising concern regarding how we retain these novice educators in the classroom. Research targeting teacher retention is imperative for keeping teachers in the classroom.

A global study of teacher retention found where characteristics influencing early childhood public school teachers' (ECPST) in the classroom fell within the layers of the Brownell and Smith's (1993) conceptual framework (Gieger, 2020). Characteristics influencing ECPST in the classroom rested primarily in the micro- and mesosystem. Within the microsystem, teacher/student relationships were especially important for teacher retention. Extending this research, in-depth examinations of reasoning within these systems should be undertaken to better understand teacher retention. This study seeks to fulfill that challenge by exploring what aspects of the microsystem influence ECPST retention. The primary question guiding this study is: What are the reasons, within the microsystem, that early childhood public school teachers remain in the classroom?

Methodology

Research Design

This study of teacher retention employed a qualitative research design permitting rich description of a person's lived experience (Bazeley, 2013). Thus, analysis,

interpretation, and description of teachers' lived experiences and reasons for remaining in the classroom were undertaken in this study. Quantitative methods using large data sets (Conley & You, 2017; Ingersoll, 2003; Urick, 2016; Sutcher et al., 2019) and smaller data sets (Ryan, et al., 2017; Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2017; Vagi et al., 2017; Whipp & Geronime, 2017) have been utilized by many researchers examining teacher retention and attrition. Pursuing parity in research, the researcher used a qualitative method (Bazeley, 2013). Seeking parity in research through qualitative methods provides a more comprehensive view of teacher retention.

Using interviews to conduct classical phenomenological research, the researcher examined the phenomena of teachers' rationales for remaining in the classroom (Gay et al., 2012; Grbich, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Undertaking interviews of 60 novice teachers in their mixed methods, longitudinal study, Zhang and Zeller (2016) sought information concerning the impact of preparation on teacher retention. Their data showed more than two times the number of traditionally prepared teachers remained in the field as compared to alternatively certified teachers over a three-year span. Interviewees trained through the *minimal*, alternative program stated they felt unprepared to manage a classroom on their own. Further, Glazer's (2018) research utilizing interviews of 25 experienced and invested teachers found teachers often leave the profession as an act of resistance. Issues of power, autonomy, and unacceptable policies and practices were revealed through the resistance lens impelling teachers to leave the classroom. As is evidenced, the use of in-depth interviews for this study was grounded in previous research and sought to provide a richer perspective of reasons teachers remain in the classroom (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participants and Setting

A stratified purposeful sampling method was applied to achieve the selection of participants who met the criterion for the study, which included: (Etikan et al., 2016; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 1990)

- Current Oklahoma public school educators teaching children in the early childhood grades of pre-kindergarten through third grade, and
- Participants who have remained in the classroom at least five years.

Once recruited, participants were divided into three subgroups based on years of teaching: 1) 5-10 years; 2) 11-20 years; and 3) 21 plus years. Twelve participants, four from each of the three strata, were interviewed. Staying in the classroom a minimum of five years is a crucial point in teacher retention, since research indicates that almost one-half of teachers leave the field in the first five years (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Thus, participants were required to have been a classroom teacher for a minimum of five years. All teacher participants held a traditional teaching certificate.

Seeking potential public school teachers from a variety of contexts throughout Oklahoma, the researcher began with professional contacts in the field. Teachers equally represented a range of settings with four each from rural, urban, and suburban schools and from 0-49% poverty level, 50-75% poverty level, and 76-100% poverty level. Six school sizes spanned 160 to 410 students while the other six schools extended from 520 to 900 students. Across the participants, the researcher aimed to interview teachers working with diverse populations regarding socio-economic levels, ethnicities, and cultures. Table 1 provides the demographics of the participants and their schools.

Table 2.1

Participants' and Participants Schools' Demographics

Pseudonym	Years of experience	Urban, rural, suburban	School population	Percentage of free & reduced lunch	Percentage minority enrollment	Age	Grade level currently teaching
Jean	38	Suburban	73	16	30 (Majority Black & Hispanic)	60	Pre-K
Lori	30	Rural	227	57	40 (Majority Hispanic)	53	3rd
Grace	25	Rural	279	75	69 (Majority American Indian)	58	2nd
Arleen	21	Urban	413	100	74 (Majority Hispanic)	43	K
Sue	20	Urban	546	94	83 (Majority Hispanic)	48	2nd
Suzanne	18	Rural	520	47	22 (Majority Hispanic)	51	1st
Alane	16	Suburban	309	74	43 (Majority Hispanic)	39	K
Jackie	14	Suburban	694	42	41 (Majority Hispanic)	35	K
Lurie	8	Rural	635	55	57 (Majority American Indian)	30	Pre-K
Harriet	7	Urban	358	100	88 (Majority Hispanic)	29	3rd
Cheryl	6	Urban	900	100	82 (Majority Hispanic)	35	Pre-K & K
Dawn	6	Suburban	535	42	38 (Majority Hispanic)	29	2nd

Data Sources and Procedures

Interviews

Understanding the basis of reasons why teachers remained in the classroom was done through interviews, the primary method for data collection in phenomenological studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews provided the opportunity for the researcher to study and probe participants' replies to collect comprehensive data concerning their experiences and feelings (Gay et al., 2012). Meeting via FaceTime, Zoom, or in-person, the researcher conducted one- to two-hour interviews with current, pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade classroom teachers. All interviews took place at a time mutually acceptable to both parties and were recorded using the Voice Memo application.

A combination of structured and semi-structured formats were used in the interviews (See Appendix A for complete interview protocol). Although structured interviews frequently do not allow the researcher to explore participants' perceptions and understandings, they do permit the collection of common sociodemographic data, therefore warranting their use in this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Guided by a flexible set of questions, semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to explore participants' responses regarding their beliefs and experiences. In-depth data centered on teachers' decisions to remain in the field was gathered through the semi-structured section of the interview. Using the conceptual frame work to construct the interview, it was composed of questions based on the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (Brownell & Smith, 1993; Heineke et al., 2014). Pre-worded, demographic questions asked of all participants comprised the structured section of the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The semi-structured section used an interview guide with questions to be

explored. The researcher began by asking a broad, open-ended question of the participants regarding their thoughts and feelings concerning their teaching career and their decision to remain in the classroom. Dependent upon the participant's answer, the researcher consulted the follow-up prompts that addressed various levels of the framework (see Appendix A). Each participant was asked to address each area of the framework directly or indirectly.

Field Notebook

To document the physical and social context of the research setting, actions, and experiences a field notebook was maintained (Bazeley, 2013). The context is critical for understanding, interpreting, and transferability of data. Following each interview, field notes were handwritten in a notebook. They included date, time, place, details of the interaction, and reflective commentary (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Also noted in the field notebook were connections and informal thoughts of the researcher (Emerson et al., 2011). After the interaction, the notes were transferred to Dedoose (2018), a cross-platform application for analyzing qualitative and mixed methods research for easier and more comprehensive analyzation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative studies is an ongoing process that takes place concurrently with the collection of more data (Bazeley, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Future data collection and the direction of the study are guided by the analyzation of completed interviews and field notes throughout the data collection process. A word processor was used to transcribe the interviews. Each line of the transcription was numbered to aid in the analysis of the data and transcriptions were uploaded to Dedoose

(2018). Throughout the first level of coding, the researcher used provisional start codes based on the micro-, meso-, exo-, macrosystems, and external personal factors to code the data (Miles et al., 2014). Inductive coding, the emergence of other codes during data collection, revealed additional themes within the proposed systems.

While first round coding arranged segments of data into groups, second round coding categorized these groups into fewer numbers of themes (Miles et al., 2014). The second round of coding entailed analyzing the provisional codes of the interviews and defining emerging themes and patterns within each set of data before comparing and making connections across cases. Additionally, during second level analysis of the interviews the data was analyzed by each of the systems provided in the theoretical framework. Level two coding also consisted of meta-coding into the number of codes that emerged for presentation in the findings. The goal of triangulation was to secure confirmation of findings through convergence of varied perspectives (Kasunic, 2005). The juxtaposition in which the perspectives converge is considered to indicate reality.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers are responsible for providing credible and dependable findings, gathered, analyzed, and disseminated in ethical ways (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Trustworthiness of qualitative research is based on the fundamental idea that the data accurately measure that which it is sought to measured (Bazeley, 2013; Gay et al, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). While carefully examining all aspects of the research process, the researcher must reflect thoroughly about the study and the process to ensure trustworthiness. During the course of conducting research, the researcher must heed ethical guidelines, always acting in a principled manner.

Indicators of quality in qualitative research are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the research process, the researcher maintained an audit trail and connected the findings to the existing body of literature to ensure credibility in the study (Bazeley, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). Triangulation also helps to ensure credibility by using multiple data sources and connecting the current research to the existing body of literature. Multiple data sources including interviews and the field notebook aided in triangulation in this study. Following transcription of each interview, the researcher provided the transcription to the participant for a member check to ensure credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Accurate reflection of participants' perceptions and experiences was achieved using this strategy. Credibility is also confirmed through peer review. Colleagues reviewed the data and conclusions to verify the conclusions were possible, based on the data.

The ability of the results of a study to transfer to other contexts is known as external validity or transferability (Bazeley, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). Comparisons of other contexts by the reader are possible through the provision of a rich description of the study details including setting, participants, data collection, and analysis permits. This rich, descriptive detail of proceedings ensures other researchers may replicate the study allowing confirmability. A wider range of application by other researchers is made possible through the careful selection of the sample in which the maximum variation was sought. Care was also taken when selecting the sample to seek maximum variation, thus granting other researchers a greater range of application. To achieve dependability, the researcher used quality, intercoder agreement, and member checks to confirm the accuracy of data devoid of bias (Miles et al., 2014). Commitment

to the guidelines of the institutional review board (IRB) also aided in the attainment of dependability in this study (Lichtman, 2011). Confirmability was maintained through an audit trail, triangulation of data with various data sources, and connecting findings to previous literature as well (Miles et al., 2014).

Findings and Discussion

Teacher/student relationships have a significant influence on teacher retention (Gieger, 2020; Kelly et al., 2019). Choi and Chung (2018) found teachers possessing a mindset of helping others through teaching were more gratified, content, and not as likely to leave the profession. In addition, teachers who viewed their positions from a social justice perspective in which they were helping to overcome inequities in education had a higher probability of remaining in the field. Through the lens of teacher/student relationships, this study found teachers' reasoning for remaining in the classroom centered on the three broad concepts of passion for teaching, witnessing children's "lightbulb" moments or growth throughout the year, and personal responsibility/advocacy. Bearing in mind that teaching is a people-oriented profession, overlap exists between the three categories.

