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OKLAHOMA EDUCATION BUDGET CUTS: PERSPECTIVES OF EARLY
CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN LOW-INCOME SCHOOLS

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OKLAHOMA EDUCATION BUDGET CUTS: PERSPECTIVES OF EARLY
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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to the educators who devote their lives to the betterment of others.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks are due to my advisor, Dr. Lisa Monroe, who worked many hours with me perfecting this paper. I would also like to thank my step-dad, mom, brother, and Dakota for reading and editing my paper countless times and also encouraging me every step of the way. Lastly, I want to thank the teachers who volunteered to participate in this study so we can better understand the lived experiences of early childhood teachers during a time of uncertainty in public education.

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Abstract

This study investigated the lived experiences of early childhood educators in low-income Oklahoma public schools during a time of budget crisis. The state's education system is floundering in terms of funding with an approximately \$58 million budget reduction during the 2016-17 school year, as well as, more cuts to be expected in the future. Due to these cuts, workplace conditions in low-income schools are declining along with teacher motivation and retention. This study found many factors including fewer classroom supplies and stagnate teacher pay negatively impact teacher motivation and their decisions to stay in the state. If Oklahoma continues to lose quality early childhood educators, the future of Oklahoma education is uncertain.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Early childhood education is the foundation on which students build their academic and social knowledge (Bassok, Finch, RaeHyuk, Reardon, & Waldfogel 2016; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Research has consistently shown quality public school preschools and kindergartens are particularly impactful on children from low-income families (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Several factors contribute to the success of these learning experiences with the most significant being the teacher (Freeman, Decker, & Decker, 2013). However, studies have shown schools that serve low-income children are unable to attract or retain quality teachers (Hendricks, 2016; Johnson, 2011; McLaurin, Smith, & Smillie, 2009; NAEYC, 2009).

Early childhood education encompasses learning from birth through age 8 (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Guernsey & Mead, 2010; Trawick-Smith, 2010). During this time, children develop foundational literacy, math, and social skills; all of which impact their later development (Colker, 2014; Guersney & Mead, 2010; Trawick-Smith, 2010). Early childhood is particularly important for students from low socioeconomic households as they typically begin kindergarten with lower cognitive skills than their peers due to several factors including stress at home and delayed language development (Colker, 2014, Dickenson, 2011).

A major component in closing the achievement gap between low- and middle-income children is access to quality teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010; McLaurin, et al., 2009). Several factors influence the quality of an early childhood teacher, including path to teacher certification, experience, understanding of child development, ability to cope with stress, opportunities for professional development, working conditions,

motivation and job satisfaction (Copples & Bredekamp, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ma & MacMillan, 1999; Oklahoma State Board of Education, 2016; Osgood, 2006). Unfortunately, quality teachers are prone to transfer from low-income schools to more affluent ones due to poor working conditions and increased stress levels; leaving the most at-risk students with the least qualified teachers (Bireda, 2011; Hendricks, 2016; Knoepfel, 2007; McLaurin, et al., 2009).

Oklahoma's education system has an historically dubious track record regarding continuous cuts to education (Eger, 2016; Perry, 2014; Piphio, 1989). Oklahoma public schools rely on the state to support approximately 45 percent of their budgets (Annual Budget Report, 2017). However, state support to Oklahoma public schools has decreased by an average of 2.6 percent each year from 2008-2015 (Eger, 2016). Oklahoma schools experienced its deepest cut of 2.34 percent or approximately \$58 million at the beginning of the 2016-17 school year (Oklahoma State Board of Education, 2016). Furthermore, due to additional cuts throughout the year, the total deficit was approximately 3.76 percent equaling \$93.4 million (Eger, 2017). With these ongoing state funding shortfalls, Oklahoma public schools face an almost insurmountable budget crisis, which places stress on classroom teachers and increases teacher attrition (Eger, 2016 Dyrli, 2008; Naylor, 2001; Oakes & Saunders, 2002).

Oklahoma public school teachers have felt the impacts of these cuts on many fronts. Fewer supplies and materials, low salaries, fewer professional development opportunities and reductions in support and professional staff, are just a few of the repercussions teachers are facing amid budget shortages (Kober & Rentener, 2011). In addition, state funding for instructional materials and staff development were cut by 100

percent for the 2016-17 academic year (Oklahoma State Board of Education, 2016).

Local districts are forced to cover those costs and when those budgets are tight, teachers in low-income schools end up spending even more of their personal income on class materials (Dyrli, 2008; White, 2016).

The lack of essential supplies and opportunity for professional growth increase stress levels of classroom teachers and can create a working environment of low job satisfaction and apathy (Dyrli, 2008; Ma & MacMillan, 1999; McCarthy, et al., 2016; Naylor, 2001). Darling-Hammond (2010) argued the working environment is just as powerful as salaries in terms of teacher retention in low-income schools. Teacher attrition rates are approximately 20 percent higher in low-income schools due to working conditions, which further limits the availability of high quality teachers (Hendricks, 2016). For example, Oklahoma's 2016 State Teacher of the Year, Shawn Sheehan, announced at the end of the 2016-17 school year that he and his family would be moving to Texas because they could not make ends meet on two Oklahoma teacher salaries (Sheehan, 2017). Oklahoma is continuing to lose teachers like Sheehan in the wake of budget cuts, meaning the state will not be able to sustain a high level of educational quality or compete in the economic market (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

If the hope for the future is to retain quality teachers in low-income Oklahoma schools, it is essential to understand the lived experience of these teachers to determine their motivation and coping strategies. By cultivating these strategies into a toolbox for future educators, it is the hope of this research to increase the number of quality teachers retained in low-income schools. This research aims to discover how quality

early childhood teachers in low-income Oklahoma schools are impacted by budget cuts and how they are coping with their unfortunate reality.