Passion

One-half of the participants discussed the passion, some labeled it a "calling," they had for teaching. Previous research by Chinn (2007) also found committed teachers were motivated to stay in the field by their passion for teaching. As in the current study, teachers often used the word "calling" to express their passion. Jackie stated, "I truly believe it's my passion and calling to be a teacher. I've wanted to be a teacher since as young as I can remember." Lurie declared, "I feel like I have a talent to be with young

students. That's something I love and I am very passionate about." Alane provided a comprehensive description of her passion.

> I'm very passionate and want to do everything I can to help the child and their family. I like to work with interns and first-year teachers because it reminds me of why I'm still teaching. When I see their passion and excitement, it reignites the passion in me. I started teaching to help children like myself and my family and my parents. Sometimes, the teachers are the ones that give them the instruction or guidance on things that need to happen at home. Sometimes, they were the only ones that fed us or taught us about personal hygiene and things like that they could impart with a student at the time.

Love of Teaching

The pleasure of teaching others compelled educators to remain in the classroom (Chiong et al., 2017). Akin to previous research, the twelve participants talked passionately about their love of teaching. *"*It's always been so rewarding for me. Teaching is such a wonderful job! I love working with children," Suzanne proclaimed. While Sue stated her enthusiasm, she also believed she is lacking in options. "Before long, it had been 15 years, and then 19 years. Now, I'm looking at 20 years and I think, 'It is really the only thing that 1) I want to do and 2) that I can do."

Three of the participants discussed their early feelings for teaching. Lori, a teacher for 30 years, recalled

> Once I started doing my student teaching, I knew I had made the right decision because I absolutely loved it. There's nothing else I'd want to do. I absolutely love it! I didn't get in it for the money. I chose teaching. I chose it because I love

the children and the impact. I can't see myself doing anything else. My first bachelor's degree is in social work and I think I use that a lot in teaching, but I absolutely love teaching.

Grace, a twenty-four-year veteran, ardently shared

> I love, absolutely love, teaching! I knew from an early age that I wanted to teach. I didn't do it for the money; that was never considered. I just knew that was my gift and that's what I needed to do. I remain in the classroom because I still love teaching. I still love coming to school every day. I love sharing with kids and being with them. I still love what I do, so I'm going to stay with it as long as I can.

Sue expressed

> It was kind of an accident that I ended up in teaching, but I found out I was really good at it. I really had this special skill and I understood the kids and I knew what they needed, I just had this innate knowledge of kids. The longer that I did it, the better I got at it, and the more respected I got in my school.

Arleen enjoyed the challenge of teaching stating,

> I've always said, 'Teaching is like CSI without the blood.' It's figuring out what do I need to do so that I can help that child be the best he/she can be. Sometimes, it's problem solving and figuring out, 'Oh, I already have the teaching skills to help. I know what the child needs.' But, a lot of times, especially anymore, it's, 'I don't have this skill.' What I have in my teacher toolbox is not going to help that child. I need to figure out how to help. It's so rewarding for that hard work and that dedication and going out and stepping out of my box and figuring out

> something else new and watching it work with that child and seeing that child believe in themselves and maybe even see more of themselves and think more of themselves they ever could have before. I think that's our biggest job as teachers. I think that's why I teach because I was very lucky to have teachers that saw more within me than I ever did in myself. I think that's what our dedication is and what we should be doing.

Two participants conveyed the love of teaching helped mitigate the teaching frustrations they faced. Suzanne said

> You know, in Oklahoma education, educators are frustrated quite often but I think that sometimes I just like to go shut my door and teach and do what I love and kind of block that out. Sometimes that really does help my frustration with the big picture of Oklahoma education and what is going on. I just go in, do what I love, shut my door and teach. I think that helps me more than anything.

Harriet, an urban educator, articulated

> I'm frustrated by a lot of things in and out of the classroom, but I still enjoy my job. I remain in the classroom because I like the day-to-day of teaching. I like kids, obviously, and I like that every day is different. Like any Oklahoma teacher, if you're still teaching, you just want to teach because it's a lot. If it was just district quality, I would have left. I do not agree with most of the things the district does.

Relationships

One of the most important reasons experienced teachers reported for remaining in the classroom was the enjoyment of working with children (Chinn, 2007). More than

50% of remarks made by teachers in a study conducted by Adams et al. (2019) were associated with student relationships. They relished connections and exchanges with students and watching students connect with one another. Much like the previous study, one-half of the participants in this study spoke of the importance of relationships with students and their families. Appreciating the young children in her class, Lurie said, "The relationships you build are very important to me. You know there is not one day that someone doesn't say something hilarious that just makes you so thankful for being in that space with that little person." Two of the teachers told of students coming back to visit and reconnect with them. Jackie expressed, "They move on, come back and you know, they don't remember everything I taught them, but they remember that relationship I have with them." Sue fondly recalled

> At the beginning of the year, I had a Facebook message from a kid. I was like, 'I know that name. Where do I know that name from?' I opened it up and it says, 'I've been searching for you everywhere.' I had him in Pre-K. He is a senior graduating this year. When we did the Teacher of the Year football game, we had to go stand out on the field. We got to select somebody to walk us out. I had him take me out and it was awesome! I texted him one day and asked him to walk me out. He said he would be honored to. He brought me roses and none of the other teachers had roses. It was pretty special.

Relationships can be difficult as well. Lori explained, "Do I shed tears? Yes. I've had students go through things and you're right there with them. It breaks your heart when you see what all they're going through." While Suzanne acknowledged the importance of helping parents

> One of the biggest rewards is that we get to help families. How many times have I sat across the table at a parent conference counseling the parents on how to handle certain things? I think getting to know families and the relationships that we develop with the families are huge.

"It's just for the kids."

Previous research found teachers stayed in the classroom because they believed they made a difference in a child's life (Chiong et al., 2017). Comparable with past studies, one-fourth of the participants mentioned their desire to remain in the classroom was "for the kids" and their love for them. Lurie discussed the importance of children having a good experience when starting school and why she stayed in the classroom.

> It's just for the kids. I love my students and my students love me. I know they need a strong influence and they need someone that loves them, someone that cares for them, especially with Pre-K on that first step. So they can love coming to school and know they're loved.

Referring to her decision to stay in the field, Grace said

> That's what's keeping me in it. Just the smiles, being able to make the kids laugh, seeing that lightbulb come on. Those are the rewards, the love. I just, I love them so much and that's so important for me because I truly believe that until you love a child, they're not going to learn. I really believe that. That's very important to me. So, when you invest yourself like that, the dividends are just watching those kids grow and know that you love them and have confidence in them and you're there for them. That's all the reward I need.

Jackie expressed similar sentiments

> For me personally though, I'll just do my job because of the kids. I'm here for the kids. I'm obviously not here to make the money. I'm here to make a difference in their lives and to impact them for the rest of their lives. To know that someone loves them, if that's the only thing they can remember, that's the thing I say to them on the last day of school, 'Remember, Mrs. J loves you. Take that with you every day.'

Sue verbalized

> It has been a personal decision to stay in. The old adage is that you know if you stay in for any length of time, everything will come full circle. In 20 years, I've seen a lot. It's come and it's gone and some has stuck and some has just disappeared. I stay for the kids.

One student had a particular impact on Sue. She relates his story.

> We had our Veteran's Day program today and I'm probably going to cry again. A boy, that I had two years ago, is nonverbal and smeared poop in the bathroom. He used to throw chairs through the wall. He was moved into my classroom mid-year. He scared me to death! I mean, I was freaking out but I instantly bonded with this kid. I was lucky enough to have him for the second half of the year. He went to a phenomenal teacher last year. He's got a phenomenal teacher this year. The amount of time that the three of us and the people at school that are his mentor people have put into him are paying off. He was in the middle of this program with six other classes. He was singing and dancing! As he was moving, he looked across the gym at me and smiled wide. He was so proud. It's the kids. There's probably other things I could do but nothing else I want to do.

Lightbulb Moments

Adams et al. (2019) found that secondary science teachers gained gratification from observing student growth. Another study revealed seeing student progress and achievement promoted teacher retention in experienced teachers (Chiong et al., 2017). Clearly, this construct was important to this study's participants since three-fourths of them expressed the importance of seeing the *lightbulb* moment or student growth in their resolution to remain in the classroom. Addressing why she remained in the classroom, Suzanne asserted

> I think those lightbulb moments. When the light goes on and they can read and they know these Word Wall words and, you know, just to see through the year that progression of your kids. That's huge! That's one of the main reasons I'm still here, is just to see that excitement of learning to read and doing math. That's huge for me!

Seeing the "fruits of their labor" was rewarding for two participants. Harriet asked and answered her own question about becoming a teacher.

> Why become a teacher? I liked seeing the growth that you could actually see. You know, in some jobs, you don't ever see the fruits of your labor. In teaching, you could actually see the difference you're making. I really liked that.

Lurie added

> The other day, I had a couple of kids at the peace table, which is where we do our conflict resolution. One child had bumped into the other child and this little five-year-old said, 'But you put your body on my body and I have an actual body.' It dawned on him that he had a body. It was like this is a miracle! I'm getting to

watch this! But aside from it being fun and making you appreciate people, it fills your spirit. You get to watch how they learn and how they grow. So that part is really cool. Watching a human being develop, that's the fruit of your labor. You get to see it every day!

Excitement could be heard in many of the participants' voices as they discussed remaining in the classroom to see the growth of children. Arleen expressed

> For me, those little, bitty, tiny moments, like when my friend made an *a* perfectly in his name today. I did the happy dance! I made happy, smiley faces everywhere! It's just the small moments. With kindergarten, it's so awesome because everything's new, everything's exciting. I get to live that every day! These are the rewards that are more than any type of money that I could ever get.

Lurie described the joy of seeing young children learn.

> When you see the kid have that lightbulb moment and, boom, they finally get it. Or, you've had the kid, you know, struggle all year. And, finally, they get it in April. They finally learned! Being excited and seeing the students really learn. Going back to that first week activity that you saved. It has their name. It is just a scribble and then at the end of the year there it is all beautiful with a picture they've drawn of themselves. You know, stuff like that makes it really exciting.

Jean related the rewards of a lightbulb moment.

> The lightbulbs, the lightbulb moment when they get it. For example, today, a little girl, who has obviously…She's an only child and so her parents have done pretty much everything for her. If she wants a drink, if she wants to move her chair, they are there to help her. Today, she had both of her shoes off. I don't exactly know

why. She was wanting me to put them back on and I said, 'I'm going to help you learn to do it.' So, we talked through how to slip those shoes on. We talked through how to push that foot in there and reach back. She put one on. She looked at me. She just put the other one on. She stood up. She put both her arms up and said, 'I did it!' I said, 'I know you did!' You can't pay for those moments.

Dawn summed up the connection between remaining in the classroom and student growth.

The reason I'm still a teacher is because I can't see myself, even if I wanted to move upward, I would miss having a group of kids that are mine. I'm in charge of getting them from point A to point B at the end of the year. I don't understand people who have to change jobs all the time but, as a teacher, you kind of do get to change jobs every single year. It's like I'm starting again with a new challenge every single year, which I enjoy. I would say that's probably what has rewarded me the most is just having that group of kids. Just starting out, you think, every year, how am I going to get them to where I need them to be? And then every single year, you end up getting them there. It's just rewarding.

Personal Responsibility

Despite the demands of teaching, Chiong et al. (2017) found that experienced teachers were motivated to remain in the field by the difference they could make in the community. Lori, a veteran with 30 years of experience, feels a responsibility to parents as well. She maintains parents need support too "because, sometimes, it's just not all black and white." She believes being a resource for parents is one of the roles of a teacher. Alane talked of her feeling of responsibility to many stakeholders.

> Overall, I feel it's a good place for me. Sometimes, I'm ready to challenge myself and kind of fly, but then, I think about my position and the work that I do with my students, families, the interns, and all the people I work with and it keeps me grounded there.

Arleen spoke of her responsibility to the community where she grew up.

> I felt like I really needed to give back to the same community that gave so much to me. So that is the reason that I really feel like I'm at home. That's why I've stayed where I'm at for such a long time, even though I had opportunities to go other places. My husband has worked in other states since I've been here. But this is kind of my mission field.

Often times, mentors encourage mentees to step up. Lurie recollected her mentor's challenging words.

> One of my mentors once told me, 'If you are not going to do it who is? Who is going to be a teacher? Who is going to do this job?' So, sometimes when it gets tough, I think back to that. Who is going to do it? I'm good at what I do. I just need to stick it out.

Leadership

Frequently, experienced, effective teachers are called upon or step up on their own volition to fill leadership roles. Chiong et al. (2017) found teachers with more experience had a higher probability of being a school leader and being a school leader promoted teacher retention. Similar to earlier research, the participants in this study were experienced teachers, which found them being solicited or volunteering for leadership roles. Harriet declared

> I got myself into a lot of responsibility. I like things to be done well, if they're going to be done. I also know that it won't get done if you don't do it. If it involves my class, me, or my job, I'm going to do it. That's how you get yourself in charge of a lot of things. I've been the FAC president, which is the faculty advisory committee. I am the lead English/Language Arts teacher. I have also, prior to that, been the lead math teacher. I started our assemblies on Fridays. We didn't have assemblies and now I run them with another teacher. I started a winter, formal dance for the first time two years ago that we still do. So, I guess, I run that. Right now, we're voting for Teacher of the Year again and I'm in charge of getting the ballots and everything for that.

Leadership can be a double-edged sword for teachers. Veterans have the knowledge and experiences to be effective leaders, but they can also become overburdened with the additional responsibilities. Alane spoke of this dilemma

> As a veteran teacher of 16 years, I have more responsibilities. In our district, new teachers, teachers new to our district or first-year teachers are not given additional responsibilities such as district or school committees. Those additional responsibilities fall back on the veteran teachers. We are a small school that has had huge turnover and it's been pretty stressful. But we have so much knowledge and training that when kids come with all this need, you know what's right. But, when you're approached with the district and the state and the national standards and the principal is being told, 'This has to get done,' and so he's trying to convey that to you. There's all the professional standards that have to be met and if there's a child looking at you that you know what they really need. It's a hard

> place to be sometimes. Sometimes, I sit back and think, I love that I have all this knowledge, but sometimes I wish I could just love you. Like, I didn't have this information in front of me or sometimes I wish they would just treat me like that first-year teacher when they say, 'Oh, it's okay. You'll get that done next week.' Because I just want to love this child and guide them, help them and direct them on what they need and give them the resources. I think that it becomes a really challenging time. I feel a great responsibility and ask myself, 'What is my purpose and how am I going to guide and help these children?'

Advocacy

Effective teachers should be advocates for their students providing best practices to meet each student's needs. In a study of urban educators, Quartz (2003) found teachers who promoted social justice felt a responsibility to students and their community and thus, remained in the classroom. Harriet and Grace's background as traditionally certified teachers is evident as they addressed philosophies they advocate for within their schools and classrooms. Grace spoke of advocating for play in her early childhood classroom. Harriet explained

> My philosophy has always been that every child can learn and that has been put to the test many times. I think that for me that's exactly why I did inner-city because it was such a struggling district with bad test scores and everything. I really don't think that there's any difference in a child in inner-city or suburban, as far as what they can do in the classroom.
>
> Jean disclosed her beliefs concerning advocacy and remaining in the classroom.
>
> Obviously, if I was not given some amount of freedom in my classroom to teach

the way that I think children learn and know children learn, I know that it would affect me staying in the district. If I couldn't advocate and find ways to help them see why I was doing something and they just, you know, laid down the law, I would have to leave because I'm always going to do what's best for children.

Cheryl provided a comprehensive view of advocacy and its effects on her decision to remain in the classroom.

When I started teaching, it was so different. There were so many challenges that I didn't feel prepared for that you just kind of have to learn while you're in the classroom. ELL students, students with special needs, and, since I teach younger children, a lot of children who are not diagnosed. The lack of funding for our schools was also what really took me off guard. I remember going into my first classroom and asking another teacher, 'Where are the books for our classroom libraries?' She told me, 'You have to buy those.' I remember thinking with what money. It really was a shock when I first went into the classroom. Those things didn't scare me off though. It really emboldened like this advocacy spirit that I have. It made me search for root causes. Why don't we have supports for students in the classrooms? Why are our classrooms not funded? Why do I have 29 first graders in my first year of teaching? I joined my union and through them became really empowered to advocate. First, at the district level and then a lot at the state level leading up to the teacher walkout and past that. I feel like teaching has become such a bigger beast than just a classroom for me. I don't think I could ever do anything else, because I'm so connected with the advocacy network with the teachers and legislators in trying to make positive changes that it would be

impossible for me to leave. I feel really entwined in that system. We don't always see large, sweeping change, but those little changes that we can make really sustain me and make me want to keep fighting for education and policy that are good for children.

Limitations

Findings were based on participants' self-reporting, hence, the researcher relied on their honesty and recall ability. Moreover, answers to questions may reflect the teacher's eagerness to answer questions according to the perceived desire of the researcher. In addition, only teachers holding traditional certification with five or more years of experience were included in the study. Furthermore, participants were limited to teachers living and teaching in Oklahoma.

Conclusion

The many consequences of teacher attrition have been well documented in the literature (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014; Gray & Taie, 2015; Holmes et al., 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2018; Kersaint et al., 2007; Leland & Murtadha, 2011). Repercussions include lower student achievement (Hanushek et al., 2016; Henry & Redding, 2018; Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020), disruption of academic programs (Sorenson & Ladd, 2020; Urick, 2016), instability of school climates (Gomba, 2015; Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020), impaired collegiality (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020), and financial losses (Barnes et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Synar & Maiden, 2012). Furthermore, the most significant factor affecting student achievement was access to effective, experienced teachers (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014; Wilson et al., 2004). Yet, many times departing teachers are

replaced by novice teachers with little classroom experience (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Research found teacher effectiveness increases through the first five years in the classroom (Henry et al., 2011; Kersting et al., 2012). For students to have effective, experienced educators, teachers must remain in the classroom. The in-depth investigation of reasons teachers remain in the field will aid in the achievement of this goal.

The love of teaching and "lightbulb" moments impelled teachers to remain in the classroom. The completion of a traditional teacher preparation program (TPP) is critical to these findings. Participants were confident in their teaching efficacy with Sue stating, "I found out I was really good at it. The longer I did it, the better I got at it." Teachers' knowledge of pedagogy and early childhood development and classroom experiences gained through the TPP provided them with a strong foundation. Instructors who received abbreviated training with little or no pedagogical coursework were two to three times more likely to leave the classroom after only one year of teaching than educators who completed a comprehensive program (Gray et al., 2015; Ingersoll et al., 2014). Lack of knowledge and training could lead to low efficacy. Teachers are more apt to love teaching and experience "lightbulb" moments when they have robust knowledge and training in pedagogy and child development and strong efficacy.

Often, experienced teachers are fulfilling leadership roles within a school (Chiong et al., 2017). More than likely, teachers taking on these additional responsibilities have completed a TPP, since they have greater longevity in the field and they also possess knowledge of pedagogy and child development. Administrators must be careful in assigning responsibilities because too many added responsibilities can lead to burnout, which can affect teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom (Skaalvik & Skaalvik,

2017). Also, leadership and burnout may hinder teacher/student relationships (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017), which was one of the most significant reasons voiced by teachers for staying in the classroom. These relationships, along with "lightbulb" moments, could also be negatively affected by class size. Schanzenbach (2014) found class size increased teacher stress and Jean stated, "When you look at class sizes going up by even one or two students, you spend astronomically more time being a behavior manager than you do teaching." Limiting class sizes allows teachers and students to develop deep relationships.

Administrators must be aware of practices that impede reasons teachers persist in the classroom. Such practices as scripted curriculums steal the joy from teaching. Pacing calendars requiring all teachers within a district to teach the same concept on the same day remove the pleasure of teaching as well. Although these practices could promote teacher retention due to the opportunity to advocate for developmentally appropriate practices. Again, the importance of completing a TPP is demonstrated. Teachers must have knowledge of early childhood development and pedagogy to be effective advocates for children.