Conceptual Framework

Deci & Ryan (1980) suggested the environment and behavior of a person (in this case teachers) can determine motivation. They coined this theory as the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) which suggests self-determined behaviors are not chosen consciously; rather behaviors are intrinsically chosen and do not require involvement of “higher cerebral functions” (Deci & Ryan, 1980, p. 34). Decisions, according to SDT, are primarily made based on two motivation subsystems: extrinsic and intrinsic.

Extrinsic motivation is primarily driven by external rewards or needs such as money, praise or status (Deci & Ryan, 1980). External rewards, either tangible or verbal, are the catalyst of extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1980; Gagne & Deci, 2005). Extrinsic motivation is often used when the activity or job is not particularly of interest to the individual (Gagne & Deci, 2005). Further, when individuals are motivated by external factors, they act with the “intention of obtaining a desired consequence or avoiding an undesired one” (Gagne & Deci, 2005, p. 334). For example, an extrinsically motivated person may work harder when they know their superior is watching.

Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is experienced when chosen behaviors are not followed by external rewards. Satisfaction is derived from experience, whereas extrinsic motivation obtains satisfaction by an external reward system, according to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Central to SDT and intrinsic motivation is autonomy, or the freedom of choice within limits (Gagné & Deci, 2005). When an individual makes a

decision intrinsically and autonomously, the choice is made voluntarily. In contrast, compulsory decisions are made under pressure. Therefore, rather than *wanting* to do something, compulsory choices are seen as *having* to do something. Gagne & Deci (2005) argue without the presence of extrinsic benefits, decisions absent of autonomy are often experienced by less motivated individuals.

Motivational subsystems are important to this study for a few reasons, most importantly is the issue of behavioral consistency. Deci & Ryan (1980) argue when the same motivational subsystem (intrinsic or extrinsic) is used, situational behaviors become consistent. The motivation and coping techniques used by early childhood educators in low-income Oklahoma schools during a budget crisis are of interest to this study. The SDT will impact the lens in which this study is implemented and evaluated.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Teacher Motivation and Job Satisfaction

Teacher motivation and job satisfaction have been linked to retention rates in low-income school districts (Johnson, 2011). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), approximately one quarter of entry level public school teachers leave the profession within the first three years of their career. Hendricks (2016), who analyzed teacher salaries and labor market outcomes, found approximately eight out of 100 teachers leave Texas Public Schools each school year, compared to 11 of 100 of Oklahoma teachers who leave every year. Further, research suggest low-income schools are especially at risk for teacher attrition and have difficulty hiring quality teachers, resulting in a less-experienced certified and support staff (Johnson, 2011; Knoepfel, 2007). While several factors, including mentorships or professional development

opportunities have the chance of increasing teacher retention (Darling-Hammond, 2010; NAEYC, 2009), the availability of these programs in Oklahoma is scarce.

Mentorships

Research suggests mentor opportunities are a fundamental experience for early childhood educators to train and improve their effectiveness in the classroom (Korth & Baum, 2017). Teachers who have the opportunity to collaborate with a seasoned mentor have higher determination and effectiveness in the classroom than those who do not (Korth & Baum, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2010; DeCesare et al., 2017; NAEYC, 2009). Mentors, who typically have 5-15 years' of experience in the field, are able to share their knowledge and experience with novice teachers which, in turn, increase their motivation as well as the novice's (Epstein & Willhite, 2015; Johnson, 2011; Korth & Baum, 2017).

A case study (Johnson, 2011) highlighted the importance that mentorships and administrative support have on entry year teachers in low-income schools. The study suggested when support from colleagues and administration are present, the retention, development, and motivation of entry year teachers increase (Johnson, 2011). The study also found implementation of such programs decrease teacher anxiety, stress and apathy (Johnson, 2011).

Professional Development

Leaning Forward (2015), a professional development model used by the district in this study, considers professional development, or PD, as activities that expand teachers' knowledge of academic subjects, student learning patterns, and opportunities to better analyze student achievement utilizing various assessment data. PD sessions

allow teachers to become refreshed in a topic with which they are familiar, discuss contemporary issues with other educators, develop a repertoire of skills to be used in the classroom, and/or become exposed to a new curriculum or standards (Barron, Taylor, Nettleton, & Amin, 2017). PD further creates an atmosphere of professionalism among educators and has the possibility to motivate teachers to stay in the field (Osgood, 2006). One case study (Barron et al., 2017) found teachers who participated in professional development rediscovered the joy of teaching and learning again while also developing a new found appreciation for student involvement in learning.

Relationships

Relationships have shown to increase teacher motivation in low-income schools (Furuta, 2015; Hooker, 2013). A study of veteran and early-career teachers in Hawaii, affirmed the social atmosphere and the relationships with peers, students, and those in administration impacted their commitment to stay in a low-income school (Furuta, 2015). However, veteran teachers who taught 15 years or more generally felt their efforts were undervalued in terms of pay, benefits and appreciation (Furuta, 2015).