Retaining experienced, effective teachers in the classroom is essential to the development of young children. Teacher retention is a multi-faceted issue with veteran teachers voicing various reasons, such as passion, love of teaching, lightbulb moments, leadership opportunities and advocacy for remaining in the classroom. It is crucial that all stakeholders are aware of reasons teachers remain in the classroom. This knowledge allows them to employ strategies that promote teacher retention; thus, providing children with experienced, effective teachers ensuring the best opportunity for success.

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MANUSCRIPT III

“When You Find a Principal You Love, You Stick with Them”:

Experienced Teachers Perceptions of Principal Support and Teacher Retention

This manuscript is prepared for submission to the peer-reviewed journal, *Principal Magazine* and is the third of three manuscripts prepared for a journal-ready doctoral dissertation.

Abstract

Teacher retention has a positive effect on student achievement, the continuity of programs, and the school community (Kini & Podolsky, 2016; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Therefore, it is essential to retain effective early childhood teachers in the public school classroom. Principals have a direct impact on teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). By investigating veteran early childhood public school teachers' (ECPST) reasons for remaining in the classroom, the types of principal support promoting teacher retention were identified. Identified factors included curricular, personal/emotional, and professional support strategies: these are examined and discussed. Knowledge and practice of these strategies may serve to boost the number of ECPST remaining in the field.

Keywords*:* teacher retention, principal support, curricular support, personal/emotional support, professional support, early childhood

"When You Find a Principal You Love, You Stick with Them": Experienced Teachers Perceptions of Principal Support and Teacher Retention

Marty, a veteran teacher, told of her appreciation for and commitment to her principal.

> The school district where I taught decided to close our older school building, since a newer and bigger one was being built. The principal was reassigned to the new school with permission to take as many of her faculty as she would like to the new school. Before the move, the superintendent asked her how many of her faculty members would be going with her to the new school. When she responded that all of the faculty would be moving to the new school, he laughed and told her there was no way an entire faculty would follow a principal. A few months later, our entire faculty, along with our beloved principal, moved into the new building. Little did the superintendent know that we would have walked on water for her.

A strong, effective administrative leader is vital to teacher retention. One study found the greatest indicator of teacher's choices to remain in the classroom was perceived principal support (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Moreover, teachers who believed the principal promoted a positive school climate were more prone to remain in the classroom (Boyd et al., 2011; Ingersoll et al., 2016). Dawn provided affirmation of this previous research, "The big reason that I stay is because of my principal and the community I have with my school."

Teacher shortages are well documented in recent research with 8% of the overall teaching force leaving the classroom each year and 44% of beginning teachers leaving the field in the first five years of teaching (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Sutcher et al., 2016). Sutcher et al. (2019) propose the primary factor compelling teacher shortages is substantial teacher attrition. While many stakeholders focus on recruiting more teachers to remedy the teacher shortage, it is equally critical to give priority to teacher retention.

Ford et al. (2019) asserted school leaders' support of teachers' psychological needs is influencial in teacher burnout, affective organizational commitment, and determination to remain at their school. Research shows teachers left the classroom due to dissatisfaction with administrative practices such as lack of support (Sutcher et al., 2019). This qualitative study involving veteran teachers revealed they desired principals who provided various supports including curricular, personal/emotional, and professional, which fostered teachers' intentions to remain in the classroom.

Curricular Support

Curricular support is paramount in helping ECPST meet their students' needs. Effective principals devote resources and an encouraging community for curriculum support (Kim, 2019). Administrators must provide resources for curriculum without overwhelming teachers with too many new programs. Cheryl teaches at a pilot Montessori school in an inner-city district. Her principal was eager to be at the forefront of education and to improve their school, so she implemented many curricular programs at the same time. Cheryl expressed her distress

> You don't have enough time in a day to implement any of them with fidelity. You're just doing little tastes of them and you're not getting into anything deeply.

Let alone the Montessori curriculum, which is what you're supposed to be doing. That has been a struggle this year.

At times in their eagerness to be on the cutting edge and enhance education, principals overwhelm teachers with innovative programs. Achieving a balance in piloting and adopting new initiatives is crucial.

The scarcity of resources, such as curricular materials, vital for teacher effectiveness can contribute to teacher attrition of special education teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Regarding curriculum, Harriet, a third-grade teacher, proclaimed, "This year, we got math curriculum, which we hadn't had in like three years. So, that's nice. I have a basal, which I haven't had in forever." Two participants voiced frustration that they were not provided with literacy curriculum. Sue, a twenty-year veteran, gathered her own curriculum. Using personal money, Lurie and her team bought their curriculum online. Foundational reading skills are taught in the early childhood grades. It is incomprehensible that early childhood teachers would be expected to teach children literacy skills without being provided with curriculum. Lack of curriculum in any classroom is unacceptable.

When supplied with curriculum, ECPST appreciate when administrative leaders invest in new curriculum with them. Suzanne and Grace told of their encouragement when principals were willing to attend out-of-town training sessions with them. The provision of curriculum, a basic need, and a willingness to learn alongside faculty members is imperative in demonstrating a commitment to teachers' success. This dedication can influence ECPST' determination to remain in the classroom.

Personal/Emotional Support

Emotional support was shown to have the greatest association between principal supports and the likelihood of teachers remaining in the classroom (Hughes et al., 2015). Principals at Sue and Jean's schools fostered open communication with teachers. Sue stated, "I feel comfortable going to her with anything. It doesn't necessarily have to even be a school matter, but something that's affecting me, you know affects my teaching. So, she has a very open door policy for that." Recognition of successes provided teachers with a feeling of support (Hughes et al., 2015). While it is important to recognize successes, as teachers comments show, efforts and challenges should be acknowledged as well. ECPST conveyed that "little things" were appreciated and made a difference. Grace expressed gratitude for support offered by her principal, "Occasionally, she brings a snack cart around for the teachers. At Christmas or during Teacher Appreciation week, she hires a massage therapist to come up and give us all massages. It's my favorite thing ever!" Lori said she valued such practices as her principal taking recess duty on parent/teacher conference days, his keeping a list of teachers' favorite drinks and providing one for them from time to time, and notes of appreciation.

Teachers were also grateful when principals recognized and supported teachers' care for their families. Jackie declared

> I feel like they've all, all my administrators, this year and in the past, have definitely supported me. With family things that have happened, they're very understanding. When my kids get sick, they're supportive of that. We had a family emergency where they were very sensitive to my needs at that time. They came to my classroom and checked in on me.

Suzanne's granddaughter was born several weeks premature. She left school one day and was unable to return to school for two weeks. Following the two weeks, there were two school days left before a break. She relates the experience,

> My principal called me and said, 'You don't need to come back. We've already got you covered. Your team has your things ready. You've got to stay there with your daughter.' That's the kind of personal support she gives us. I mean, she expects us to do our job, but at the same time she knows we have families. That meant the world to me.

Conversely, Harriet, an urban, early career teacher, asserted, "If you had a problem, you would have to seek them out. They wouldn't notice that you were struggling." Furthermore, contrary to other participants' feelings of support, Sue contended that, historically, personal and emotional support were provided to teachers in her school but due to the surge in challenging behaviors and emotional eruptions there was no longer time for this support. With teachers facing increases in challenging student behavior at greater intensity levels, teachers need emotional and personal support more than ever if they are to remain in the classroom.

Professional Support

A school environment that is favorable to relevant, fulfilling learning for teachers has the potential to develop a collective sense of efficacy (Ford & Ware, 2018). Strong instructional leaders demonstrated an increased possibility of ensuring beginning teachers received effective professional development (Youngs et al., 2015). This leads to greater probability of growth and development of the teachers' efficacy resulting in improved teacher retention. Within a school setting, teachers possess different levels of experience,

child development expertise, and content knowledge. Principals must be aware of these differences and provide varying levels of support to appropriately meet the needs of individual teachers (Tran & Smith, 2020). In Cheryl's urban district, professional development (PD) is focused on curriculum only. Her perception for this practice is because of the large number of emergency certified and Teach for America educators. "Administrators must spend their time teaching them how to teach the curriculum." PD should be differentiated. Traditionally prepared teachers do not require the same PD as emergency or alternatively certified teachers. Lori, a teacher for more than 30 years, spoke of her principal's ability to adjust his support. He held an all-school training on technology, but when two long-time teachers with limited technology experience struggled to understand, he provided one-on-one training for them.

Professional support also entails promoting teacher autonomy. Lack of autonomy has been linked to teacher attrition (Glazer, 2020; Ingersoll et al., 2018; Santoro, 2017; Sutcher et al., 2019). The emphasis on standardized testing and limited autonomy leads to teacher stress and a perceived lack of professional respect compounding teacher retention (Tran & Smith, 2019). All participants completed traditional preparation programs and many of them discussed the professional respect afforded them by their principals. "My principal values my experiences and education. I feel empowered. I feel like I'm heard at my school," asserted Alane. Lori said, "He asks us what we think and what works best. And I love that, not just being told, because I do feel like I'm the expert on this right now because I've been doing this for so long." Grace described her principal, "She is in our business as far as knowing what we're doing. Of course, she expects us to do what we're hired to do but she lets us do what we're professionally trained to do." Jean commented

> I have always been blessed with administrators that believed that I knew what I was doing and that they trusted my professional judgement. So, I really have not had too many frustrations at that angle. But if I did, I really believe, and I have occasionally gone to my principal or early childhood coordinator and said, 'If it's saying this, but I've got research to back up that this is more helpful. How can we make what you're asking me to do fit into what I know is developmentally appropriate for children?' And we talk it out. Communication is the key.

Hiring traditionally prepared content specialists (i.e. early childhood education) offers principals reassurance that they are knowledgeable and prepared to effectively teach young children. This allows principals to grant autonomy to teachers treating them with professional dignity and respect.

Principals should provide a hedge of protection from external pressures allowing teachers to concentrate on teaching, which will increase self-efficacy (Ford & Ware, 2018; Tran & Smith, 2020). Describing her principals as a "buffer for district policies," Alane respected his stance that teachers should use effective teaching methods and "not exact methods the district has instructed us on." On the contrary, Cheryl expressed her frustration, "There's something coming down from the top saying, 'But, we're going to do it this way.' It doesn't feel like we've been asked. It feels like we've been told. So that to me is not supportive. That's very top down." Alane felt stymied by her principal when seeking other positions. After unsuccessful interviews for an ELL coordinator and a math specialist, she was told, "You are too much of a kindergarten teacher." and "They do a lot of testing and that's not your thing." She related, "What I have learned is the

administrators think I'm really great at my position and they are not going to move me anywhere. I guess I should take it as a compliment but it has also been frustrating."