A recent study found teachers in low-income South Carolina schools credit parent involvement and partnership as essential factors to a successful school environment (Hooker, 2013). For instance, one elementary school held parent workshops and educational classes to inform parents about curriculum requirements. This strategy helped build a relationship of trust and support between school and home. Teachers and administrators encouraged parent involvement by moving beyond the classroom as the limit for parent collaboration with the school. With an increase in

parent involvement, the school experienced an increase in student engagement and job satisfaction of school faculty and staff (Hooker, 2013).

Budget Cuts

No district is immune during a time of state financial instability (Kober & Rentener, 2011). School districts in Oklahoma have been under pressure to examine their spending to identify areas where cuts could be made without interfering with the quality of education for students (Howard, 2011; Kober & Rentener, 2011; Williamson, 2011). Yet, this demand has become a strain on schools and districts in their efforts to maintain a quality work environment while juggling a mounting budget crisis. Historically, common cuts as a result of budget shortage in Oklahoma include decrease of office supplies, fewer classroom materials, reducing the school week to 4 days, furloughs, cutting benefits, or cuts to personnel. (Howard, 2011; Williamson, 2011; Eger, 2016). All of which have been shown to impact a teacher's day-to-day working experience.

Supplies and Materials

The lack of necessary supplies and materials, most notably appropriate manipulatives and other hands-on materials, was a notable impact of budget cuts in the literature (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Oakes & Saunders, 2002). The lack materials can have a negative impact on student achievement in low-income schools (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Oakes & Saunders, 2002). There are many reasons why students are unable to access such materials during a time of budget cuts, including the lack of funds to purchase new materials and replace ones that are broken or worn (Oakes & Saunders, 2002). Darling-Hammond (2010) warns if states want to

increase overall achievement of their students, investment in proper school supplies in low-income schools is essential.

It is necessary for early childhood teachers to create a learning environment of accessible, appropriate materials in order to develop early learning skills (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; D'Angelo & Iliev 2012; NAEYC, 2002). Young students learn best through a wide array of intentional hands-on learning materials that are selected by the teacher (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Hands-on experiences through the use of manipulatives are essential in early childhood because they create an environment where learning is concrete and tangible (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; D'Angelo & Iliev, 2012; Trawick-Smith, 2010). When essential materials such as puzzles, building blocks, counters, etc. are not present, young students are less likely to have meaningful learning experiences and think critically, placing these students at risk for decreased efficacy in the classroom (D'Angelo & Iliev, 2012).

Studies have indicated the absence of essential classroom materials, such as paper and manipulatives, increases stress level and the financial burden on classroom teachers in the wake of a budget crisis (Dyrli, 2008; Naylor, 2001; Oakes & Saunders, 2002). On average, teachers spend between \$500 and \$1,000 of their personal income each school year in order to make up for the lack of funding (Dryli, 2008; White, 2016). This is approximately 3% of an entry year teacher's salary in Oklahoma spent on classroom materials alone (Oklahoma State Department of Education). Comparatively, this statistic would be equivalent to a business and financial operations manager spending \$18,828 on their own office supplies (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

With classroom supply costs increasing with inflation, putting pressure on teachers and parents alike, teachers have looked elsewhere to supply the needs in their classroom. "DonorsChoose" is a popular website used by educators to get funding online for classroom items. "DonorsChoose" reported approximately 74% of projects that were funded through their site were for educators who teach low-income students. As of May 2017, "DonorsChoose" has raised over \$500 million to support 355,135 classroom teachers across the country, according to its website. The amount of funding "DonorsChoose" provides has been steadily increasing since 2003, see Figure 1 below.

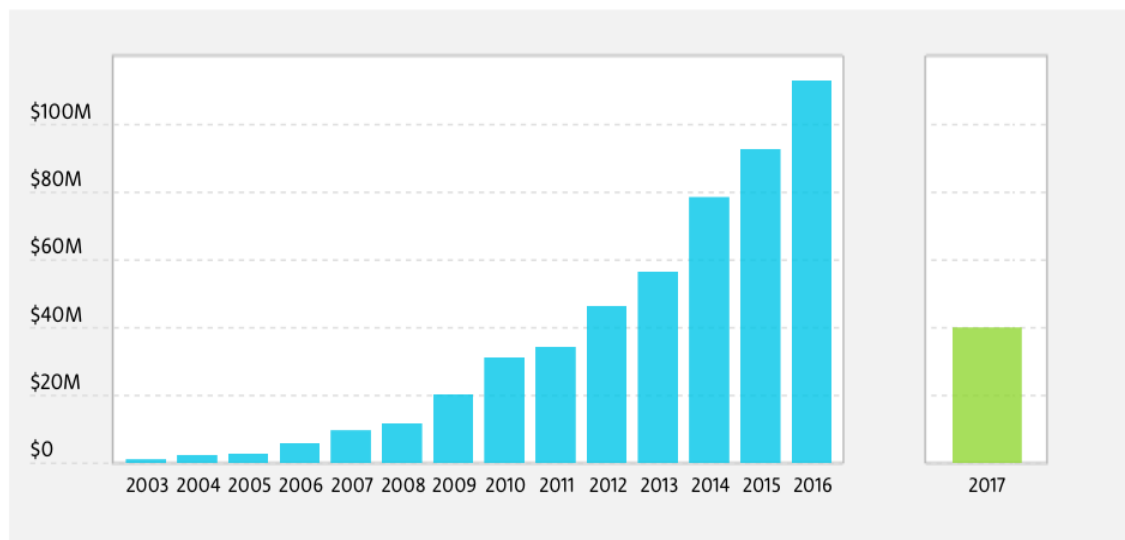


Figure 1: "DonorsChoose" project funding per calendar year

Chapter 3: Methods

This study is founded upon a qualitative research method where the goal of the researcher is to investigate and interpret the lived experience of early childhood educators teaching in Oklahoma low-income public schools. Qualitative research begins with a particular problem, either human or social, that the researcher deems worthy of investigating (Creswell, 2013). This type of research is an inquiry based process of

exploring a human or social problem which primarily relies on perceptions and knowledge of human subjects (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2010). The researcher is a key instrument in qualitative research. The researcher is responsible for data collection and understanding the environment being studied to develop an appropriate representation of the research results (Creswell, 2013).