Maintaining a consistent faculty results in higher student achievement and more stability in the school climate (Kini & Podolsky, 2016; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). The most powerful effect on teachers' intended and actual turnover was the caliber of administrative leadership (Kim, 2019). Positive working relationships with principals are instrumental in retaining teachers (Hughes et al., 2015; Tran & Smith, 2020). Teachers' perceptions of principal support are pivotal in determining teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom (Sutcher et al., 2019). Suzanne extolled her principal, "She is supportive in all areas. I'm blessed. I don't know how many people could say that but I can. I have 100% confidence in her." By being mindful and intentional about providing comprehensive support to teachers, principals can aid in the critical need to retain teachers in their schools.

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APPENDIX A

Prospectus

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

TEACHER RETENTION: WHY TEACHERS REMAIN IN THE FIELD

A PROSPECTUS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

JOANIE GIEGER
Norman, Oklahoma
2019

TEACHER RETENTION: WHY TEACHERS REMAIN IN THE FIELD

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

BY

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Abstract

Teacher retention is at the forefront of educational issues with the number of teachers in the field dwindling. Research shows staffing difficulties afflicting districts are due in large part to a *revolving door*, in which substantial numbers of teachers transfer or leave schools considerably before retirement (Chang, 2009; Ingersoll & Perda, 2012). Roughly, 50% of teachers exit the classroom during the first five years of teaching with 20% of those leaving the profession in the first three years of teaching (Gray & Taie, 2015; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Retention of teachers is imperative for reversing this trend. The purpose of this study is to examine teacher's rationale for remaining in the classroom. By examining experienced teachers' reasons for remaining in the field, findings of this study will aid in turning the tide of teachers leaving the classroom.

Keywords*: teacher retention, teacher attrition*

Teacher Retention: Why Teachers Remain in the Field

The most significant factor in student success is access to an effective, experienced teacher (Wilson, Bell, Galosy, & Shouse, 2004). Retention of well-qualified, veteran teachers aids in the maintenance of high caliber of instruction, especially in low achieving schools (Hanushek, Rivkin, & Schiman, 2016). Despite these findings, one-half of teachers in the United States leave the classroom during the first five years of teaching (Chang, 2009; Ingersoll & Perda, 2012). This alarming trend is concerning for all stakeholders due to the sweeping effects on the educational system. Annually, the financial impact is significant with estimated national costs of up to $2.2 billion dollars and district costs for departed teacher replacement ranging from $8 thousand dollars to $9.5 thousand dollars (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014; Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007). Additionally, federal and state governments provide funding dollars through teacher tuition reimbursements or grant programs, which often require a predetermined number of years of service in the field (Goldhaber & Cowan, 2014). Long-term benefits from these monies are lost when teachers leave the field after a short stint in the classroom.

Furthermore, the school environment is disrupted by teacher attrition through the interruption of instructional programs and the hindrance of peer collaboration and collegiality (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). Most importantly, the consequence of teacher turnover has a negative effect on children in the classroom. Practitioners identify teaching quality as the most influential school-based factor in student learning (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). The quality and consistency of the faculty are gravely affected by the cumulative impact of teacher turnover. The average number of years

taught by teachers in 1987-1988 was 15 years (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014). That number dropped to one year in 2008, before bouncing back after the economic downturn to five years in 2011-2012. Research shows teacher effectiveness improves throughout the first years of teaching (Henry, Bastian, & Fortner, 2011; Kersting, Chen, & Stigler, 2012). Yet, evidence demonstrates exiting teachers are frequently replaced by first-year teachers, thus creating a cycle in which students are taught by a series of novice teachers year after year (Ingersoll et al., 2014).

The teacher shortage is a pressing concern not only nationally, but regionally as well. Districts in many states face challenges as they attempt to hire and maintain a sufficient number of teachers in classrooms. Despite eliminating 480 teaching positions and a record number of emergency teaching certificates granted, over 500 teaching positions in Oklahoma remained unfilled at the start of the 2017-2018 school year, thus, failing to meet the needs of a growing student population (Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE), 2017b; Oklahoma State School Boards Association, 2017). The numbers for the 2018-2019 school year are even more concerning with the Oklahoma State Board of Education (OSBOE) approving 3,034 emergency certificates (OSDE, 2018a, 2018b, 2019). The number of emergency certificates granted in 2018-2019 was a 64% increase over the number issued in the 2017-2018 school year. Seven years ago, only 32 emergency certificates were issued in the state of Oklahoma. Resulting in a 9,381% increase in emergency certificates granted in the past few years.

School districts have taken drastic measures including increasing class sizes, paying teachers to relinquish plan time to instruct an additional section, rehiring retired teachers, and assigning teaching responsibilities to administrators (OSDE, 2017c, 2019). Data in

Oklahoma indicates emergency certified teachers generally remain in the classroom one year or less with only 20% returning to the classroom for a second year. Ergo, the current 3,034 emergency certified teachers offer little in the way of permanently filling the chasm of additional teachers needed within the classroom. The exorbitant number of emergency certificates granted leaves multitudes of Oklahoma students with underprepared and underqualified teachers.

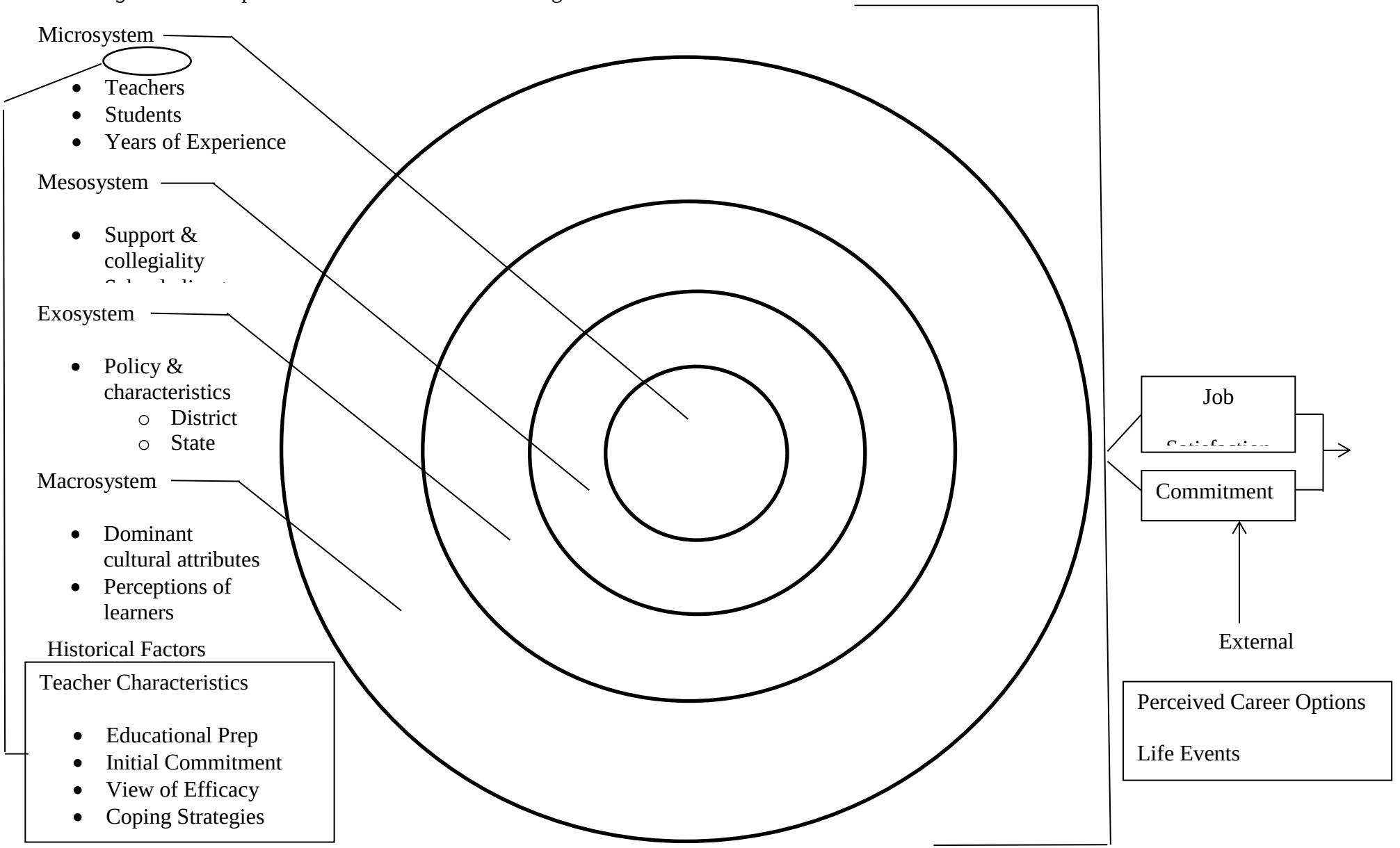
Theoretical Framework

This study, grounded in the theoretical framework put forth by Brownell and Smith (1993), aids in the understanding of teacher retention by examining teachers within broader educational contexts. This framework has two assumptions: 1) connections between the expressed variables may be multifaceted and reciprocal, and 2) some variables may have a higher association than others with teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom.

The framework, based on Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological model, consists of four nested, interconnected systems: *microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem* (Brownell & Smith, 1993; Heineke, Mazza, & Tichnor-Wagner, 2014). The microsystem is closest to the teacher and the classroom. Within the classroom, student-teacher relationships, job assignment, or class size can affect teachers in positive or negative manners**.** Also included within the microsystem are the teacher's historical influences including educational preparation, initial commitment to teach, coping strategies, view of efficacy, and demographics. The mesosystem involves relationships and their interconnectivity at school including collegiality and administrative support. The exosystem consists of broader social structures affecting the teacher and the

workplace such as characteristics and policies at the district, state, and federal levels. The macrosystem encompasses the philosophies, beliefs, values, and attitudes of the dominant culture along with economic states that influence schools and the choices of teachers within them. In addition, the framework considers the effects of external factors on teachers' career decisions. External factors possibly affecting teacher decision-making involve life events (e.g., marriage, pregnancy) and economic considerations (See Figure 1). The relationship between external influences and environmental interactions affects the teacher's assimilation into the profession conceivably affecting future determinations to remain in the field. Therefore, the framework for understanding teacher retention provides a structure to study reasons influencing teachers' decisions for remaining in the classroom.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Understanding Teacher Retention



Adapted from Brownell & Smith, (1993, p. 27)

Literature Review

As early as the 1920s, teacher turnover has been the subject of many discussions by administrators, teachers, and stakeholders (Almack, 1933/1970). For many years school districts across the nation have faced the challenge of maintaining qualified and experienced teachers in the classroom (Billingsley, 2003; Ingersoll, 2003; Waddell, 2010). Of the nearly half a million teachers who leave the classroom each year in the United States, 16% retire while 84% transfer schools or leave the profession (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). Urban and rural districts are most at risk for teacher attrition with nearly double the number of teachers leaving them versus suburban districts (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014, Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, Meisels, 2007; Leland & Murtadha, 2011). First-year teachers are especially susceptible to attrition with over 9% leaving the field after the first year (Ingersoll et al., 2018). These facts point to the critical need for strategies to keep highly qualified, effective teachers in all classrooms.

The impact of teacher attrition is far-reaching, affecting people, academics, school climate, and finances. While many educational reformers assert teacher attrition is the result of low compensation and student behavior, many teachers cite other working conditions such as lack of respect for the profession, curricular autonomy, overburdensome paperwork, insufficient administrative support, and inadequate resources as reasons for leaving the field (Byrd-Blake et al., 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future and NCTAF State Partners, 2002; Santoro, 2011). Teacher turnover creates schools lacking continuity and stability when experienced teachers depart and are replaced by novice educators (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011; Gomba, 2015). Inexperienced teachers

are not yet proficient in classroom management or differentiating instruction (Rodgers & Skelton, 2014). Classroom experience is invaluable for gaining professional growth and teacher effectiveness. Instability disrupts instructional programs and negatively affects student success (Urick, 2016).

Teacher attrition also has financial consequences. Districts spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on recruitment, hiring, and professional development of new teachers (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Synar & Maiden, 2012). Synar and Maiden (2012) proposed the costs of teacher turnover could be separated into four distinct areas. *Separation Costs* including exit interviews, gathering of other data, and administrative costs associated with such collection of data represented 2.29% of the total cost of replacement. *Hiring Costs*, such as recruitment, advertisement, interviews, reference checks, drug testing, criminal background checks, bonuses, and administrative expenses accounted for 8.64% of the cost of replacement. *Training Costs* consisting of introduction to the school and district, new teacher training, mentoring and professional development, materials, and administrative expenses comprised 48.19% of the total cost of replacement. Lastly, *Performance Productivity* expenses are grounded in Sorenson's (1995) calculations of 20% productivity increases per month, necessitating five months to attain complete productivity resulting in 40.92% of the cost of replacement. Calculations from this study placed the average cost per teacher exiting at $14,508.86. When teachers exit the field after only a brief stint in the classroom, those monies are lost. Therefore, emphasis should be placed on retention rather than teacher recruitment.

Reasons within the Microsystem

The literature concerning teacher retention and attrition can be viewed through the lens of the conceptual framework. Within the microsystem, several components may affect a teacher's decision to depart the field including class size, teacher-student relationships, educational preparation, coping strategies, initial commitment, and demographics (Brown & Smith, 1993). Provasnik and Dorfman (2005) noted two of the most prevalent reasons for leaving the classroom included class size and student behavior. In one study, physical education teachers stated growing class sizes, which included more students with significant behavior problems as justification for leaving education (Cieśliński & Szum, 2014).

Research also found educational preparation with limited training often led to teachers' leaving (Lasagna, 2009; Zhang & Zeller, 2016). Ingersoll, Merrill, and May (2012) concluded teachers having little or no coursework in pedagogy with inadequate time in the field in hands-on teaching experiences (e.g. Teach for America – TFA), were twice as likely to leave the field after the first year compared to those who received extensive coursework and experience in the classroom prior to teaching through traditional, accredited teacher education programs. Other research showed alternative preparation programs, in which future teachers receive abbreviated preparation for teaching impelled teacher attrition as well (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2008; Burstein, Czech, Kretschmer, Lombardi, & Smith, 2009).

Additionally, the microsystem includes teacher stress and subsequent coping strategies that possibly play a role in the decision to leave the classroom. Stress may be a factor to leave, since Watson, Harper, Ratliff, and Singleton (2010) found it led to

diminished job satisfaction. Reasons within the microsystem, such as mentoring and mindset, also affect teachers' decisions to remain in the field. Choi and Chung (2018) found teachers possessing a mindset of helping others through teaching were more gratified, content, and not as likely to leave the profession. In addition, teachers who viewed their positions from a social justice perspective in which they were helping to overcome inequities in education had a higher probability of remaining in the field.

Reasons within the Mesosystem

Perceptions of collegiality, support, and school climate comprise the mesosystem. Collegiality applies to the relationships teachers have with their peers within the school environment. Schools that foster positive, reliable relationships in which teachers can confide challenges and seek counsel from their peers seem to have lower teacher turnover rates (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009). Ladd (2009) found teachers' perceptions of principal leadership and support were more indicative of teachers' plans to leave the classroom than any other component of the school context. Research also showed teachers who believed the principal cultivated an affirmative climate were more inclined to remain in the classroom (Boyd et al., 2011; Ingersoll, Merrill, & May, 2016). While isolated and limited teachers who described low principal leadership were more prone to leave or transfer the succeeding year.

Children in inner-city and lower socio-economic status schools may not have reliable access to effective and experienced teachers (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). The workforce in these schools is often comprised of larger numbers of instructors holding emergency approval and lacking certification in the area taught. All too frequently, less possibility for collaboration, feedback, and limited access to highly-

qualified, experienced peers and mentors exists for teachers in high-risk schools. Teachers' performance in high-poverty schools tends to level out after a short number of years due to the inability to collaborate with others and assess and reflect on pedagogical methods. In these lowest achieving schools, morale and school community are adversely affected since schools that are difficult to staff emerge as sites to depart, rather than sites to remain.

In a study conducted by Urick (2016), shared leadership appeared to promote teacher retention. Teachers' perception of engagement in collective leadership via classroom autonomy, shared school decision making, professional development, principal support, and a positive climate led to a greater proclivity to stay in their present position (Hulpia, Devos, & Rosseel, 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Somech & Ron, 2007). Correspondingly, Provasnik and Dorfman (2005) found lack of planning time, excessive workloads, and limited power concerning school policy influenced teachers' decisions to leave. Research involving more than 50,000 public school teachers in Chicago showed they were more inclined to remain in a school where they had an effect on school decisions (Allensworth et al., 2009). Research signified the value of a positive school climate, since teachers' perceptions of it were directly connected with their determination to remain in the field (Hulpia et al., 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010).

Reasons within the Exosystem

Policies and characteristics at the district, state, and federal level form the exosystem. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2014) put forth a policy brief featuring the work of the national nonprofit organization, New Teacher Center. It asserted a model consisting of a robust structure of professional learning whereby clearly defined effective

teaching provided guidance for the global program and novice teachers obtained extensive induction and opportunity for school-based collaborative learning. In this era of accountability, novice teachers may rapidly feel voiceless and disheartened when expected to teach a restricted and/or scripted curriculum including excessive standardized test preparation activities (Hancock & Scherff, 2010). Likewise, veteran teachers with little classroom autonomy sought relief by exiting the field (Ingersoll et al., 2016). Glazer (2018) found experienced teachers left the classroom when they had no power to change the curriculum and/or pedagogy imposed on them by district officials.

Added obligatory responsibilities and required documentation affects many teachers' desire to remain in the field. Nance and Calabrese's (2009) study found special education teacher retention was significantly affected by additional, mandatory state assessments and increasing legal requirements. Included within the exosystem, compensation is at the center of most discussions concerning teacher attrition and retention with many studies finding low salaries frequently cited as one of the primary reasons for exiting the classroom early (Cieśliński & Szum, 2014; Hancock & Scherff, 2010; Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2017a).

Reasons within the Macrosystem

Contained within the macrosystem of the framework are such elements as the dominant culture's beliefs and attitudes toward teaching, teachers' perceptions of students, and the economy. Schools with large populations of low-income, minority, and low-achieving students were prone to have a greater teacher attrition rate (Boyd et al., 2011; Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005). Lasagna (2009) reported teachers made

the determination to leave the field, in part, because they believed students from the inner city were not capable of succeeding academically.

External Personal Reasons

External personal factors may have an effect on teachers' commitment to the profession. These can include economic considerations, perceived career options, and life events such as pregnancy, marriage, and spousal relocation. Ingersoll (2002) found nearly 40% of teachers include family or personal reasons for leaving the field. Moreover, insufficient funds for family needs or a perceived unacceptable standard of living were also given as reasons teachers exit the classroom (Cieśliński & Szum, 2014). Securing permanent positions and the limited opportunities for career advancement also influenced teachers' decision to depart the field (Cieśliński & Szum, 2014; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014).

Teacher retention is a crucial component in solving the teacher shortage problem (Billingsley, 2003) and achieving better outcomes for students (Wilson, Bell, Galosy, & Shouse, 2004). Ingersoll (2001) notes teacher recruitment is futile if teachers depart after only a short time in the field. In spite of this information, research has been unbalanced with reasons teachers leave the classroom receiving much more consideration than reasons teachers remain in the classroom (Gomba, 2015; Perrachione, Rosser, & Petersen, 2008; Waddell, 2010).

Purpose

Numerous research studies have examined the issue of teacher retention by investigating reasons teachers have left the classroom, but few have explored the reasons teachers remain (Cieśliński & Szum, 2014; Gray & Taie, 2015; Heineke, Mazza, &

Tichnor-Wagner, 2014; Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & Perda, 2012; Lindqvist, Nordänger, & Carlsson, 2014; Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2017a; Scheopner, 2010; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014). This disparity in research between reasons for teacher attrition and retention has left a gap in the literature, which this study seeks to satisfy. The purpose of this study is to examine why teachers remain in the classroom. The primary questions guiding this study are: 1) What are reasons teachers remain in the classroom? 2) How do these reasons breakout into the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and external personal reasons?