Phenomenological inquiry will be used as an extension of the qualitative work being done. This approach explores a phenomenon experienced by a group of individuals (Creswell, 2013; Lin, 2013). The common goal of phenomenological research is to describe the essence of the lived experiences of those participating in a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Using this type of research method, this study aims to reveal the lived experience, including motivation and coping strategies, of early childhood teachers in low-income Oklahoma schools during a time of budget crisis.

Limitations are present both in qualitative research and phenomenology. Since qualitative research is subjective, the contributions made to the field are gradual and usually provide more questions than answers (Stake, 2010). A limitation to phenomenology, however is the selection of respondents (Creswell, 2013). Streamlined information collected by a few individuals may lead to inaccurate representation of the phenomenon. Phenomenological research includes anywhere from 3-4 interviews to 10-12, as deemed necessary by the researcher. Additionally, using just one method of data collection, namely interviews, may lead to the research missing important factors contributing to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Sampling

District

Rockwell Public Schools (pseudonym), a suburban school district in Oklahoma will be the focus of this study. The district is comprised of 15 elementary schools, 4 middle schools and 2 high schools; 12 of which receive Title I federal funding. Of the 16,000 students who attend Rockwell Public Schools, 49 percent are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program (*Rockwell Annual Report, 2016*). Rockwell relied on 10 percent of federal financial support, 49 percent state support, 37 percent local support and 3 percent from the county for the 2016-17 school year (*School Budget and Financing Plan, 2016*). This particular district was chosen due to Rockwell's ability to sustain most operations post budget cuts, setting an effective financial example for other districts to follow.

Participants

A Google Form was sent to five early childhood educators known to the researcher who had strong reputations in the district. The teachers were asked to nominate up to ten early childhood educators who have taught in a low-income public school in Oklahoma for at least ten years. Based on the teachers' recommendations, 11 females and one male respondent were contacted through email, which were obtained through the district website.

Of the 12 who were nominated and contacted for this study, five females, ranging from 40-69 years old, agreed to participate. Respondents were not offered compensation for their time and were assured anonymity before the interview began. All of the participants in this study were white of non-Hispanic descent, with an average

of 20.2 years in education, and represented 3 of the district’s low-income schools. See Table 1 for more demographic information.

Table 1 Teacher Demographics

Pseudonym	<u>Kacy</u>	<u>Nancy</u>	<u>Martha</u>	<u>Leigh</u>	<u>Katie</u>
Highest level of education	Bachelor’s	Bachelor’s	Master’s	Bachelor’s	Master’s
Years in Education	12	18	28	20	26
Martial status	Married	Married	Single	Divorced	Married
Children in Household	1	0	0	0	0
Annual household income	\$50,000- \$74,000	\$50,000- \$74,000	\$25,000- \$49,000	Decline	\$75,000- \$99,000
Current grade level	Preschool	Preschool	1 st	2 nd	Kindergarten

Data Collection

Respondents were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire which was returned to the researcher along with the consent forms. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews using an Olympus digital voice recorder and downloaded onto a Macbook Air for transcription. Respondents answered questions based on their perceptions of the Oklahoma education budget crisis and how they were coping with the

lack of funding. Following the interviews, the researcher transcribed the audio recordings on a MacBook Air computer using Microsoft Word. The transcriptions were saved to the researcher's password-protected OneDrive folder for security purposes.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2013) suggested data analysis in a phenomenological study requires multiple steps, which work together throughout the research to develop results and ensure quality and credibility. To begin, raw data, which consisted of five interview transcriptions, were reviewed by the researcher to assure accuracy. Next, the data were loaded into a manual coding program called ATLAS.ti. This program allows the researcher to upload multiple transcriptions for reviewing and coding. Once the transcriptions were loaded into the ATLAS.ti program, significant statements that pertained to the lived experience of early childhood educators in wake of a budget crises were identified. The program allows the researcher to view the data in multiple ways including by code, by transcription or by identified significant statements. This program was particularly helpful to analyze commonalities across all five interview transcriptions to identify accurate and proper codes. After the 14 codes were assigned, the data were then downloaded into an Excel file and organized into four themes based on common responses by the respondents, see Appendix A. Finally, a description of the phenomenon will be presented to answer the research question: How have Oklahoma state budget cuts to education impacted early childhood teachers in low-income schools and how are they coping with the lack of funding?

Chapter 4: Results

Four themes emerged as a result of the data analysis process: *atypical experiences, professionalism, teaching and learning* and *looking to the future*. Due to the funding deficit, teachers in this study are encountering atypical experiences in their day-to-day operations, such as cleaning their own classrooms and relying even more on certain classroom parents to supply classroom materials. Professionalism included many constructs, such as lack of respect, low salaries, and opportunities for professional growth, to name a few. Student needs (including the lack of teacher assistants, insufficient supplies, and materials) emerged as factors in the teaching and learning theme. Lastly, teachers reflected on the future of public education in Oklahoma, emphasizing a lack of new early childhood teachers entering the profession.