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research design will be used for this study of teacher retention. Qualitative research allows for rich description of a person's lived experience; hence this study will analyze, interpret, and describe the teachers' lived experiences and reasons for remaining in the classroom (Bazeley, 2013). Many studies focused on teacher attrition and retention have employed quantitative methods using large, national data sets (Hancock & Scherff, 2010; Ingersoll, 2003; Urick, 2016), and smaller data sets (Ryan, et al., 2017; Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2017; Vagi, Pivovarova, & Barnard, 2017; Whipp & Geronime, 2017). This study seeks to balance the research by using a qualitative study, which will provide a comprehensive view of teacher retention (Bazeley, 2013). Balancing the research using qualitative methods will offer a more holistic view of teacher retention.

The researcher will undertake classical phenomenological research looking in-depth at reasons for persisting in the classroom (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012; Grbich, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This qualitative study will use interviews to examine

the phenomena of teachers' rationale for remaining in the classroom. Zhang and Zeller (2016) conducted interviews of 60 novice teachers in their mixed methods, longitudinal study to gain information regarding effects of preparation on teacher retention. Their findings indicate more than twice as many traditionally prepared teachers remain in the field as compared to alternatively certified teachers over a three-year period. Interviewees trained through the *minimal,* alternative program stated they felt unprepared to manage a classroom on their own. Additionally, Glazer (2018) utilized interviews of 25 experienced and invested teachers and found teachers often leave the profession as an act of resistance. The resistance lens revealed issues of power, autonomy, and unacceptable policies and practices that drove teachers away. As is evidenced, the use of in-depth interviews for this study is grounded in previous research and will seek to provide a richer perspective of reasons teachers remain in the classroom (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Sample and Setting

A stratified purposeful sampling method will be applied to achieve the selection of participants who meet the criterion for the study (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 1990). Current Oklahoma public school educators teaching children in the early childhood grades of pre-kindergarten through third grade will engage in the study. Participants who have remained in the classroom at least five years will be divided into five subgroups based on years of teaching: 1) 5-9 years; 2) 10-14 years; 3) 15-19 years; 4) 20-24 years; and 5) 25 or more years. The researcher chose to require participants to have completed five years of teaching due to research that shows one-half of teachers leave the field in the first five

years, thus making remaining in the classroom a minimum of five years a key point in teacher retention (Chang, 2009; Ingersoll & Perda, 2012). Teachers may hold a traditional, alternative, or emergency teaching certificate. Possible participants will likely represent various age groups, genders, ethnicities, types of settings, grade levels taught, and years of experience. Ten teachers from each of the five strata will be interviewed for a total of 50 participants.

Beginning with professional contacts in the field, the researcher will solicit potential public school teachers from various contexts throughout Oklahoma. Differing contexts may include rural, urban, inner city, and suburban schools with various-sized student populations. Across the 50 participants, the researcher will strive to interview teachers working with diverse socio-economic levels, ethnicities, and cultures.

Data Sources and Procedures

Interviews. Reaching the foundation of the reasons why teachers remain in the classroom is done through interviews, the principal method for data collection in phenomenological studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews allow the researcher to study and probe participants replies to collect comprehensive data concerning their experiences and feelings (Gay et al., 2012). Thirty- to sixty-minute interviews will be conducted with current, pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade classroom teachers. Interviewees in close proximity to the researcher's university will meet in-person with the researcher at a public library for the interview. Participants from greater distances will be interviewed via FaceTime or Zoom. All interviews will take place at a time mutually acceptable to both parties and will be recorded using the Voice Memo application.

Interviews will be a combination of structured and semi-structured formats (See Appendix A for complete interview protocol). While structured interviews often do not permit the researcher to investigate participants' views and understandings, they do serve the purpose of collecting common sociodemographic data, therefore justifying their use in this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Semi-structured interviews are guided by a flexible set of questions allowing the researcher to explore participants' responses regarding their perceptions and experiences. The semi-structured portion of the interview will enable the researcher to gather rich data focused on teachers' decisions to remain in the field. The interview was structured with the conceptual framework in mind. It is comprised of questions based on the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (Brownell & Smith, 1993; Heineke, Mazza, & Tichnor-Wagner, 2014). The structured section will consist of pre-worded, demographic questions asked of all participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The semi-structured section will use an interview guide with questions to be explored. The researcher will begin by asking a broad, open-ended question of the participants regarding their thoughts and feelings concerning their teaching career and their decision to remain in the classroom. Dependent upon the participant's answer, the researcher will consult the follow-up prompts in Appendix A that address various levels of the framework. Each participant will be asked to directly or indirectly address each area of the framework.

Field notebook. A field notebook will be maintained documenting the physical and social context of the research setting, actions, and experiences (Bazeley, 2013). The context is crucial for understanding, interpreting, and transferability of data. Field notes will be handwritten in a notebook before and after each interview. They will include date,

time, place, details of the interaction, and reflective commentary (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Connections and informal thoughts of the researcher will also be documented in the field notebook (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Following the interaction, the notes will be transferred to Dedoose (2018), a cross-platform application for analyzing qualitative and mixed methods research for easier and more comprehensive analyzation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative studies is an ongoing process that takes place concurrently with the collection of more data (Bazeley, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Analyzation of completed interviews and field notes, throughout the process of data collection serves to guide future data collection and the direction of the study. Interviews will be transcribed using a word processor. Each line of the transcription will be numbered to aid in the analysis of the data and transcriptions will also be uploaded to Dedoose (2018). The researcher will use provisional start codes based on the micro-, meso-, exo-, macrosystems, and external personal factors to code the data during the first level of coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Inductive coding, the emergence of other codes during data collection, may reveal additional themes within the proposed systems.

While first round coding encapsulates segments of data into groups, second round coding categorizes these groups into fewer numbers of themes (Miles et al., 2014). The second round of coding will involve analyzing the provisional codes of the interviews and defining emerging themes and patterns within each set of data before comparing and making connections across cases. Additionally, second level analysis of the interviews will entail analyzing the data by each of the systems provided in the theoretical

framework. Level two coding will also consist of meta-coding into the number of codes that emerge for presentation in the findings. The aim of triangulation is to procure confirmation of findings through convergence of varied perspectives (Kasunic, 2005). The juxtaposition in which the perspectives converge is considered to indicate reality. The researcher will triangulate data between cases and data to ensure trustworthy results.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers are tasked with providing credible and dependable findings, gathered, analyzed, and disseminated in ethical ways (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Trustworthiness of qualitative research is based on the foundational idea that the data accurately measure that which it is sought to measured (Bazeley, 2013; Gay et al, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). Ensuring trustworthiness requires the researcher to think extensively about the study and the process while also thoroughly examining all aspects of the research process. Throughout the process, the researcher must adhere to ethical guidelines, always acting in a principled manner.

Credibility. Credibility, or internal validity, is the trustworthiness of the conclusions of the study (Bazeley, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). The results are logical, sound, and unified. When rich and meaningful data is plausible to the reader, credibility is demonstrated. Internal validity is a strength of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Because human beings are the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research, interpretations of reality are accessed directly through their observations and interviews. We are thus "closer" to reality than if a data collection instrument had been interjected between us and the participants (pp. 243-244).

To ensure credibility in the proposed study, the researcher will maintain an audit trail of the research process (Bazeley, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). Triangulation also helps to ensure credibility by using multiple data sources and connecting the current research to the existing body of literature. In this study, triangulation will be accomplished with multiple data sources such as interviews and the field notebook. Credibility will also be maintained by connecting the findings to the existing body of literature.

Another tactic for assuring credibility is to conduct member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After transcription of each interview, the researcher provides the transcription to the participant for a member check. This strategy affirms the transcription accurately reflects participants' perceptions and experiences. An additional strategy for ensuring credibility is reflexivity, which is how the researcher influences and is influenced by the research process (Probst & Berenson, 2014). This researcher will disclose biases, assumptions, and dispositions to aid in the understanding of research conduct, decisions, and conclusions. A final strategy for ensuring credibility is peer review. Colleagues, as well as the dissertation committee, will review the data and conclusions to verify that the conclusions are possible, based on the data.

Transferability. Transferability, also known as external validity, is the ability of the results of a study to transfer to other contexts (Bazeley, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). Adequate descriptions of study details such as sample, settings, and processes must be provided to allow sufficient comparisons with elements from other studies. This researcher will provide rich description of the proposed study details including setting, participants, data collection, and analysis to permit comparisons of other contexts to be made by the reader. Care will be taken when selecting the sample to

seek maximum variation, thus granting other researchers a greater range of application. Reporting of the findings are crucial, because the researcher must be able to persuade the reader that results have substance and consequence to other individuals, sites, and times. Further, results should be compatible with, associated with, or affirmative of previous theory. In this study, the researcher will offer settings where the results could be successfully tested further.

Dependability. The primary concern of this realm is constancy and steadiness through time, research, and methods (Miles et al., 2014). The researcher uses quality, intercoder agreement, and member checks to confirm the accuracy of data devoid of bias. Honor, quality, and attention to detail by the researcher are essential to ensure dependability. Dependability can be achieved in the proposed study though many practices including adherence to the guidelines of the institutional review board (IRB) (Lichtman, 2011). Member checks will take place shortly after each interview is completed. This researcher aspires to engage honor, values, and ethics throughout the research process.

Confirmability. Sometimes labeled *external reliability*, this domain involves neutrality without researcher bias or, at the least, openness regarding unavoidable biases (Miles et al., 2014). The researcher is aware of, seeks to minimize, and communicates the effect of any possible biases. This researcher will strive to be aware of any biases and not permit them to have an effect on the research process (Lichtman, 2011). Qualitative studies clearly and thoroughly describe the research with enough detail so an outside researcher may replicate the study. Rich, descriptive detail of proceedings will be provided by this researcher to ensure others may replicate the study. Consideration of

alternative hypotheses also adds to confirmability. An audit trail, as well as multiple data sources to provide triangulation of data are present to ensure confirmability. An audit trail and triangulation of data with various data sources and connecting findings to previous literature will be undertaken by this researcher to maintain confirmability.