Atypical Experiences

Atypical experiences emerged as a theme during data analysis. Teachers are now experiencing an increase in the amount of time they spend completing duties that are not within their job description. Several branches arose from this theme including conservation of resources in the school building, parental assistance, PTA financial support and the impact on the district.

School Building Conservation

Three out of five teachers mentioned the district encouraged energy conservation throughout all buildings as a way to cut operation costs. The teachers stated tasks such as turning off lights, shutting down computers and turning down the air conditioning after school, has not made a significant impact on their day-to-day operations or perceived as a burden. Rather, teachers pointed out learning to be energy conscious was an unintended positive benefit from the budget crisis.

On the other hand, most teachers explained how the changes in the custodian's hours due to the budget shortfall has been one of the most immediate impacts from budget cuts. These teachers addressed several negative consequences from this change, however the most notable impact was that classrooms were only being vacuumed every other day. The preschool teachers were most outspoken about this issue, by arguing the floor area is their students' "learning space," and it deserves to be clean. One of those teachers chose to purchase her own vacuum to use on off days. Another added she was "spending time, preparation time, just making sure my classroom is clean in a way I haven't had to in years past."

Parental Support

All teachers were sensitive to the fact many of their students' families are also feeling impacts from statewide budget cuts. Teachers said they are working "really hard to pare down our school supply list," knowing families are also "hurting for money." Another teacher added,

We're really conscious that [the parents are] going through budget cuts in their jobs and cuts and that sort of thing too. So, if it's a choice between: is your child going to bring markers to class or are you going to have food tonight? Definitely want your family to have food instead of some markers.

Interestingly enough, while teachers are shortening the school supplies lists, four out of five teachers interviewed said they are relying more on certain parents in the past few years to supplement for the lack of classroom materials. The teachers suggested while some parents are able and want to help, some "just don't know how." Therefore, the teachers recommended different ways to explain their needs to these parents, including wish lists in newsletters, public Amazon wish lists and "DonorsChoose" projects.

Parent Teacher Association

Funding from Parent Teacher Association (PTA) was unequal among the five teachers. Two teachers at one elementary school receive approximately \$200 a year and additional funding throughout the year; however, the other three teachers received little to no funding from their PTA. The two teachers whose PTAs were funded felt their PTA was working to minimize the impact of state budget cuts. For example, one teacher mentioned the PTA officers didn't go to the annual state conference, but rather put the money toward the budget for teachers.

Furthermore, the two teachers who receive money from the PTA are often using the money to supply necessary classroom materials. Both teachers mentioned they are spending their PTA money on more consumable items in the classroom such as markers, paper and snack, rather than purchasing supplementary instructional tools as they had in the past. Another teacher commented that when her school's public announcement system broke, the principal had hoped the PTA might have money to fix it, yet they were not able to do so.

Professionalism

The theme of professionalism was one that was personal to all teachers, as they took their professionalism in the field very seriously. Teachers expressed their professionalism was not valued by the state due to decreasing financial support. Three teachers mentioned they felt public education was not a priority for the state in terms of state funding and perceptions of public schools. One teacher expressed frustration with the media, who often "hype up" the negative aspects of education, such as teacher scandals, rather than highlighting important topics such as budget cuts and teacher

shortages. She stressed the respect for public schools and teachers are continuing to decrease, which makes her feel “expendable.”

Decreased Support for Public Schools

All teachers mentioned a fear of the dismantlement of public education in Oklahoma. One stated, “There is a huge conglomerate that want to do away with public schools. They teach and preach and spend so much money on trying to convince people public school is a drain on every state.” Another teacher mentioned the state can’t run a “corporation, which is what a school really is” if funding for planned expenditures continues to be taken away. She went on to say an environment where lack of state funding is the norm makes it “difficult for people to even feel good about going to work, really.”

Teacher Pay

All teachers stated low teacher pay in Oklahoma to be an issue for themselves and their families. Two teachers suggested that families living off of teacher salaries are able to qualify for free and reduced lunch programs in addition to other government subsidy programs. These teachers felt devalued because while they are not “in it for the money,” they do not feel they are paid for all the hours they are actually working. One teacher went on to add that the district expects teachers to stay after contract hours for events such as faculty meetings and evening activities, all of which are unpaid hours. This teacher warned that Oklahoma cannot “expect to keep the cream of the crop, as far as educators go, if you don’t care enough about or respect them enough to pay them a respectable wage.” While two teachers interviewed said they have after school jobs to make ends meet; others simply expressed frustration that they are paid so poorly.

Teachers are also watching as colleagues leave the field due to low compensation. One mentioned a friend of hers leaving the field after having children because working on a teacher salary while paying for childcare would not be feasible for their family. Other teachers discussed colleagues either collecting retirement and going back to work part time to supplement their income, or crossing the border to work in a surrounding state for a few years, then receiving double retirement.

Job Satisfaction

While the tone of the interviews was generally negative due to the subject matter, when talking about job satisfaction and working with children, the tone of the teachers' voices immediately shifted. All teachers expressed helping students develop academically and socially among the reasons they continue to enjoy teaching. One teacher mentioned she loves to feel needed, and that desire is satisfied through teaching in low-income schools. Another mentioned she finds satisfaction through observing former students succeed as they continue their educational careers. Furthermore, four teachers mentioned loving their job and not wanting to do anything other than working with young children. One added, "I would sell furniture out of my house" before she would give up teaching.