Significance and Importance of Findings

Retaining quality, experienced teachers in the classroom is essential for the success of students and, ultimately, the community (Rodgers & Skelton, 2014). Teachers wield a cumulative effect on student learning and a succession of highly qualified, effective teachers helps to mitigate the gap between underprivileged students and their more advantaged peers (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). Correspondingly, the enduring effects of instruction by ineffective teachers year after year are calamitous. Despite 50% of teachers exiting the classroom within the first five years of teaching, a change in perspective allows the 50% of teachers who remain in the classroom to be seen (Chang, 2009; Ingersoll & Perda, 2012). Research centered on reasons teachers remain in the classroom can have positive effects on schools. Changes to federal, state, and district policies, school contexts, and classroom experiences can improve the work environment for teachers. Teachers may feel more connected, less isolated, and experience increased camaraderie and collegiality with peers. From existing research on teacher retention, this researcher believes the many altruistic reasons teachers remain in the field will be brought to light through these findings. This information can begin to change the value society places on teachers' today. Feeling valued and respected is the first step of many toward turning the tide of teachers exiting from classrooms across the nation. Most

importantly, experienced, effective teachers will remain in the classroom to teach the nation's most vulnerable and valuable population.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Structured Interview

1. Please tell me about yourself and your teaching background. – Microsystem and External Personal Factors

1.a. How long have you been teaching?

1b. What grade levels have you taught?

1c. What districts and schools have you taught in?

1d. What is your marital status?

1e. Do you have children?

1f. Are you a dual-income or single-income family? Are you the primary wage earner in your family?

1g. How old are you?

1h. What is your race/ethnicity?

1i. How do you define your gender?

1j. Where did you grow up?

1k. Do you teach in the district where you grew up?

1l. Do you teach in a district near where you grew up or went to undergraduate school?

Semi-structured Interview

Primary Question - Please summarize your thoughts and feelings concerning your career as a teacher and why you remain in the classroom.

2. Microsystem – Teacher Characteristics

2a. When did you decide to become a teacher? What influenced this decision?

2b. Why did you want to become a teacher?

2c. What bachelor's degree do you hold?

2d. What areas of certification do you hold?

2e. What type of certification do you currently hold? What type of certification did you hold?

2f. Did you complete a traditional teacher preparation program?

2g. If you have not completed a TPP, have you had coursework in pedagogy? Approximately how many courses or hours?

2h. If you have not completed a TPP, did you spend time in the field working hands-on with children before beginning to teach? Approximately how many hours or practicums?

2i. What type of impact does effective teaching have on students?

2j. How have your teaching responsibilities changed since you began teaching?

2k. When you are faced with teaching frustrations, what type of active strategies do you use?

2l. How were you placed in your current assignment?

3. Microsystem – Students

3a. What has been your average class size?

3b. What is the largest number of pupils you have had?

3c. What is the smallest number of pupils you have had?

3d. How many children with special needs do you typically have in your classroom?

3e. How many English as a Second Language (ESL, DLL, ELL) students do you typically have in your classroom?

3f. Overall, how have students changed since you began teaching?

3g. More specifically, how has student behavior changed since you began teaching?

4. Mesosystem – Support and Collegiality

4a. Describe administrative support at your school. What types are provided? (Emotional, curricular, personal, professional)

4b. Talk about peer support at your school. What types are provided?

4c. What types of parent support are provided at your school?

4d. Do you collaborate formally (set times for meeting) with colleagues? If so, how frequently?

4e. Do you collaborate informally with colleagues? If so, how frequently?

4f. What type of induction, or first-year teaching program, was offered when you began teaching? How effective was it for you?

5. Mesosystem – School Climate

5a. Talk about how you gain meaningful skills and practices?

5b. How does your position complement your educational beliefs, values, and philosophy?

5c. How do administration, peers, and parents recognize your teaching?

5d. Describe the autonomy you are given to make decisions regarding your classroom.

5e. How are teachers involved in curricular decisions concerning the school?

5f. How are teachers involved in policy decisions regarding the school?

5g. How are teachers involved in scheduling decisions relating to your school?

5h. How are teachers involved in decisions relevant to faculty makeup of the grade level team?

5i. How have the demands placed on teachers changed since you began teaching?

5j. What are your responsibilities versus other teachers' responsibilities?

5k. Talk about the stressors you face in your job?

6. Exosystem – Policy and Characteristics – District, State, Federal Levels

6a. Do you know the composition of your faculty regarding certification?

6b. How many sections of each grade level do you have in your building?

6c. Is your superintendent appointed by the Board of Education or elected?

6d. Is your building administration involved in decision-making at the district level?

6e. What input do you have in district decisions?

6f. Does your district pay a competitive salary compared to other comparable districts in OK?

6g. If given additional responsibilities, how has your compensation been affected?

6h. How does district policy on teacher assignments affect you?

6i. What resources are provided to help you effectively teach?

6j. How do district policies affect your decision to remain in the classroom?

6k. How do state policies affect your decision to remain in the classroom?

6l. How do federal policies affect your decision to remain in the classroom?

7. Macrosystem – Dominant Cultural Attributes & Perceptions of Learners

7a. How are education, learners, and teachers viewed in your community?

7b. How are education, learners, and teachers viewed in your state?

7c. How are education, learners, and teachers viewed in the nation?

8. Macrosystem – Economic Conditions

8a. How has the availability of resources changed in your years of teaching?

8b. How have class sizes changed in your years of teaching?

8c. How has the teaching pool been affected by the economy?

9. External Personal Factors – Economic Considerations & Perceived Career Options

9a. If you wanted to change, what opportunities do you have to change grade levels?

9b. If you wanted to change, what opportunities do you have to change schools within your district?

9c. If you wanted to change, what opportunities do you have to change school districts?

9d. Have you completed any graduate work, certificates or degrees? If so, please describe.

9e. What career options are available to you? Will/Have you pursued any of these options?

9f. Are you fairly compensated for the responsibilities you hold? Explain.

10. Summary

10a. What challenges do you face as a classroom teacher?

10b. What rewards do you receive as a classroom teacher?

Appendix B

Informed Consent

Signed Consent to Participate in Research

Would you like to be involved in research at the University of Oklahoma?

I am Joanie Gieger from the Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum department and I invite you to participate in my research project entitled Teacher Retention: Reasons Teachers Remain in the Classroom. This research is being conducted at Oklahoma Christian University or via Zoom, a video conferencing platform. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an Oklahoma, public school educator with at least five years of experience teaching children in grades pre-kindergarten through third grade. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study.

Please read this document and contact me to ask any questions that you may have BEFORE agreeing to take part in my research.

What is the purpose of this research? The purpose of this research is to examine why teachers remain in the classroom.

How many participants will be in this research? About 50 people will take part in this research including 10 teachers from the following subgroups: 5-10 years of experience, 10-15 years of experience, 15-20 years of experience, 20-25 years of experience, and more than 25 years of experience.

What will I be asked to do? If you agree to be in this research, you will participate in an interview with the researcher.

How long will this take? Your participation will take approximately 45 minutes.

What are the risks and/or benefits if I participate? There are no risks and no benefits from participating in this research.

Will I be compensated for participating? You will not be reimbursed for your time and participation in this research.

Who will see my information? In research reports, there will be no information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only approved researchers and the OU Institution Review Board will have access to the records.

You have the right to access the research data that has been collected about you as a part of this research. However, you may not have access to this information until the entire research project has been finished and you consent to this temporary restriction.

Do I have to participate? No. If you do not participate, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the research. If you decide to participate, you don't have to answer any question and can stop participating at any time.

Will my identity be anonymous or confidential? Your identity will remain anonymous. The data you provide will be retained in anonymous form.

I agree for the researcher to use my data in future studies. ___Yes ___ No

Audio Recording of Research Activities To assist with accurate recording of your responses, interviews may be recorded on an audio recording device. Audio files will be deleted once they have been transcribed. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording without penalty.

I consent to audio recording. ___Yes ___ No

Video Recording of Research Activities To assist with accurate recording of your responses, interviews may be recorded on a video recording device. Video recordings will be deleted after they have been transcribed. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to video recording. ___ Yes ___ No

Who do I contact with questions, concerns or complaints? If you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research or have experienced a research-related injury, contact me at (405)808-0432 or joanie.gieger@oc.edu or Dr. Vickie Lake at (918)660-3984 or vlake@ou.edu.

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than the researcher(s) or if you cannot reach the researcher(s).

By signing the informed consent form, you do not waive any legal rights.

You will be given a copy of this document for your records. By providing information to the researcher(s), I am agreeing to participate in this research.

Participant Signature	Print Name	Date
Signature of Researcher Obtaining Consent	Print Name Joanie Gieger	Date
Signature of Witness (if applicable)	Print Name	Date

Appendix C

Projected Time Line

Monday, July 22, 2019 – Defend prospectus and submit IRB upon successful defense of prospectus

July 22 – August 1, 2019 – Work with IRB to obtain approval, Begin writing theoretical article

August 1 – August 23, 2019 – Obtain consent and interview participants, Send audio files to transcription service, Begin analyzation

August 23 – September 13, 2019 – Analyze data

Monday, September 2, 2019 – Apply for graduation (Deadline Sunday, September 15th)

September 14 – September 30, 2019 – Write theoretical article

October 1 – October 18, 2019 – Write empirical article

October 19 – November 4, 2019 – Write empirical article

Wednesday, October 30, 2019 – Submit request for degree check (Deadline November 6th)

Monday, November 4, 2019 – Submit request for authority to defend (Deadline November 20th)

November 5 – November 20, 2019 – Revisions

Thursday, November 21, 2019 – Submit completed dissertation to committee

November 21 – December 4, 2019 – Defense preparation

Thursday, December 5, 2019 – Dissertation defense (Final deadline for defense December 6th)

Friday, December 13, 2019 – Submit dissertation to SHAREOK, Close IRB

Appendix D

Possible Publications

Teaching and Teacher Education

Educational Leadership

Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice

Education and Treatment of Children

Leadership and Policy in Schools

School Leadership and Management

Educational Research

Principal Leadership

APPENDIX B

Institutional Review Board Approval

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: July 29, 2019 **IRB#:** 10990

Principal Investigator: Joanie Arleen Gieger **Approval Date:** 07/29/2019

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: Teacher Retention: Why Teachers Remain in the Field

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Fred Beard, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX C

Institutional Review Board Closure

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Final Report – Inactivation

Date: January 14, 2021 **IRB#:** 10990

To: Joanie Arleen Gieger **Inactivation Date:** 01/14/2021

Study Title: Teacher Retention: Why Teachers Remain in the Field

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the Final Report for the above-referenced research study. You have indicated that this study has been completed and should be inactivated. This letter is to confirm that the IRB has inactivated this research study as of the date indicated above.

Note that this action completely terminates all aspects and arms of this research study. Should you wish to reactivate this study, you will need to submit a new IRB application.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB at (405) 325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Ann M. Beutel

Ann Beutel, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board