Relationships emerged as an important factor contributing to job satisfaction for these teachers. Two expressed building relationships with both parents and students as one of the most enjoyable aspects of their job. One teacher mentioned relationships are very important to her and often become long lasting. For instance, this teacher mentioned a grandparent of a student she had several years ago still donates to her classroom.

One teacher said while she's satisfied with her job, several factors contribute to these feelings. She first mentioned the fact that she has been in the field as long as she has (26 years) as a major reason why she is satisfied with her job. However, she emphasized the morale of the school building also contributes to her job satisfaction. Since her school has had high administrative turnover, it becomes stressful to know what to expect from new principals every few years.

Teaching and Learning

Student Needs

Three out of five teachers interviewed stated the lack of teaching assistants, or TAs, for students was a challenge. Teachers explained TAs work in different capacities: some work with individual students, others assist teachers when class sizes become too large and a number work in special education classes. However, to compensate for the lack of funding, several schools in the district have decreased the number of TAs they employ, leaving teachers to cope with large classes and less personal assistance for students that need it. One teacher mentioned the lack of TAs for students has made an impact on her student population. More students are forced to go to an alternative school because proper assistants are no longer available. Two other teachers felt nervous that they will have more students with more significant needs but with less support in the future.

In years past, one school was able to use part of their federal Title I funds to hire a tutor to assist at-risk students. However, due to a decrease in state funding, the teachers said that money was needed elsewhere. Therefore, the school was only able to staff a tutor for the last three months of the school year for a few hours a week.

Supplies and Materials

The lack of supplies and materials available to teachers and students arose as one of the biggest impacts due to budget cuts. Needs ranged from consumable items such as markers and copy paper to art and science materials. One teacher stated colleagues feel pressure to provide the same level of educational experience today without the appropriate funding.

Two out of five teachers said money for science activities was heavily cut. One teacher explained that the district sends science materials to classrooms for units that are required to meet state standards, however, oftentimes several necessary materials are not included. For example, one teacher said her class was supposed to complete a “lesson on lights on shadows, but there’s no batteries in the containers... because what they [the state] want you to do is go buy the batteries yourself. And I’m not going to go buy that many, that’s really expensive.” As a result, this teacher’s class did alternative, less hands-on activities, such as reading books, to meet the standards.

The lack of funding for art supplies was a common concern among all five teachers. Two teachers mentioned the art supply closet at their school was completely empty by mid-year, and expressed panic when no construction paper was left and funding for more paper was not in the school’s budget. While their school did receive a donation to resupply the closet, one teacher predicted as budget cuts continue “it’s going to be harder and harder to have supplies available.” Additionally, the preschool teachers explained how the lack of construction paper and other supplies is inhibiting the number of creative art experiences their students have.

All teachers said their students should not miss out on important educational opportunities because of the budget cuts. A common expression among all teachers was “I’m going to provide.” While teachers expressed they may have to do a few lessons differently or do away with others altogether, they are determined to provide as many hands-on educational opportunities as possible. Therefore, the teachers have funded necessary classroom items through personal income, district grants, fundraising, community partnerships and crowdfunding websites.

All teachers acknowledged they typically spend their own money on classroom materials every school year. However, teachers mentioned they are having to dig deeper and deeper into their own pockets to supplement for the lack of state funding. Two teachers confessed to spending double the amount on their classroom this year than in years past, and expressed student “experiences outweighed the cost” and “that’s what is important for my students.” Other teachers had similar experiences by expressing, “I spend more than what I can count on my taxes,” “I’m going to provide for them, it’s usually going to be out of my own pockets and they aren’t very deep,” and “I always buy double sets of markers and pencil boxes, pencils, erasers, things for celebrations, any snacks we have. I buy all of that myself.”

Three out of five teachers said they have applied for and successfully funded a "DonorsChoose" project. Three teachers said they’ve relied more on "DonorsChoose" this year than in the past to replace broken or old furniture, art supplies or other classroom materials. One teacher commented her classroom alone received more than \$1,000 worth of classroom materials from "DonorsChoose" projects in the past two years.

Along the same lines, other teachers have looked to Rockwell Public School grants to fund their classrooms. While grants have been available for many years, teachers expressed there is now a sense of urgency and necessity to apply for as many as possible. Four teachers mentioned receiving grants annually from the district, to fund things ranging from manipulatives to technology. Several teachers said they apply at least once a year for a Rockwell grant and expressed since funding for classroom materials has been cut, more of their colleagues are applying than in years past. Two teachers said while they are so appreciative of the grants, there are some negatives to the program. For example, teachers mentioned the grant process is time consuming, has strict deadlines and there is not a guarantee your request will be funded.

All five teachers mentioned increased community support and partnerships have been an unintended positive benefit from the budget crisis. As state funding continues to decline, teachers said they focus more on fundraising opportunities and have felt extra support from their local community. One explained her “little school of 400 raised \$40,000 in a month or 3 weeks of fundraising.” She went on to add this amount was almost double what her school raised last year “which is pretty indicative of the community wanting to help.” Another teacher said her school sells their parking spaces during local football games and have made approximately \$7,000 to go towards their school’s budget. Additionally, many churches and organizations in the community have partnered with individual schools to help supply the needs of classroom teachers. Two teachers expressed the community wants to support schools, but sometimes don’t know how.

Looking to the Future

When looking to the future, all teachers feared financial support from the state will continue to decline, which could further impact public education teachers. A few commonalities arose from these conversations including lack of incoming teachers, increasing teacher shortages and the interviewees themselves seeking possible career changes.

All teachers expressed fear, in terms of forthcoming budget cuts and how it will further impact their schools and classrooms. One teacher predicted she will have to make additional "DonorsChoose" requests to fund basic classroom needs. Two teachers suggested future budget cuts could be detrimental to the district, including the possibility of going to four-day school weeks. Others mentioned they see "the writing on the wall" in terms of a funding cliff and Rockwell's ability to sustain operations, including essential personnel jobs such as assistants, advisors and receptionists.

The lack of young teachers in Oklahoma emerged as a common fear among all teachers. Two teachers felt the lack of young teachers staying in the state was one of the biggest impacts of the budget cuts. Many feared what the future will hold for Oklahoma public education when tenured teachers retire and few young teachers stay in the state. Since teacher pay in Oklahoma is low, many young teachers cannot afford to stay and choose to leave, which one teacher described as, "sad, but smart." Teachers feared pre-service teachers are either being talked out of the field, looking for other avenues to use their degree, leave the state or will "be unsatisfied" if they do stay.

When assessing their own future career options, the teachers' responses were split. Three teachers stated they were too close to retirement to think about leaving now.

Another teacher said after her daughter finishes high school, her family will discuss if they plan to continue to stay in Oklahoma or move to a surrounding state. The remaining two teachers indicated they had considered leaving the state, yet family obligations kept them here.

The data showed mounting budget deficits are not only creating stress for teachers in the workplace, but also for those seeking retirement. Three of the teachers stated they have five years or less before they are eligible for retirement. It's interesting to note, that while teachers were talking about retirement and getting out of the field "before it's too bad," these comments were usually followed up with statements such as, "I do love what I do," and "I don't want to leave."

Both preschool teachers felt the preschool program is always "on the bubble" or at risk of being cut every year during budget talks. The preschool teachers are concerned because preschool is not mandatory, it is especially susceptible to being cut. One said, "They're never going to say, 'We're not going to have 5th grade next year', or 'We're cancelling senior year for everyone in Oklahoma.' Preschool, I feel like that's always on the chopping block." The other preschool teacher said her program may be more at risk since her classroom is off-site, which is an additional expense for the district.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Qualitative research and phenomenology are research methods that seek to better understand a human or social problem (Creswell, 2013; Lin 2013). The goal of this study was to understand the lived experiences of early childhood teachers in low-income Oklahoma schools during a time of budget crisis. The lived experiences

included investigating the motivation and coping strategies of these teachers. Teachers in this study fear for the future of public education in Oklahoma and feel generally devalued as educators in the state. Teachers are also struggling with low pay and supplying their classrooms with necessary materials, which is increasing their stress levels. However, teachers were still enthusiastic about working with young children and providing them access to a quality education.

The literature suggests workplace conditions and teacher pay can contribute to low job satisfaction (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Deci & Ryan, 1980; Furuta, 2015; Ma & MacMillan, 1999). Results of this study indicated teacher perceptions of workplace conditions have continued to decline as budget cuts increase. This study confirmed what other studies have found (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Dryli, 2008; Oakes & Saunders, 2002; Naylor, 2001), that poor workplace conditions negatively impact teacher motivation. The results also showed that teachers are now spending more time cleaning their classrooms than they had in the past, with one teacher reporting that cleaning was cutting into her planning time.

While the teachers found joy working with young children, several stated there comes a point where they must be realistic about their financial stability and the possibility of leaving the state to find better paying jobs in education. This finding is supported by Hendricks (2016), who pointed out teacher salaries in Oklahoma are approximately \$2,000 less than they were in 2006, when measured in 2015 dollars. Further, the state minimum salary schedule has not changed since 2009, which influences teacher financial stability due to increasing inflation rates since 2009 (Hendricks, 2016).

Approximately 11% of teachers in low-income Oklahoma schools leave every year due to working conditions and the inability to earn a livable wage (Hendricks, 2016). One teacher in this study predicted she will leave the state after her daughter finishes high school in two years. With both members of her household employed by the district, she expressed fixing their car's engine that blew out earlier this year was a financial burden on the family. She and other teachers said at some point, teachers have to get realistic and sometimes that means moving to another state for better pay. The loss of this 12-year veteran teacher demonstrates the flight of experienced teachers from low-income Oklahoma schools due to low teacher pay (Hendricks, 2016).

Research suggests students in early childhood classrooms learn best when they have access to quality teachers who understand how to link students' developmental needs with academic standards (Brown, Feger, & Mowry, 2015). The data from this study showed the teachers understood the necessity for hands-on, developmentally appropriate learning, as suggested by Copple & Bredekamp (2009). However, several teachers mentioned they are without proper science and art materials to use in their classrooms, which will continue to inhibit the number of educational opportunities their students have. Supplies and materials, such as scissors, paint, paper, magnifying glasses and magnets, contribute to a developmentally appropriate education in early childhood (Trawick-Smith, 2010); however, the Oklahoma education budget has not allocated funds for these materials (Oklahoma Board of Education, 2016). Teachers fear supplying these materials will "get harder and harder" as cuts continue.

Teachers in this study made it evident they attempt to provide many educational opportunities for their students, often spending more of their own money than in years

past. While one study found teachers typically spend hundreds of dollars a year on classroom supplies (Dryli, 2008), another reported some teachers spend even more, sometimes up to \$1,000 after cuts to education (White, 2016). These findings are supported by this study that found teachers are spending double than they have in the past and often their contributions exceed the maximum they are able to claim on their personal income taxes.

Teacher motivation in this study was both intrinsic and extrinsic, as defined by the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Several teachers said the relationships they build with students and families directly impacts their motivation in their current position, demonstrating intrinsic motivation. While most districts typically encourage teachers to have relationships with families; the teachers' decisions to build and maintain these relationships is an autonomous choice, which directly relates with intrinsically motivated behaviors (Decis & Ryan, 1980). On the other hand, another teacher mentioned that she was satisfied with her job mainly because she's been doing it so long. She mentioned she didn't feel she was paid for the full amount of hours she works and was not valued as an educator in the state. Another added the decline of support for public schools decreases her motivation and makes it hard to stay in such an environment. These teachers are demonstrating behaviors that are motivated by extrinsic factors such as pay and support.

One of the biggest factors contributing to teacher retention is the educator's ability to regulate stress (McLaurin, et al., 2009), especially during a time of financial instability. The teachers in this study discussed several coping strategies including seeking funding from outside resources, partnering with community organizations and

digging deeper into their own pocket. Having access to resources such as "DonorsChoose" and district grants have positively impacted teachers' motivation while decreasing their stress levels. Understanding how to cope and what resources are available is essential for novice teachers in low-income schools, and could prove to decrease teacher stress levels while increasing motivation.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a few limitations to this study. One is the lack of diversity in the participants. All participants in this study were white women. Only one male was nominated for this study, however he did not respond to an invitation to participate. The lack of male respondents limits the result viewpoints of male teachers in low-income schools, as they may perceive the impacts of budget cuts differently than their female colleagues. Further, teachers from different ethnic or racial backgrounds may have different perceptions of budget cuts than the women in this study. Future research on this topic should increase diversity in the participants. Additionally, this study focused on one suburban school district in Oklahoma. Perceptions of teachers in low-income urban and rural schools were not taken into account. This may limit the generalizability of results as teachers in different school populations may have different challenges and employ different coping strategies than those in this suburban district.

Future research on this topic could study how new teachers to the field (1-5 years' experience) have perceived the budget cuts and how it impacts their decisions to stay. Are these teachers using different coping techniques than tenured teachers? Do they support the data in teacher turnover occurring after year 3 of teaching in low-income school? Or, are these teachers more hopeful for the future?

To add to this study, future researchers can explore how teachers with various home lives, such as marital status and children living in the household, are affected by budget cuts. While only one of the teachers in this study had a minor living in the household, other researchers could explore how teachers with multiple children perceive and cope with budget cuts affecting education. Are these teachers more likely to move, find an extra job or leave the profession all together? Another topic that could be explored is married teachers; are they impacted or cope differently than those who are unmarried?

Implications

If state funding for education continues to decline in Oklahoma, teachers and administrators in low income schools have to utilize effective coping strategies or risk further teacher attrition. Teachers in this study were proactive in researching outside funding opportunities for their classrooms through “DonorsChoose” and district grants. Additionally, their understanding of their low-income population contributed to their intrinsic motivation to stay in the field. Many teachers expressed their love for students in low-income schools and felt a need to stay there, despite low teacher pay and a lack of supplies and materials in the classroom. Novice teachers who utilize ideas from effective mentors increases the motivation and job satisfaction of these teachers.

Administrators can be impactful by educating teachers about possible funding opportunities such as “DonorsChoose” or district grants. Along the same lines, allotting time for teachers to write requests for these funding opportunities is crucial, as many teachers find this to be an extra task they have to complete. Lastly, continuing to

advocate and provide mentorship opportunities can increase morale and job satisfaction in low-income schools for both novice and tenured teachers.

Lastly, the community has a part to play in public education. All teachers discussed how they felt the Rockwell community was reaching out to public schools through partnerships in wake of the budget crisis. Community members and organizations who financially support low-income schools can demonstrate their support for public education and the necessity for it.

Understanding the perceptions and experiences of early childhood teachers during a time of budget crisis may be beneficial in retaining quality teachers in the future. Many teachers in this study expressed their love for working with children, but decreasing funds from the state is affecting many aspects of their job and creating a stressful working environment. Without understanding and sharing effective coping strategies, such as finding alternative sources of funding, quality teachers will continue to exit Oklahoma low-income schools; leaving the most vulnerable population at risk.

Conclusion

Although the state has generated a slight revenue increase, many Oklahoma school districts will start the 2017-18 school year with million dollar deficits due to unstable state funding during the 2017 fiscal year (Price, 2017). This leaves many Oklahoma schools unable to hire certified and support staff at the level at which they are needed based on student enrollment. This trend may continue to lead down a path of higher teacher turnover in Oklahoma's poorest schools due to stress from poor working conditions and low teacher pay. If the state is not looking to amend these issues in the near future, Oklahoma teachers in low-income schools will benefit from utilizing

effective coping strategies to maintain a high level of motivation and job satisfaction.

Without quality teachers in our schools, the future of Oklahoma's students is uncertain.

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Appendix A: Codes and Themes

Atypical Experiences

- School Building Conservation
- Parents
- PTA

Teaching and Learning

- Student Support
- Supplies and Materials
- Outside Funding Sources

Looking to the Future

- Personally
- Decreasing State Aide
- Young Teachers
- Teachers Leaving
- Pre-K Programs

Professionalism

- Decreased Support for Public Schools
- Teacher Pay
- Job Satisfaction